



Egypt's Unfinished Revolution: The Fight for Sexual Equality

by [Rania Said Abdalla](#)

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Brief Analysis

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By the time she was seven years old, Dalia Alfaghal felt different. In college, she tried to be in a relationship with a man for appearances' sake, but ultimately broke it off. At the age of twenty-seven, Dalia became the first **publicly** announced—and self-described “**most hated**”—Egyptian lesbian, breaking social norms when she announced her relationship with a woman on Facebook on July 15, 2017. She was harassed, bullied, and received death threats on social media. The backlash also targeted her father when his approval of the relationship became public.

As an Egyptian-American woman and practicing Muslim, I sympathize greatly with such victims of prejudice. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called on Al-Azhar for a “religious revolution” two years ago, and yet these outdated taboos show no signs of softening. One's personal heterosexual identity should not translate into hatred of others' preferences, but in Egypt this too often remains the case, with official or semi-official blessing. President Sisi tries as much as he can to gain support from the conservative and religious public.

Unfortunately, being a member of the LGBT+ community in Egypt means that you will be subject to arrest, hatred, rejection, bullying, and discrimination. Many Egyptians are still fighting for freedom, equality, and social justice, yet society, religious institutions, media, and the state are unified against sexual minorities, including the LGBT+ community. The success of the January 25 Revolution requires a sexual revolution. Egypt will never enjoy complete freedom and social justice— and every revolutionary attempt will fail—unless sexual rights and identity are part of the public debate. Abusing sexual minorities' rights is contradictory to what the initial goals of the January

Revolution demanded.

Egyptian laws do not explicitly criminalize homosexuality. However, any publicly announced behavior related to homosexuality or supporting homosexuality falls under the crime of “debauchery,” according to Article 9 of the 1961 Anti-Prostitution Law. On October 25, 2017, sixty-seven members of the Egyptian parliament signed a new draft bill to criminalize the act of homosexuality to “constrain the presence of the LGBT+ community in Egypt.” The draft includes provisions stating that those found engaging in homosexual relations, appearing at LGBT+ affiliated parties, or carrying signs or symbols of the LGBT+ community and journalists defending and supporting the LGBT+ community may be jailed from one to five years.

The conditions of the LGBT+ community in Egypt have grown worse over the last few years. Along with other activists, members of the LGBT+ community are being detained with little public outcry. In 2001, during Mubarak’s rule, the Egyptian police arrested fifty-two homosexuals on a floating nightclub called the Queen Boat, and charged them with debauchery. Since President Sisi came to power in 2014, over 300 homosexuals have been arrested.

The current government crackdown on the LGBT+ community began following the Mashrou’ Leila concert in Cairo on September 22, when concertgoers waved gay pride flags during the show. Audience members raised the flags in support of the band’s singer, Hamed Sinno, who spoke publicly about his homosexuality. Consequently, Mashrou’ Leila was banned from entering the country. At least seventy-six people have been detained and referred to court due to this incident. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International harshly criticized President Sisi after Egyptian authorities carried out anal examinations on those who were arrested. HRW stated that “Egypt should stop arresting and harassing people suspected of homosexuality using trumped-up ‘debauchery’ and ‘inciting debauchery’ charges.”

Egyptian media launched a fierce defamation campaign against the LGBT+ community. The Egyptian government encourages this hyperbolic media coverage as well as homophobic religious leaders insulting and attacking homosexuals. Sisi turns a blind eye to those who initiate hate speech. Instead, he allows them to bully and initiate violence against LGBT+ people on TV and then arrests sexual minorities.

During his talk show “Ala Masou’liti,” or My Responsibility, Ahmed Moussa, a pro-government television host, said, “Waving the gay pride flags in support of homosexuality is considered a criminal act. I am asking the Egyptian parliament to execute any homosexuals because homosexuality is as dangerous as terrorism. Homosexuals and terrorists should share the same prison cell.” His comments are based on the belief that the Egyptian society has certain religious and cultural practices that prohibit homosexuality.

In this vein, Georges Azzi, the co-founder of Helem, a Lebanon-based organization that works to improve the legal rights of the LGBT+ community in the Middle East and North Africa, said, “The Egyptian media caused hysteria and paranoia after the Mashrou’ Leila incident to scare the public regarding the existence of homosexuals in society. We need an authoritative, independent media and strong platforms that offer assertive discourse in the Egyptian government and other Middle Eastern governments as well.”

Religious figures also play a key role in inciting violence and hatred against the LGBT+ community. According to the Quran, specifically the Prophet Lut story, Muslims will be punished for practicing homosexuality. Homosexuals are also not accepted by Coptic Christians in Egypt. The Coptic Church leaders agree with Sisi and Al-Azhar that punishing homosexuals is acceptable, and uses the Old and New Testament texts to justify their position on homosexuality. That is why many homosexual Egyptians still face negative repercussions and may choose to hide their sexual identity.

Religious leaders appeal to religious rulings to stir the society against the LGBT+ community. Al-Azhar Deputy Sheikh Abbas Shoman said, “Waving the rainbow flags is an attack on the holy laws and norms of humanity, and

those who participated should be held accountable because of their participation in doing so and not preventing it.” Shoman believes that homosexuality and the support of homosexuality are outrageous and a disgrace to social and religious norms. He describes homosexuality as no better than terrorism.

Egyptian television presenter Mohamed el-Ghaiti harshly **attacked** homosexuals on his talk show “Saha al-Noum” or Wake Up, by saying, “During this concert, all the homosexuals gathered, and this is happening in the country of Al-Azhar!” He then added, “Homosexuals are the people of Lut, and I am asking the Head of the Egyptian Musician Syndicate, Hani Shaker, to ban the band from singing in Egypt.”

According to **international law**, all citizens are entitled to basic human rights without discrimination regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, violent attacks against the LGBT+ community that come in the form of verbal abuse, assault, psychological bullying in media and online, torture, legal punishment, and anal examinations prove that the Egyptian government and society do not respect human rights. Egypt needs to work on preventing violence, torture, and abuse against homosexuals in order to become a democratic country. A true revolution cannot happen without respecting sexual freedom.

The United States, along with organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, should put pressure on the Egyptian government to protect minority rights and release the arrested LGBT+ people.

In August 2017, U.S. Secretary of State Rex **Tillerson** withdrew \$95.7 million in foreign assistance and withheld \$190 million in military assistance due to “Egypt’s failure to advocate democracy and human rights.” The State Department and members of Congress condemned the attacks and crackdown on LGBT+ Egyptians and stated that Egypt violates the Egyptian obligation towards the International Human Rights Law, therefore American aid given to Egypt should be made conditional on greater respect for human rights and democracy, including supporting the LGBT+ community and allowing them to exercise their basic human rights.

The United States should also ask President Sisi to instruct the media, which is already subject to government guidance, to avoid spreading hate against the LGBT+ community.

Realistically, however, the United States has other, more strategic interests in Egypt’s stability and security cooperation. Moreover, any Egyptian government is sure to resist outside attempts to intervene on such sensitive social issues. Nevertheless, Cairo could at least be put on greater public notice that the United States cares about sexual discrimination.

Perhaps this would encourage Egypt to pursue less abusive policies, in practice if not yet as a matter of public policy. As in America and many other societies until very recently, practical and social taboos can gradually loosen in practice even while old laws remain on the books; they can simply be unenforced. This would be a far cry from full equality, but at least a step forward toward a more moderate, enlightened, and tolerant life for Egypt, a key ally with nearly 100 million, mostly Muslim, people.

In order to encourage gradual improvement and steady progress, the Egyptian government must fund its education system, allow basic civil rights, and respect the fundamentals of democracy. Only then will all Egyptians truly understand human rights. Enjoying democracy in Egyptian society is impossible when its government refuses to permit sexual freedom. However, we have hope that the sexual revolution is on its way. ❖



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