

Egypt Renews Its Crackdown on NGOs

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Brief Analysis

By once again targeting foreign-funded NGOs, Sisi's government is reactivating the cycle of recriminations that nearly torpedoed the U.S.-Egypt relationship four years ago.

On March 20, the Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that the government has reopened its investigation of NGOs that allegedly receive American and European funding. The investigation is targeting many well-known organizations, including the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), CARE International, Transparency International, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Even a social services NGO run by parliamentarian Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat, the nephew of the former Egyptian president, has not been spared.

By targeting organizations whose leaders are highly respected in Washington and other Western capitals, Cairo is effectively creating a lobby against itself abroad, where it already faces significant criticism regarding its dismal human rights record. Last week, the European Parliament called for suspending security cooperation with Egypt following the torturing and killing of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in January, and the new NGO investigations will create even greater domestic pressure in the West for downgrading relations. Yet the Egyptian government appears willing to accept this cost because the investigations are in line with its habit of blaming the country's political and economic problems on foreign interests.

The original crackdown on NGOs began under the military junta that governed for the sixteen months following President Hosni Mubarak's February 2011 ouster. At the time, officials claimed that foreign-funded organizations were working to divide and destabilize Egypt; by December, security forces were raiding the offices of the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Forty-three employees of these NGOs were indicted in February 2012, including sixteen Americans. In response, the Obama administration threatened to cut military aid and then posted approximately \$5 million in bail that March,

enabling the indicted Americans to leave the country safely. Fifteen months later, an Egyptian court convicted all forty-three employees, some in absentia. The issue went more or less dormant shortly afterward, as the July 2013 toppling of Egypt's first elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, brought other human rights concerns to the fore. Yet U.S. officials have quietly prodded Cairo ever since to pardon the convicted workers and put the issue to rest.

Given the opacity of Egypt's current government under President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, it is difficult to know why these investigations are being reopened now, including against many nonpolitical NGOs. The decision may have come from one of Egypt's many (sometimes competing) security services, or from the very top. Either way, the investigations are consistent with Cairo's long-running narrative that the political tumult of the past five years is a foreign conspiracy. Indeed, officials at every level -- including the president -- claim that foreigners are waging "fourth-generation warfare" against Egypt, with external powers deploying domestic actors to weaken and destroy the state from the inside "without firing a single bullet," as a recent column in the state-run daily *al-Ahram* described it. Foreign-funded NGOs are depicted as key weapons in this supposed "war."

Cairo's deep suspicion of NGOs means that there is no easy U.S. policy solution to the current crisis. By reopening the investigations, Sisi's government is reactivating the cycle of recriminations that nearly torpedoed the U.S.-Egypt relationship four years ago. In this vein, when Secretary of State John Kerry rightly criticized the new NGO inquisition last week, Egyptian parliamentarians responded by calling for a strict ban on foreign NGO funding and urging the government to proceed with its investigations. Accordingly, President Obama should urge President Sisi -- vigorously and directly, but not publicly -- to end the inquiry and quell the crisis as soon as possible. Alternatively, if the crisis persists, the U.S. support that Sisi still claims to value will become much less politically tenable.

Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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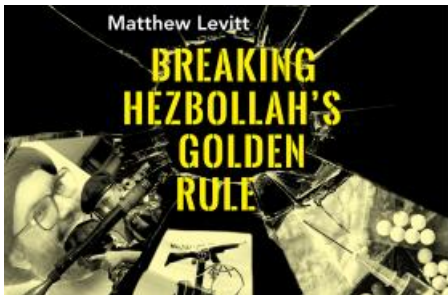
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