



RAFTO

[Rafto Prize award statement 24.09.2020](#)

The Rafto Prize for 2020 is awarded the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF) for their persistence in bravely resisting Egypt's state of fear. ECRF documents, reports and raises awareness about the grave human rights violations in Egypt and beyond, and provides legal support to victims of human rights abuses. Almost ten years since the Arab Spring, it is more pressing than ever to focus on the alarming state of basic human rights in the Middle East

EGYPTIAN COMMISSION FOR RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS (ECRF)

ECRF was founded by Mohamed Lotfy and Ahmed Abdallah in the wake of the coup d'état in 2013. In a relatively short time ECRF has grown to a team of more than 50 lawyers and researchers as well as about 1000 volunteers. The aim of their work is to provide non-partisan support to human rights defenders. Despite working under extremely harsh conditions, the ECRF uses the parts of Egypt's judiciary, which are still functioning, to defend human rights for political prisoners, prosecuted human rights activists and protestors and victims of disappearances and torture. In this state of fear, the work of ECRF stands out as a beacon of hope for human rights.

"If everyone is silenced this would be the ultimate gain to the current regime and the ultimate victory to Egypt's state of fear." (ECRF)

The ECRF works at ground level across Egypt, using peaceful and legal means. The organization conducts extensive documentation, monitoring and analysis of human rights violations. To do this, ECRF's lawyers and researchers meet with victims, collect testimonies and analyse documents and court verdicts. ECRF has emergency hotlines where relatives and friends can report on arbitrary arrests, and receives on daily basis cases of enforced disappearance. The campaign "Stop Enforced Disappearances" documented 2723 cases over a five-year period. Through the documentation of cases, campaigning and legal aid, the ECRF has contributed to several reappearances. They use

the documentation in court defences, as a basis for reports, policy papers, for advocacy, press statements and in social media campaigns to raise awareness around human rights issues. ECRF's documentation is extensively referred to by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and well-respected news sites such as The Guardian and The Washington Post.

Last year they published 13 major reports covering topics such as criminal justice, refugees and asylum seekers, transgender visibility and the impact of the amendments of the constitution from a human rights perspective.

The ECRF played a central role in the launching of the Egypt Death Penalty Index – a website that monitors all death sentences in Egypt 2011-2018. In “the month of the woman”-campaign the organization highlighted the stories of women human rights defenders in Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

EGYPT'S STATE OF FEAR

The Arab spring in Egypt and in other autocratic regimes in the Middle East at the beginning of 2011 was an uprising against decades of authoritarian regimes. In Egypt, persistent demonstrations led to democratic elections. After a political crisis in 2013, however, the army took control again and General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has since ruled as president. Under his leadership, the worrying human rights situation in Egypt has deteriorated to a degree not seen before.

Egypt with its population of 100 million has a strategic position in the Middle East. As a regional key actor, Egypt's authoritarian direction is paving the way for a new normal – systematically and routinely abusing the most basic human rights and the rule of law.

“The Egyptian authorities have made it very clear that anyone who challenges the official narrative will be severely punished” (Philip Luther, Research and Advocacy Director, Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa)

In a letter from October 2019, a young political prisoner, Shady Habash, wrote that it was a struggle to “stop yourself going mad or dying slowly because you’ve been thrown in a room two years ago and forgotten.” The Egyptian filmmaker (24) died in a high security prison in Cairo after two years of confinement without trial. His crime was to make a satirical video about the president. The cause of death was medical negligence. His case is one of many examples of how citizens challenging the official narrative are systematically silenced. The strategies employed to maintain a state of fear and repression are brutal.

Government security forces frequently conduct mass arrests and enforced disappearances, and critical voices are detained incommunicado for long periods of time. Thousands of political opponents, including children, have been arrested in sweeping campaigns. The prisoners are often held in overcrowded prisons in poor conditions, without access to satisfactory medical care. Amnesty International has documented reports of torture and the degrading conditions in Egyptian prisons and detention facilities. Criminal charges are often withheld. Lawyers are, through abduction or arrest, prevented from representing their clients. Death sentences are common in both civilian and military courts.

The regime has dramatically narrowed the space for civil society and dissent by imposing a number of restrictions on the population such as travel bans, targeting human rights defenders and a range of repressive measures. In August 2019, President el-Sisi approved a law that severely restricts NGOs' independence. His government uses the “war on terrorism” as a disguise to conceal their abuses. In April 2017, the government declared a state of emergency, which gave the security forces unchecked powers. In 2019 the

government passed constitutional amendments that consolidated the authoritarian rule, once again undermining the rule of law. In 2020, during the pandemic, doctors in Egypt who complain about a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) or criticise the government's pandemic response face interrogation, arrest, or forced transfer to distant hospitals in addition to risking death due to the covid-19.

The work of ECRF comes at great personal costs to its members. Since 2016, five ECRF affiliates have been arrested; Ahmed Abdallah, ECRF's Chair of the Board of Trustees and Mina Thabet, ECRF's minorities rights expert, and board member Ahmed Abdel Fattah. These three were released a few months after their arrest. Two other employees have been subjected to enforced disappearances. Two employees are currently detained. In June 2019, ECRF researcher Ibrahim Ezz El-Din, was arrested by Egyptian security forces and taken to an unknown location. He was missing for 167 days before he reappeared accused for "spreading false news" and "joining a terrorist organization". Ezz El-Din is still in prison. Amnesty International reports that his health condition is degrading. The other employee is is long-standing labour rights lawyer Haytham Mohamadein, also detained on similar accusations since May 2019.

THE RULE OF LAW AS A PRIMARY CONCERN

The current regional stability is built upon fear caused by political suppression and the use of numerous emergency measures. A decade after the Arab Spring it is more urgent than ever to defend and promote human rights in Egypt and other autocratic regimes in the Middle East.

The efforts of ECRF provides a model for human rights work in authoritarian regimes. The Rafto prize for 2020 is thus awarded to the *Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms* for their courageous defence of basic human rights.

United Nations and its member states should make rule of law a primary concern in the region. We call upon the international community to put pressure on Egyptian authorities to stop enforced disappearances, mass arrests and torture, and to open up for civil society and political dissent.

Egypt should respect the CAT- convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and ratify the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. We call on Egypt to respect the rule of law and the integrity and life of its citizens.

The Rafto Foundation,
Bergen, Wednesday 19 August 2020.

The Rafto Prize will be presented at 18.00 on Sunday 8 November 2020 at The National Stage, Bergen.

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The rule of law as a primary concern:

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<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CED/Pages/ConventionCED.aspx>