

LIBERAL HOPES DASHED AS EGYPT TURNS CONSERVATIVE

CAIRO: When Egypt's military overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, Egyptians like Nabil dared to hope that their conservative country was on the brink of change. Like many gay Egyptians, Nabil faced a life of persecution and intolerance, and when the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi came to power in 2012 he fled to the United States. Many believed that Morsi's ouster amid mass protests a year later and replacement with then-army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi would nudge Egyptian society in a more liberal direction.

But two years after Sisi took office, those hopes have been dashed by a crackdown, not just on the gay community, but on writers, intellectuals and even belly dancers who have fallen foul of conservatives and Egypt's influential Islamic authorities. "I was hoping that with the change of that theocratic regime of the Muslim Brotherhood the people will realize that they've been fooled all this time and become less conservative," Nabil said.

But any thought of returning from the United States, where he has been granted asylum, has been set aside for now. "Things are worse. Egypt has gone backwards," says Nabil, 29, who asked to be identified with a pseudonym for his protection. Morsi's overthrow unleashed a crackdown on his supporters that killed hundreds of protesters and detained thousands. Authorities then began rounding up liberal and leftist political activists who had been involved in the protests against Morsi and the 2011 uprising that ousted longtime Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

Morality Laws

As Sisi has consolidated his rule, the suppression of political dissent has paved the way for a rise of conservatism, says rights lawyer Negad El Borai. "One-voice regimes are usually conservative by default," Borai says. "They're linked not only to restrictions in the political sphere, but in freedoms in general." Sisi had initially promised modernity and vowed religion would not be used in politics again.

But the authorities' actions say otherwise. In April, 11 men accused of homosexuality were sentenced to prison terms of up to 12 years after they were convicted of "debauchery". Egyptian law does not prohibit homosexuality, but gays are prosecuted under debauchery laws. "They like to show they are still Muslims: 'We're a Muslim state you guys, we have arrested some gays here,'" says Nabil.

The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) has documented at least 200 cases against gays and transgender people since Morsi's overthrow. "The sentences are terrifying," says Dalia Abd El-Hameed, head of the gender program at the EIPR. The crackdown has widened, with several artists jailed for violating morality laws. In February, writer Ahmed Naji was imprisoned for violating "public modesty" after a state-run newspaper ran an excerpt from his novel that described a sex scene. Islam Behairy, an Islamic researcher, was in December sentenced to a year in prison for "insulting religion" over remarks he made on his television program criticizing books in the Sunni Muslim canon. — AFP



CAIRO: In this Dec 9, 2015 file photo, Egyptian journalists hold posters calling for the release from prison detention of Mahmoud Abou-Zeid, known as Shawkan, in front of the Syndicate of Journalists building. — AP



ROME: Amnesty International activists hold a flash mob yesterday in Rome's Pantheon Square to remember late Italian student Giulio Regeni and other victims following their latest report. — AFP

EGYPT USES 'SHOCKING' TACTICS AGAINST DISSIDENTS: AMNESTY 'UNPRECEDENTED SPIKE' IN FORCED DISAPPEARANCES

CAIRO: A leading international rights group assailed Egyptian authorities yesterday, accusing them of using abductions, torture and other shocking tactics as a tool to stifle dissent and appealing on the Egyptian president to acknowledge and investigate serious human rights violations. The country's Foreign Ministry promptly responded, lashing back at Amnesty International by saying the group was being "biased" and that it seeks to "tarnish Egypt's image".

The exchange comes as Amnesty released a new report that says there has been an "unprecedented spike" in enforced disappearances since early 2015 in Egypt under the pretext of fighting terrorism. International human rights law defines enforced disappearance as the secret abduction or imprisonment of a person, followed by the state's refusal to acknowledge that person's fate.

Amnesty's report - entitled "Egypt: Officially, you do not exist" - documents 17 cases that the London-based group says reveal "the shocking and ruthless tactics" of the Egyptian authorities to crack down on government opponents. Rape, electric shocks, and arrests of other family members were also used to force victims to give false confessions, it said. Victims range from political activists to children as young as 14 years old, the group said, adding that its report is based on more than 70 interviews with lawyers, non-government organizations, released detainees and family members of victims of torture and enforced disappearance.

Philip Luther, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Amnesty International said that "the report exposes not only the brutality faced by those disappeared but also the collusion between national security forces and judicial authorities, who have been prepared to lie to cover their tracks or failed to investigate torture allegations, making them complicit in serious human rights violations."

Egypt's Foreign Ministry rejected the report, saying in a statement that Amnesty is "biased, politicized and has special interest in tarnishing Egypt's image." The ministry also said that the group depends on one-sided sources of information and on those who are in a state of "animosity toward the Egyptian state". Luther noted that Egyptian authorities "have repeatedly denied that enforced disappearances exist in the country."

Confessions

After abductions, security authorities use torture to extract confessions, in sessions that last up to seven hours, Amnesty said. The report refers to a case of a 14-year-old boy whose name is provided by Amnesty, describing it as one of the most shocking cases of torture. It recounted the repeated rape and abuse of the teen, which Amnesty said was intended to extract confessions. The boy was among five children whose cases Amnesty documented in the report.

Luther appealed on Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to "order all state security agencies to

stop enforced disappearances, torture and other forms of ill-treatment and make clear that anyone who orders, commits or is complicit in such violations will be brought to justice". Police abuses were among the complaints that fueled the 2011 uprising that ousted autocrat Hosni Mubarak. His elected successor, Islamist Mohammad Morsi, was removed by the military in 2013 after massive protests against Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood. Then military chief Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi was subsequently elected president in a landslide.

Since Morsi's removal, authorities have cracked down heavily on pro-democracy advocates, as well as Islamist supporters of Morsi. Egypt's prisons and detention centers are packed with political opponents, and courts have issued heavy prison sentences, often with little evidence or due process. Prosecutors have vigorously applied vague charges such as endangering security or stability, while turning a blind eye to police abuses ranging from torture and forced disappearances to long detentions without charge.

Official records put the number of arrests at over 30,000 from 2013 to 2015. Hundreds more are held facing the death sentence, including Morsi, his supporters and leaders of the Brotherhood, which el-Sisi's government has declared a terrorist organization. Some rights groups estimate that as many as 60,000 people have been detained for political reasons in Egypt since July 2013, according to Amnesty. — AP

QUEUES FOR FOOD IN REBEL ALEPPO AFTER ROUTE CUT

ALEPPO: In a rebel-held neighbourhood in the east of Syria's second city Aleppo, more than 100 people are lined up outside a bakery, hoping to get a daily ration of bread. For some, it may be the only food available after a government advance severed the sole remaining supply route into rebel-held districts, prompting shortages and rising prices. "I've been standing here for about 45 minutes and there are still 40 people in front of me," said Ahmad al-Haj, in the queue of around 150 people.

At another nearby bakery, the queue is even longer, with some 200 people gathered. "Yesterday, my family of five didn't eat any bread because the bakeries stopped working. Today, I will only get seven pieces which will barely be enough for a single meal," he said. With their route to the outside world cut, there is no new flour coming to the city's bakeries, and fuel to light their ovens is also now hard to find.

The mood among those waiting is grim, with families arguing over their spot in the queue and the meagre portions available to families that sometimes include seven or eight people. Once an economic powerhouse and a thriving tourist destination, Aleppo has been devastated by the conflict that began in March 2011. Since mid-2012, it has been roughly divided between government control in the west and rebel control in the east, and has suffered enormous destruction in the war that has killed more than 280,000 people nationwide.

Last week, a government advance brought regime troops within firing range of the Castello Road, the only remaining supply route into the opposition-held east, effectively severing rebel neighbourhoods from the outside world. The United Nations said on Wednesday it was "deeply alarmed" by the situation in Aleppo, warning that the east was "at risk of besiegement." It also criticized civilian deaths in ongoing government air strikes on the east and rebel fire on the west.

'Everything is Missing'

With the Castello Road cut, shop shelves have been left empty and residents are struggling to find even basic goods. Abu Mohamed was combing through a nearby half-empty vegetable market in a bid to find potatoes, which now go for five times the price they did last week - about 500 Syrian pounds (\$1) a kilo. "I have four children and I don't know what we will eat today," he said. "The markets are totally empty, I couldn't find anything. Everything is missing - eggs, yogurt, cheese, vegetables."

Abu Mohamed, a tailor, said his salary of 25,000 Syrian pounds was no longer enough to feed his family. "The prices are so high now, so my income isn't enough for a single week." In another neighborhood, supermarket owner Mohammed Hijazi looked at the half-empty shelves of his store. His remaining stock, including cleaning supplies and perfumes, is of little interest to customers who can barely afford food. "For the past two days, my shop was full of people trying to buy canned food and dates to store them," he said. "I had to ration what each person could buy so that as many people as possible could get what they needed. But today we've nearly run out of supplies."

Other shopkeepers closed their doors in the first days after the road was cut, and only reopened after hiking their prices. The price of a kilo of dates has doubled to 800 Syrian pounds (\$3.70), while a kilo of tomatoes has gone from 100 to 600 Syrian pounds. Fuel is also in short supply and increasingly expensive, making life difficult for Hassan Yassin, a taxi driver. He has stopped working during the day for fear of government air strikes and shelling, but even at night he is no longer driving passengers because the cost of fuel makes trips too expensive. "A litre of petrol costs 1,500 Syrian pounds, so the shortest trip would cost a customer 700 Syrian pounds," he told AFP. "I've hidden my taxi so that I don't get hit in shelling. I'll sit at home without work." — AFP



ALEPPO: Syrian bakers pack portions of bread as people wait in line outside a bakery in a rebel held neighborhood in this northern city on Tuesday. — AFP



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State John Kerry speaks during a reception in honor of Eid Al-Fitr at the State Department on Tuesday. — AFP

KERRY TO MEET PUTIN OVER SYRIA

WASHINGTON: A frustrated US Secretary of State John Kerry is heading back to Moscow once again to meet President Vladimir Putin and test his commitment to the stalled Syrian peace process. Russia and the United States are nominally co-chairs of international efforts to bring Bashar Al-Assad's regime to the negotiating table with armed opposition groups. But ferocious bloodshed continues in defiance of a series of failed ceasefires, and the odd couple heading the peace effort appear increasingly at odds over the way forward.

Kerry told diners at a delayed Eid Al-Fitr supper Tuesday that he would meet Putin "to see if we can somehow advance this in the important ways that people want us to". And he told the State Department guests: "You have my word - all of you - that we will continue doing everything that we can to alleviate the suffering in Syria." But, as Kerry's spokesman John Kirby said of his boss to reporters earlier: "I'd say he's extremely frustrated, and we want to see real change in what's been going on. I believe he meant every molecule of what he said when he said that his patience was growing thin," Kirby said.

In Washington, many observers have criticized Kerry's outreach to Russia on Syria, arguing he has been strung along by a Putin seeking only to pro-

tect his client Assad. But Kirby insisted the administration is not being naive, and that Thursday's visit to Moscow, Kerry's third this year, would "probe the sincerity" of Putin's promises. Hopes for the existing peace process rest on the UN-backed blueprint sketched out by the 22-nation, US and Russian-led International Syria Support Group (ISSG).

Drop Dead Date

Under this road map, signed by both Syria's ally Iran and Assad's pro-rebel foe Saudi Arabia, a nationwide ceasefire will precede Geneva-based talks on "political transition". Substantial political talks were once supposed to start on August 1, although Kerry has sought to underline that this is a "target" and not a "drop dead date" nor deadline. Before leaving yesterday with Kerry for Paris, from where he was due to fly on to Moscow, the spokesman said "we're mindful of the clock. We're mindful of the calendar."

Kirby said talk of the August 1 target date "underscores the importance of the secretary's trip to Moscow and the conversations that he intends to have there." But he added "clearly, we are not ignorant to the fact that achieving some sort of groundbreaking political development in two weeks is not likely." Previously, Kerry has suggested

that if there is no breakthrough by the target date then Washington might resort to an undefined "Plan B" to deal with Assad.

Open to Ideas

He and other US officials have since played down this idea - reportedly a call for military strikes against the regime - but it is not clear if they have other options. There have been suggestions that the US and Russia might coordinate their forces to jointly go after the jihadists of the Al-Nusra Front and the so-called Islamic State. On this, Kirby said the US was "open to ideas". But on the civil war itself, Washington and Moscow are still far apart, and Kerry's counterpart Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov places the blame on the United Nations.

Lavrov said on Tuesday that UN envoy Staffan de Mistura was "shunning his duties" in not summoning the warring parties to a new round of peace talks in Geneva. On Monday, De Mistura said he wants guarantees of progress before restarting the process, warning "the key lies in a possible agreement between Russia and the United States." Washington defends De Mistura, arguing it is hard to expect the moderate opposition to come to the table while Russian-backed Syrian forces are bombarding them daily. — AFP