



National Council for Human Rights

Roundtable Discussion

“Challenges Facing Civil Society Organizations and Human Rights Defenders”

Cairo – March 9, 2025

Speakers and participants

The speakers and participants include a range of key human rights defenders residing in Egypt and abroad including:

Hossam Bahgat, human rights defender, investigative journalist, and the founder of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

Mohamed Lotfy, human rights activist and the Executive Director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms

Waleed Farouk, representing the National Association for the Defense of Rights and Freedoms

Ahmed Mefreh, Executive Director of Committee for Justice (via video conferencing)

Moza Hassan, founder for Nazra for Feminine Studies (via video conferencing)

Ahmed Samih, human rights activist, journalist, and TV presenter, General Director of Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies (AITAS) (via video conferencing)



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Moataz El-Fegieri, scholar, human rights defender, and protection coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa at Frontline Defenders (via video conferencing)

Mohamed Zarea, human rights defender and former head of the Arab organization for penal reform, currently residing in Switzerland (via video conferencing)

Mohamed El Baqer, lawyer and human rights defender

Summary of Outcomes and Recommendations

Key Observations from Participants:

1. **Exclusion from Legislative Processes:** The continued exclusion of civil society actors and human rights defenders from the drafting and reform processes of the Criminal Procedure Code undermines transparency, public trust, and the participatory principles enshrined in international human rights standards.
2. **Marginalization of Civil Society Input:** Proposals and contributions presented by civil society organizations during national dialogue sessions have frequently been disregarded, diminishing the credibility and inclusiveness of such consultations.
3. **Insufficient Engagement with Civil Society Initiatives:** There remains a limited institutional response to legislative proposals initiated by civil society, which weakens the role of independent actors in contributing to law and policy reforms aligned with international human rights obligations.
4. **Persistent Violations of Freedom of Expression:** Ongoing concerns regarding the detention of prisoners of conscience and restrictions imposed on the exercise of freedom of expression continue to contravene Egypt's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
5. **Extended Deprivation of Liberty:** The practice of continued detention of individuals beyond the completion of their legal sentences constitutes a serious violation of the right to liberty and due process guarantees.
6. **Targeting of Human Rights Defenders:** Human rights defenders remain vulnerable to arbitrary and punitive measures, including inclusion on terrorism lists, imposition of travel bans, denial of official documents, and convictions in absentia—even in instances where presidential pardons have been granted. These actions violate the Declaration on



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Human Rights Defenders and undermine the independence and security of civil society actors.

7. **Weak Institutional Coordination:** The lack of effective coordination by the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) in facilitating civil society operations limits the Council's ability to fulfill its mandate under the Paris Principles, particularly with respect to promoting and protecting the work of human rights defenders.
8. **Financial Restrictions on Civil Society:** Constraints on access to financial resources severely limit the operational capacity of civil society organizations to deliver services, advocate for rights, and support at-risk communities, contravening international norms protecting freedom of association and the independence of NGOs.
9. **Limited Government Engagement:** The absence of participation by relevant government ministries in structured engagement meetings between the NCHR and civil society organizations hampers constructive dialogue and weakens collaborative approaches to addressing human rights challenges.

Recommendations:

1. Reassess the Executive Regulations of the Associations Law to eliminate administrative and bureaucratic obstacles that impede the effective functioning and registration of civil society organizations (CSOs), in accordance with international standards on freedom of association.
2. Encourage CSOs to resubmit sectoral proposals, particularly those that enhance their role in service delivery in areas such as education and public health, while ensuring a streamlined and transparent process for their consideration and adoption.
3. Strengthen institutional cooperation between the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) and civil society, reinforcing the Council's role as an independent bridge between the State and society, consistent with its mandate under the Paris Principles.
4. Expand civic space to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and to enable meaningful democratic participation without fear of reprisal.
5. Raise public awareness regarding the independence and mandate of the NCHR, ensuring its accessibility and visibility as a national mechanism for the promotion and protection of human rights.
6. Institutionalize the role of the NCHR as a platform for dialogue with human rights defenders and CSOs, ensuring their meaningful participation in shaping national human rights policies and practices.
7. Establish inclusive and participatory mechanisms to facilitate regular and constructive dialogue between government authorities and CSOs, grounded in mutual respect and a commitment to human rights principles.
8. Ensure CSO access to rehabilitation and correctional facilities, in accordance with the NCHR's mandate and international standards, to monitor detention conditions and promote accountability.



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9. Constitute an independent and impartial committee to address the legal, social, and security concerns of exiled human rights defenders, with the aim of enabling their safe return and reintegration.
10. Utilize the current transitional period to restore trust and cooperation between the State and the human rights community by lifting travel bans, ceasing judicial harassment, and discontinuing criminal prosecutions of compliant actors engaged in legitimate human rights work.
11. Develop and adopt a national index to assess conditions in correctional and detention facilities, with disaggregated data and human rights-based indicators, to guide evidence-based reforms.
12. Establish a joint gender-responsive committee to review the gender-related provisions of the National Human Rights Strategy and evaluate the specific conditions of women in detention.
13. Develop a comprehensive operational strategy for the NCHR, aligned with the objectives and concerns of civil society, to enhance responsiveness and institutional accountability.
14. Reinstate regular prison visits by the NCHR and relevant independent actors, which had been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure compliance with international detention standards.
15. Conduct joint workshops between the NCHR and civil society organizations to review and implement recommendations related to the NCHR's international accreditation and classification, including those issued by the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA).
16. Conclude a formal cooperation protocol between the NCHR and CSOs, to establish effective mechanisms for handling individual complaints, and providing rights-based legal services and referrals.