

Egypt: Protests mount over police murder of Khaled Said

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Attempts by the Egyptian authorities to cover up and whitewash the brutal torture and killing on June 6 of 28-year-old Khaled Saeed by the Alexandria police have failed to suppress popular outrage. Anger at the security forces' ability to act with impunity under the Emergency Laws, in force since 1981 and recently renewed, is beginning to boil over.

Demonstrations have escalated. In the last few days, Egyptian youth have organised a series of protests across the country against police torture and to demand a new independent autopsy on Saeed's body, using online social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Within a month, the "My Name is Khaled Saeed" group had attracted more than 255,000 members and activists are now launching a wider anti-torture campaign.

In Cairo, protests were held at the October 6 Bridge, Qasr El-Nil Bridge, at the journalists' union office in the city centre, and in the Maadi suburb. Other protests were held in the Cleopatra neighbourhood of Alexandria where Saeed lived, Assiyut in Upper Egypt, and in Mansoura, in the Delta region, which was organised by the National Association for Change. The police moved in quickly to disperse the demonstrations.

Khaled Saeed had been sitting in an Internet café posting a video online showing police corruption and drug dealing. In what was clearly a planned operation, police dragged him out into the alley and beat him to death in front of passers-by.

The police tried to claim that Saeed was a drug dealer who had choked on a plastic bag of cannabis hidden in his mouth. But his battered body said otherwise and the authorities were forced to carry out a second autopsy, which claimed he had died "resisting arrest." Anger and demonstrations continued to mount, with the case attracting international attention after the publishing of online video reports. Now the authorities have prosecuted the two officers, although not their superiors who gave the

order to kill Saeed, in an attempt to stop the protests spreading and setting a match to the seething discontent in Egypt.

Police brutality and torture in Egypt are the norm, and the number of such cases has been rising over the last decade. A report published last year by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights documented 46 torture cases and 17 cases of death between June 2008 and February 2009.

While police assault, torture and detention without trial, often for years, are officially illegal, the Emergency Laws override other laws. Parliament is simply a rubber stamp for President Hosni Mubarak's government, which is in turn dominated by the military and security forces. These are renowned for their corruption and wealth accumulated at the expense of the poor. The media is tightly controlled, and the security forces operate without restraint.

Last week, in another case that is attracting growing attention, 18-year-old Mohamed Salah, from Beni Ebeid, was tortured by police officers at a Daqahliya police station before he supposedly threw himself from a third-floor window. His crime? He had challenged two policemen for refusing to pay for their ride in his motorised rickshaw. Salah is now in hospital, suffering from multiple fractures, and his lawyers have been barred from meeting him at the hospital.

The latest protests erupted after months of small strikes and demonstrations that have seen protestors take their disputes to Cairo and encamp for weeks outside the parliament buildings after their employers broke agreements.

The largest group was 1,700 workers from the Amonsito textile factories in 10th of Ramadan City, who had not been paid for two years after the Syrian owner of the company fled the country. One protesting worker told a journalist, "Can you imagine 20 months without pay? We also lack health insurance. Our situation is like the

siege of Gaza.”

The workers took their dispute to downtown Cairo after the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation failed to secure them the agreed compensation of 170 million Egyptian pounds (EGP). After two weeks, the police broke up the protest, arrested seven workers, and violently removed the other campers.

Three hundred nurses in a state-owned hospital in Shebin El Kom in the Delta region were the latest group to stage industrial action. They just ended a 21-day strike after receiving promises—which few believe—that their salaries would be doubled. A nurse told the *Financial Times* that a typical pay packet after 20 years was only EGP400 (\$70) a month, of which up to one third goes on transport to and from work.

Workers from the privatised Tanta Oil and Flax textile company have demanded that the government either pay them EGP45,000 (US \$8,000) in early retirement pensions or renationalize the plant and reinstate their jobs.

At the same time, security forces have been involved in weeks of armed clashes with Bedouin tribesmen in northern Sinai that borders Israel and Gaza. The tribesmen have been protesting across Sinai for weeks over their mistreatment—the police seizure of Bedouin women and children as hostages for husbands and fathers, the detention of hundreds for years without trial, imprisonment after frame up trials and an investigation into the deaths of three tribesmen in 2007 at the hands of the police.

In recent weeks, the tribesmen have attacked an aid convoy of seven trucks bound for Gaza, after security forces shot out randomly at a village. Later the same day Bedouins tried to blow up a gas pipeline about six miles south of El Arish, near the Gaza-Egypt border, causing minor damage.

These clashes began three years ago after police killed three Bedouins who, they claimed, had failed to stop at a checkpoint, and then dumped their bodies on a rubbish tip. The number of clashes has increased over the past few months as the police search for Bedouin sentenced in absentia for smuggling and other offences.

Struggling to eke out an existence in Sinai, some of the impoverished Bedouin have turned to smuggling weapons, drugs and people into Gaza, using the dozens of tunnels under the nine-mile-long border between Gaza and Egypt.

In an effort to keep the Bedouin under the control of their traditional leaders in the politically sensitive area that is subject to agreements with Israel, the Egyptian

authorities have met with the tribal leaders and agreed to release a handful of the thousands of detainees held under the Emergency Laws. Many of those imprisoned have been held for at least five years. Between 2004 and 2006, following bombings in Dahab, Taba and Sharm El-Sheikh, security forces made sweeping arrests across the peninsula. According to Egyptian and international human rights organisations, many of them have been tortured.

Behind the mounting tensions and clashes with police is the mounting anger over wages that have not kept up with inflation at a time when economic growth has averaged 5 percent. The cost of food and drink has shot up by 21.2 percent in cities between March 2009 and March 2010. Last March alone, meat and poultry prices increased by a record 3.1 percent, while water, electricity and fuels increased by an average of 1.3 percent and education went up 9.4 percent. Starting this month, energy prices are to rise by 50 percent during peak hours, as the government cuts back on subsidies.

The average government worker earns about EGP400 (US \$70) a month. Around 40 percent of all workers earn less than US \$2 a day. With unemployment officially put at 9.4 percent, but at least double this in reality, employers can drive down wages. Independent trade unions have launched a campaign for a monthly minimum wage of EGP1,200 (US \$220), but even this is insufficient to keep a family above the official poverty line.

The government has doubled monthly medical insurance fees to EGP8 (US \$1.45). Hundreds of thousands of poor Egyptians are denied healthcare because hospitals refuse to treat patients sent by the Health Ministry after it stopped paying their costs in December.



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