

Egyptian court hands down 38 life sentences for 2019 anti-government protests

Jean Shaoul**17 January 2023**

Following a sham trial, an Egyptian court sentenced 38 people to life imprisonment for taking part in anti-government protests in September 2019.

Twenty-three people, including self-exiled businessman and actor Mohamed Ali, whose social media posts helped to spark the protests, were tried in absentia. Forty-four others, including 22 children, received prison sentences ranging from five to 15 years. Twenty-two people were acquitted.

Its purpose was to make an example of them and ensure no one else challenges the brutal dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who overthrew the elected government of President Mohammed Morsi in a bloody military coup in July 2013. Since then, he has defended Egypt's financial elite and the military chiefs who control much of the economy, maintaining a rule of terror.

Those sentenced were convicted in a mass trial of 104 people by the first terrorism circuit of the Cairo Criminal Court under the draconian anti-terrorism laws. The charges included posting videos on YouTube calling for the protests, sharing these videos on Facebook and WhatsApp, disrupting traffic and using violence against civil servants, including the police.

The nationwide demonstrations were sparked by a series of videos released by Mohamed Ali, who lives in Spain, accusing Egypt's dictator el-Sisi of embezzling public money for his own use and building extravagant palaces for his family while forcing most of Egypt's 104 million people to live in abject poverty. Demonstrators chanted slogans, denouncing el-Sisi, poverty and social inequality.

Police arrested more than 2,000 people in the first week of the protests, the largest number in a single week since el-Sisi's bloody coup, according to human rights groups. Most were arbitrary and carried out

without a warrant. The victims were often tortured until they confessed to false charges.

The regime itself admitted to detaining and interrogating 1,000 people. While most were under 25 years of age, prominent lawyers—detained for defending other detaineesjournalists, professors and political figures, including some who had explicitly disassociated themselves from the protests, were also arrested. They were charged with spreading false information and aiding "terrorist" organisations.

They are now part of an estimated 65,000 political prisoners languishing in el-Sisi's jails, according to Human Rights First. The organisation describes them as "places of humiliation, torture, and abuse" that "make ideal recruitment centers for violent extremists," including ISIS, and "helps in the radicalization of angry prisoners looking for revenge against the authorities." Several thousand have been sentenced to death and many have been executed.

This state clampdown has proceeded with the tacit support of the United States and the European imperialist powers. The jail sentences were barely reported in the western corporate media.

The trial comes when Egypt, having implemented the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) demand to float its currency, has witnessed a dramatic fall in the value of the Egyptian pound against the US dollar that is devastating living standards. Some 30 percent of the population live below the poverty line with another 30 percent marginally above it.

The pound's value has halved in value in the last year, sinking from E£16 to the dollar to E£32 after Egypt agreed to end its fixed currency regime tying it to the US dollar and move to a flexible currency regime—leaving the pound at the mercy of international currency speculators. The black-market rate, upon

which many depend, is even lower. The move was one of the many conditions the IMF imposed in return for a \$3 billion loan in October, the fourth in six years, that comes nowhere near meeting a financing gap estimated at between \$17 and \$70 billion.

This latest loan is to relieve the severe foreign currency shortage that has left importers unable to access foreign currency to pay for the \$9.5 billion of goods stacking up at the ports. The IMF had earlier demanded a raft of economic reforms including the slashing of subsidies for gas, water and bread, the privatisation of state assets, opening up public procurement to the private sector and transferring ever greater wealth from the masses to the tiny elite. But with many of the state's assets in the hands of companies controlled by the military or former military chiefs, el-Sisi has prevaricated while placing the entire burden on the working class.

Egypt's economy was badly affected by the pandemic that halted a tourism industry accounting for around 12 percent of GDP, 15 percent of foreign currency and 10 percent of jobs, and the return of workers from the Gulf—and the loss of their remittances—swelling the ranks of those without work.

The situation confronting workers has been compounded by the outbreak of the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine that led to an outflow of \$20 billion—more than half of all the hot money invested in the country—of speculative capital seeking a higher rate of interest. Foreign currency has remained in desperately short supply despite efforts by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar to bolster its economy with \$13 billion in loans and \$3.3 billion in return for state-owned assets; the Central Bank's restrictions on imports and interest rates' hike to a massive 16.25 percent to shore up the pound; and limits on foreign currency withdrawals.

Energy, grain and fertiliser prices have soared, with Egypt the world's biggest importer of wheat. Food prices rose by 40 percent, with the cheapest foods doubling and tripling in price, and urban consumer inflation hitting 24 percent in December. Last year saw consumer finance rise by 7 percent to \$374 million in the second quarter of last year, according to the state-run Financial Regulatory Authority.

The World Bank estimated that despite a 6.6 percent growth in 2020-21, Egypt's economy will grow by

only 4.8 percent to June 2023. About 54 percent of the government budget goes into paying interest on its debts, 13 percent on wages and 12 percent on subsidies—whose costs are rising with devaluation and inflation—and other welfare payments, leaving little room for anything else.

Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly has ordered ministers to cut their budgets and put a stop to all "new projects that have a clear dollar component", as Egypt comes close to defaulting on its foreign debt—\$158 billion debt falls due in the coming period. As the IMF's second largest debtor after Argentina, Cairo has become increasingly dependent on the petro-monarchs of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar.

Under such conditions, despite his police-state measures, el-Sisi is sitting atop a volcano. It poses, as the regime foresees, a renewal of the revolutionary upsurge of the masses that began in 2011 and resumed in 2019, not just in Egypt but across the Middle East.

The conditions are emerging for workers to unify their struggle to overthrow and replace the various Arab bourgeois regimes and medieval petro-monarchies, as well as the Zionist state of Israel, to forge the United Socialist States of the Middle East. But then as now, the decisive question is the forging of a revolutionary leadership to secure the political independence of the working class, in an implacable struggle against all those forces that seek to tie the working class to one or other wing of the Egyptian ruling elite, and the unification of its struggle with that of workers throughout the region and internationally.

This is the perspective of permanent revolution fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Sections of the ICFI must be built in Egypt and across the Middle East to provide the political leadership necessary to conduct this struggle.

The *World Socialist Web Site* directs the attention of our readers to our Arabic website www.wsws.org/ar that has an extensive archive of material on the lessons of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.



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