

## **Human Rights in Egypt: Furthering the Mutual Interests of American and Egyptian Citizens**

Madam Chairman, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Kathryn Cameron Porter, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the human rights situation in Egypt.

Ms. Porter, the President of the Leadership Council for Human Rights, is sorry that she cannot be here in person today, and expresses her great appreciation for allowing me to testify on her behalf. As you know, Kathryn Cameron Porter was the driving force behind the creation of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, and she has been a lifelong human rights activist. My name is Raffi Vartian, and I am staff director of Ms. Porter's organization.

The Leadership Council for Human Rights is currently focused on Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam to help establish and sustain civil society in those countries. Our work is made possible by funding provided by Congress through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and augmented by private donors. In furtherance of our common mission, Ms. Porter has conducted fact-finding missions to the organization's countries of focus, observing human rights conditions on the ground and working with local people.

Most recently, she traveled to Egypt in early June, spending ten days in country. The conditions she found on the ground during her visit to Cairo, Alexandria, Khorsad and other outlying regions proved more acute and volatile than has been widely reported by international news organizations or recognized by the United States government. The world seems to be unaware of how tenuous life is for everyday people in Egypt. Relying on Ms. Porter's recent experience, I will address several topics in today's testimony, including the plight of the Coptic Christians and other ethnic and religious minority groups, the still fledgling democracy movement and the endemic poverty in Egypt despite generous US assistance in the approximate aggregate of \$60 billion.

### Coptic Christians: An Ancient People Facing an Ancient Dilemma

Egypt's population includes the largest Christian minority in the entirety of the Middle East. It is estimated that 8-12 million Coptic Christians - or Copts as they often refer to themselves - live in a country of some 80 million people. The 1,950 year old Coptic Church has survived despite waves of repression and persecution throughout its history. Copts consider themselves descendants of the Pharaohs. Periodic moments of intensified discrimination under a succession of Arab rulers have been the rule, not the exception. Indeed, based on Ms. Porter's observations, the situation is so precarious that it reminded her of the Soviet Union in 1980. For real reasons, people are afraid for their lives.

Members of the Subcommittee are certainly aware of the recent attacks against Coptic Christian churches and their parishioners. This violence resulted in the deaths of several individuals, including an elderly nun. While the sectarian mob violence shocked the international community, it did not surprise the Coptic Christians. During Ms. Porter's assessment mission to Egypt, she witnessed the immediate aftermath of anti-Copt violence and the typical repressive experience of being Coptic in Egypt today. She visited a church in Khorsad, where workers conducting maintenance on a local church were arrested and held for their activities. Ms. Porter visited the church where the men were arrested, which had been surrounded by security officials who prevented her from taking pictures and made her feel threatened to the point of leaving the area.

Ms. Porter met with many Coptic individuals who told of horrific conditions experienced because of their faith. She met with Muslim converts to Christianity who lived clandestine lives to avoid detection by security forces because they would be punished by having their throats slit if their conversion were discovered. She also heard multiple stories from the parents of young girls who were kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and marry their captors. These girls are taken as early as age 14 and prevented from contacting their families until age 18, after many have given birth to at least one child. While these frightening tales may sound hard to fathom, Ms. Porter sat with the parents, looked at old family pictures and wept with them for their very real and tangible loss.

Ms. Porter met with individuals who were the victims of acid and knife attacks, who were targeted for the simple act of expressing their faith. For a Coptic woman, any infraction in the eyes of Islamic extremists can trigger a violent attack, including not wearing a head scarf, being in the vicinity of a church or daring to wear a crucifix. She met one man who was stabbed in a recent church attack and survived, unlike his unfortunate friend and fellow parishioner, an elderly man who died from his wounds.

Ms. Porter also met Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim of the Ibn Khaldun Center during her trip, whom she has worked with extensively in the past. As Members of the Subcommittee may recall, Dr. Ibrahim, along with 27 of his staff, was jailed in June, 2000 by the Mubarak regime. Ms. Porter worked extensively with the Congressional Human Rights Caucus for his release, which was achieved in May, 2001. The Center recently published an article Dr. Ibrahim wrote describing the plight of the Copts, and I quote from that report:

*“Copts are the original Egyptians; and were the majority till the tenth century. However, as Egypt has become Arabized and Islamized, the Copts have become a numerical minority in their original homeland. That has happened elsewhere in other times and places. But at minimum equal citizen rights have and should always be stipulated and respected, as was the case in liberal Egypt, i.e. the mid 19th to mid twentieth centuries. In the Mubarak's Egypt, however, equal rights to all citizens are stipulated in the constitution but not respected or observed, especially with regard to the building and protection of Coptic churches.”*

In particular, Copts point to a generation ago, where in 1980 an amendment of the state constitution legalized their oppression. The original Article 2 read:

“Islam is the Religion of the State. Arabic is its official language, and **a principle** source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence (Shari’a)”

After the Amendment of May 22, 1980, Article 2 now reads:

“Islam is the Religion of the State. Arabic is its official language, and **the principal** source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence (Shari’a)”

It is clear that this seemingly subtle change has had a huge impact, and the constitution contradicts itself. Article 40 of the constitution states that “*all citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination due to sex, ethnic origin, language, religion or creed.*” This is clearly at odds with Shari’a law, under which most traditional Islamic scholars assert that non-Muslims need not be afforded the same rights as Muslims.

#### Baha’i Community in Egypt

Ms. Porter did not meet with any members of Egypt’s threatened Baha’i community during her trip as she believed doing so could potentially put them in harm’s way; in fact, many of the individuals she did speak with were later detained and questioned by Egyptian security services. Although Ms. Porter was unable to hear firsthand the plight of Egypt’s 500 estimated remaining Baha’is during her trip, the Leadership Council for Human Rights can attest that their situation is extremely precarious. They live under ongoing police surveillance; they are denied identification cards and effectively made non-citizens, as the only government recognized religions are Islam, Judaism and Christianity; and they cannot legally marry unless they denounce their faith.

The Egyptian government has created a thoroughly hostile, even dangerous environment for members of the Baha’i community and has refused to respect their right of religious freedom. In May, 2006, an Egyptian Administrative Court ruled that Baha’is have the right to obtain identification cards noting their religion; however, the Supreme Administrative Court subsequently suspended the implementation of the ruling following an appeal by the Ministry of the Interior. This resistance to grant the Baha’is basic rights and freedoms comes from the highest level, and it must be challenged in order to ensure that all of Egypt’s citizens are equal under the law.

#### Egypt’s Disenfranchised Bedouins

While in Alexandria, Ms. Porter traveled to the surrounding desert region and visited a small enclave of Bedouins, whose sparse existence is further compounded by the discrimination they face. The Egyptian government has granted Bedouins ‘right of use,’ but not explicit ownership of the lands they inhabit. Dr. Ibrahim wrote that Egypt’s Bedouins are treated as “third-class citizens in their own ancestral lands.” While money

flows into the development of Egypt's infrastructure and tourist destinations, and those close to Mubarak profit from it, these indigenous tribes are overlooked and pushed deeper into the desert, where forging a life is often a matter of simply trying to survive. A proud and independent people, Egypt's Bedouins deserve to be recognized as citizens with the same rights as all other Egyptians.

### Democracy in Egypt

The democratic movement in Egypt has seen some victories, yet it has also suffered great setbacks over the last 30 years. Some recent examples of setbacks include the following. On June 3, 2002 the Egyptian government amended laws covering NGOs that gives the Ministry of Social Affairs authority to dismantle an NGO without judicial review. In addition, the Emergency Law that consolidates power in the Executive branch that has been in place since 1981 was extended for another two years just last month. Local council elections have also been postponed for another two years, and hundreds of activists from across the political spectrum are in jail.

As the members of the Subcommittee are well aware, there has been some room for optimism in recent years. The Mubarak regime's announcement that the 2005 presidential election would be open was a welcome indicator. The state's promise of a free and fair process was undermined, however, by credible claims of widespread voter fraud and intimidation. This failed election process culminated in the incarceration of the only candidate that enjoyed near double-digit electoral support. This candidate, Ghad party leader Ayman Nour, was jailed on dubious fraud charges. In addition, Nour's social services office was burned to the ground while Ms. Porter was in Cairo.

During Ms. Porter's trip, she was given a letter smuggled out of prison from Mr. Nour addressed to Congressmen Wolf, Obey and Schiff. The Leadership Council for Human Rights would like to thank Congressman Wolf's office for securing an accurate translation of this letter. It reads as follows:

**(INSERT LETTER HERE)**

The State Department released a statement protesting the egregious arrest and imprisonment of Nour. It read, in part:

*The United States is deeply troubled by the case of imprisoned opposition leader Ayman Nour. The Egyptian Government's handling of this case represents both a miscarriage of justice by international standards, and a setback for the democratic aspirations of the Egyptian people.*

*We are also deeply concerned by the repeated instances of police violence against peaceful demonstrators in Cairo and other places. Both Mr. Nour's ongoing detention and the Egyptian Government's handling of dissent raise serious concerns about the path of political reform and democracy in Egypt, and are incongruous with the Egyptian Government's professed commitment to increased*

*political openness and dialogue within Egyptian society. We urge the Egyptian Government to respect the rights of citizens to express their views peacefully.*

Much remains the same since Egypt's rigged presidential election and the imprisonment of Ayman Nour. Egypt's democracy movement has stalled, but has not died. Ms. Porter found a clear example of this when she attended a democracy rally put on by Nour's political party. It took place in the burned remnants of the Ghad party's social services office in Cairo. Three of the young men who had been arrested for participating in recent demonstrations supporting an independent judiciary came forward and told the crowd of the horrific conditions of their imprisonment. In their heart wrenching remarks, they said that they were given almost no food or water, and they were viciously sodomized by prison guards. Disturbingly, their story is not a rare case, and both males and females alike have shared similar testimony of undergoing such inhuman treatment. During this rally, Nour's wife, Gameela Ismail, pointed out an internal security mole in the crowd, broadcasting the evening's events through his cell phone.

These young men who were arrested and treated so poorly for supporting the independence of Egypt's judiciary raise an important constitutional issue. Again, as reported by Dr. Ibrahim:

*On May 12, the Center of the Egyptian Capital was virtually a war-zone, as two senior judges were ordered to stand for a disciplinary trial for having blown the whistle on several incidents of fraud in last autumn's parliamentary elections. Obviously the Mubarak regime had not expected such embarrassing public exposure of vote rigging. After all, Egyptian judges have a long-standing tradition of discretion and propriety. But an increasing number of these judges have lost patience with the Executive branch encroaching on their jurisdiction. They felt used by the government to sugarcoat the rigging of election after election through the public claim that the voting is supervised by judges.*

### Poverty in Egypt: Fuel for the Fire

Intractable poverty is the single most important factor that fuels the persecution of Coptic Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities, simultaneously fueling the rise of Islamic extremism. It would be reasonable to expect that billions of dollars of U.S. aid to Egypt would improve the lives of ordinary Egyptians over time. Tragically, millions remain mired in desperate poverty.

The alarming economic situation in Egypt is also linked to illiteracy. The World Bank estimates that nearly 45 % of Egypt's poor are illiterate, with women being the most affected. Illiteracy rates for female-headed households in select rural regions are estimated to have reached a staggering 85 %.

These statistics are only part of the story. Ms. Porter's trip illuminated the real human suffering behind the numbers. She was particularly alarmed upon seeing many young

children, especially boys as young as age 4 or 5, who lived on their own near the rail stations in Cairo and Alexandria. These children had been abandoned and have no one to care for them. The living conditions were so miserable, that Ms. Porter described them as worse than what she saw when she spent time with Mother Theresa in Calcutta.

The United Nations Development Programme released its most recent report on human development in February 2006. According to this report, out of the 173 countries included, Egypt ranks an abysmal 119<sup>th</sup>. This ranking stems largely from the significant rich-poor gap between rural and urban areas. This was incredibly clear to Ms. Porter when she was in Cairo and visited the garbage collectors. These individuals, Coptic Christians, use their bare hands to transport and sift through garbage for anything that can be salvaged. They live on top of the landfill that provides their livelihood.

Perhaps the most disturbing statistic related to poverty is the percentage of Egyptians who will not live to see their 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. According to the 2002 UNDP Human Development Report, an estimated 44.7 % will not live to this target age. Expressed differently, almost 38 million people will not see the age that most members on this Subcommittee were themselves when they were first elected to the House of Representatives.

Maintaining the aid status quo in the face of such indicators is not an option. There must be another approach, linking our assistance with reform and fiscal accountability

### The Third Way

One of the most telling encounters of Ms. Porter's trip occurred when she met a group of young Egyptian men in Alexandria, some of them Islamists, who dreamed of a future without the repression they know under Mubarak's regime. They shared with Ms. Porter their sense of abandonment – they felt as if the world, and in particular the U.S., had left them behind. Because the U.S. has propped up the Mubarak regime and lacks understanding of the real situation on the ground, they told her, they are in despair. They also expressed the need for an alternative to both the current regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. There are moderates in Egypt from all segments of society who realize that the only viable future for their country requires them to be able to work together to develop civic society and democracy programs without fear of persecution, arrest or torture. Only when they can work on the development of fundamental democratic principles will their prospect for the future improve.

When officials from the State Department testified before this Subcommittee last month, they strongly advised against any reduction in the annual funding package for Egypt. It was important, they noted, to maintain our close and strategically important relationship with Egypt. The Leadership Council for Human Rights is not suggesting that the U.S. reduce its aid to Egypt, but it is critical to thoroughly examine the way these funds have been allocated. As noted in today's testimony, the vast majority of Egyptian people are in many instances no better off today than they were 30 years ago. Where has US

assistance gone? Is the primary return on the American people's investment of some \$60 billion the denial of basic freedoms and desperate poverty?

There needs to be a frank and open conversation with the Egyptian government about its systemic problems (poverty, poor health care, inadequate education and corruption) and their predictable consequences (lack of basic freedoms and institutionalized discrimination). This should take place in a forum and manner that is open and transparent to the American and Egyptian people. The last 30 years of U.S. aid to Egypt has not benefited the Egyptian people. The next 30 must.

The Leadership Council for Human Rights humbly suggest the following:

- That members of this Subcommittee should demand immediate release and complete amnesty for Ayman Nour;
- That members of this Subcommittee should demand visitation and access to Ayman Nour as long as he remains a prisoner, as the Egyptian government has failed to allow parliamentarians from any country to meet with him. Mr. Nour suffers from serious health problems including diabetes, and his physical health must be ensured;
- That an Ombudsman, mandated by Congress, should be stationed in Egypt to investigate where U.S. foreign aid goes and what impact it has on the Egyptian people;
- That aid funds should be redistributed, with military and economic assistance levels flipped. The Egyptian government has enough tanks and guns. The Egyptian people need better access to education and healthcare;
- That the U.S. government should demand accountability for the development of civic society programs, helping to alleviate the triggers for the problems that Egypt faces. By building the civic society of Egypt through improved health care, education and infrastructure, Egypt will make significant progress in the years to come;
- That a center for the promotion of democracy and civil society, based on the model of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo, but with a greater focus on grassroots development, should be opened in Alexandria to support the efforts of the courageous activists in that city. It should be a place where any person can come to learn more about tolerance, understanding and ways to work together to build a stronger Egypt from the ground up;
- That the Egyptian government must be encouraged to invest more resources, time and long term strategic thought to basic health care and education. The ever widening gap between the haves and have nots is a serious threat to the long-term stability of the Egyptian society and the Middle East in general.