



**Middle
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Prime Minister Hazem Al-Beblawy
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Cairo
Arab Republic of Egypt

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Your Excellency,

I write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to register our very grave concern about the worsening climate for free speech and peaceable assembly on university campuses in Egypt. For several months, we have monitored a spate of increasingly worrisome decrees that limit peaceable assembly on campus in tandem with a pattern of escalating state violence against protesters affiliated with universities. The worst incident occurred on November 28, when Cairo University student Mohamed Reda was killed by birdshot fired by security forces attempting to disperse a demonstration. We call upon you to intervene promptly and personally to end these intolerable abuses of state power.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

We note, first, the succession of decrees that circumscribe the freedom to demonstrate on campus. State security forces are ever more conspicuous in university life, due to an October measure allowing police to guard universities from outside the grounds, which was subsequently expanded into a decree that police can enter university grounds without permission from the university administration. A November 1 edict by the Higher Council of Universities, meanwhile, prohibits campus demonstrations that target a particular body. As one student union member has been quoted in the press, "But this is the whole purpose of a demonstration: We demonstrate against someone or somebody because they did something that we find to be unfair and we criticize them for it. Otherwise, why demonstrate?" The Higher Council decree is indeed chilling. Since all demonstrations focus on the policies of a certain institution or group, it would seem that the government is claiming for itself the right to ban them across the board. Indeed, the most recent news is that some university administrators are forming committees to consider how to apply on campus the restrictions on political protest declared by the state on November 25. By this last decree, would-be demonstrators must obtain permission from the Interior Ministry in order to hold their gathering.

All of these measures are severe violations of the rights of Egyptian citizens, as laid out in



PM Hazem Al-Beblawy

17 December 2013

Re: Free speech and peaceable assembly on university campuses

Page 2

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a state party.

There have been protests at several Egyptian university campuses, some of which seem partly inspired by these arbitrary attempts to squelch freedom of expression. Time and again, the state has used violence against the protesters. Here we highlight three particularly egregious cases that are in urgent need of redress.

The first is the case of al-Azhar University, which has seen almost continuous protests since classes began in October. On November 12, 12 students were given 17-year jail sentences for their participation in demonstrations on October 30. They were charged with six crimes: gathering (*tagamhur*), thuggery (*baltaga*), attacking public employees, destruction of/damage to public property, destruction of private property and possessing instruments used to attack people.

While the demonstrators do appear to have caused property damage, including at least one hole in a wall and at least one damaged classroom, we echo the protest issued by several Egyptian human rights organizations against the draconian punishments that were imposed. The court arrived at the sentences of 17 years by adding the maximum sentence for each of the six crimes together. Yet Egyptian law is quite clear that when a defendant is charged with several crimes committed for the same purpose then they must be considered a single offense and the defendant given the penalty that applies to the most serious of the crimes. None of the six crimes carries a penalty in excess of three years' imprisonment.

The second case is that of Mohamed Reda, the Cairo University engineering student shot dead on November 28. The government contends that Reda was killed from within university grounds by fellow protesters, saying that the police do not use the type of birdshot found in his body. But the results of an internal university investigation released on December 1 cast serious doubt on the state's contention. At a press conference pursuant to the investigation, Dr. Sherif Morad, then dean of the Faculty of Engineering, said the fatal shots came from the square outside the university gates where the security forces had massed. The university inquiry lends additional credence to the complaint of Dr. Gaber Nassar, president of Cairo University. In a televised interview, Dr. Nassar said that police had used "excessive force" in the attempt to quash the November 28 protest. As an institution, Cairo University published a statement that "strongly condemned" the "direct assault" by security forces on campus protesters that day.

The third case is the suppression of a peaceful student strike at Zagazig University by Central Security Forces troops using tear gas and—before that—by unknown men with knives. The strike, which eventually spread from the Faculty of Engineering to the Faculty of Commerce, was called in late November to demand the release of 23 colleagues who were imprisoned in advance of the one-year anniversary of the Muhammad Mahmoud Street protests in Cairo on spurious charges of "sabotage." The 23 students include a Revolutionary Socialist who is a member of the student union at the Faculty of Engineering, a member of the Destour Party, and other political activists. The engineering students suspended their strike on November 25



PM Hazem Al-Beblawy

17 December 2013

Re: Free speech and peaceable assembly on university campuses

Page 3

after university administrators promised action on their demands, but as of this writing, all 23 of their colleagues remain in custody.

The government of Egypt is responsible for protecting and upholding the rights of all of its citizens, including those who disagree with particular decisions made by the authorities and take to the streets to voice their opposition. Academic freedom and freedom of expression on university campuses are two of the most important of those rights in Egypt, where universities have historically played such a vital role in political and civic life.

We urge you to lift all the restrictions identified above with respect to peaceful assembly on campus. We request that you order an immediate review of the sentences of the al-Azhar students, with an eye toward reducing them in accordance with Egyptian law, and that you conduct a thorough investigation of the circumstances of Mohamed Reda's death. As per the recommendations of the Cairo University report of December 1, this investigation should include examination of the video footage taken from cameras at the Bank al-Ahli and other nearby locations to reconstruct the event. Other violent incidents must be fully investigated as well, and any police officers who may have employed excessive or unwarranted force must be held accountable. We call for the immediate release of the students at Zagazig University without penalty or threat of further harassment.

Finally, we appeal to you to do everything in your power to ensure that Egyptian universities remain places of free inquiry and open debate during this difficult period in Egypt's history. We await the honor of your reply.

Sincerely,

Nathan Brown

President, Middle East Studies Association and

Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, George Washington University

cc: Dr. Hossam Eissa, Minister of Higher Education
Maj. Gen. Mohamed Mostafa, Minister of Interior Affairs
Adel Abd al-Hameed, Minister of Justice
Sheikh Usama al-Abd, Rector, al-Azhar University
Dr. Gaber Nassar, President, Cairo University
Dr. Ashraf al-Shehhi, President, Zagazig University
Khaled Mansour, Director, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights