



**Middle  
East  
Studies  
Association**  
of North America, Inc.

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577  
Fax 520-207-3166  
caf@mesana.org  
mesana.org



9 September 2020

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi  
Arab Republic of Egypt  
Fax: +20-2-390-1998

Chancellor Hamada El-Sawy  
Office of the Public Prosecutor  
Fax: 20-2-25774716

Prime Solicitor-General Khaled Diauddin  
Supreme State Security Prosecution in the Arab Republic of Egypt  
Fax: +20-2-26381956

Dear President al-Sisi, Chancellor El-Sawy and Prime Solicitor-General  
Diauddin,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express our deep concern regarding the verdict pronounced by the Fifth Circuit of the Criminal Court (terrorism felonies) against Bahey eldin Hassan, in absentia, on 25 August 2020. Hassan, a leading human rights advocate in Egypt and founder of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), received a sentence of 15 years.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support 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 2500 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.

Hassan has been one of the pillars of Egypt's human rights movement since the 1980s. Before founding the CIHRS in 1993, he worked with various reputable groups such as the Arab Organization for Human Rights and the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. From 2004 until 2007, Hassan also served on the National Council for Human Rights, an independent body tasked by the Egyptian government to promote and maintain human rights in Egypt. A highly respected activist and humanist, he has participated in United Nations conventions and other international fora where he has detailed the state of human rights and human rights advocacy work in Egypt. Hassan has been living in exile in France since 2014.

On 25 August, Hassan was sentenced in Case no. 5370/2020. The state's investigation began in July 2018, and its charges, including "spreading false news" and "incitement against the state and its judiciary," were based on tweets he had posted on social media about the human rights situation in Egypt. The recent charges and the court's verdict cited articles of the Penal Code in addition to the newly enacted, draconian Anti-Cybercrime Law. Particularly disturbing, however, is that the Egyptian judiciary had sentenced him, in absentia, in September 2019 to three years' imprisonment in a

different case also based on posts on social media. In the assessment of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Hassan's sentencing "in two different cases...with different legal articles based on the same published material...hypothetically opens the way for new cases in the future based on the same material" (EIPR Statement, 29 August 2020). Proceeding thus signifies a deeply troubling shift in how the law is used. The intention appears to be to double the punishment for Hassan, while intimidating other human rights researchers and workers into silence, inaction, or hopeless resignation.

We are especially worried that the recent verdict is an attempt to put an end to the critical work of both Hassan and the CIHRS itself. Since its founding, the institute has played a critical role in promoting civil liberties and supporting academic research. It has organized workshops for scholars and students of human rights, as well as regular seminars and conferences on human rights conditions and research in Egypt and the region. The CIHRS has published books and reports, including publications about freedom of research and the independence of universities. Most notably, since 1996, it has been publishing *Rowaq Arabi*, an electronic journal that "offers in-depth discussions and analyses of human rights policies and developments in the Middle East and North Africa, utilizing approaches drawn from the social sciences, humanities, and law" (<https://rowaq.cihrs.org/about/?lang=en>). Unfortunately, the persistent attacks on human rights and civil society organizations in Egypt led CIHRS to move its regional and international operations outside Egypt in 2014.

The sentencing of Bahey eldin Hassan in absentia is yet another example of the ongoing checks on freedom of speech and academic freedom, and free and fair trials in Egypt. We urge you to drop all charges against Hassan. We call on you, as well, to review the penal code and abolish easily abused counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws that impose unconstitutional restrictions on freedom of opinion, expression, information and research in Egypt.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury  
MESA President  
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

Dr. Ali Abdel Aal, Speaker, Egyptian Parliament