

Universal Periodic Review must hear call for social justice in Egypt

*Open Letter to the Permanent Representatives of
Members and observers of the United Nations Human Rights Council*

4.11.2014 (Geneva). On the occasion of Egypt's second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the Human Rights Council, the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) is deeply concerned that the escalating intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders and civil society organizations in Egypt has had the effect of silencing their voice in the UPR process—a voice that is crucial if the review is to meaningfully address the socio-economic and political injustices that inspired the revolution nearly four years ago.

As has been well documented by national and international human rights organizations, restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly have increased dramatically in the past year: non-government organizations have been given an ultimatum to register under the deeply restrictive Law No. 84/2002; a new, even more hardline, law on associations is being proposed that grants government security agencies the power to veto the registration, funding and activities of associations; and, most recently, amendments to Article 78 of the Penal Code provide for life imprisonment for receiving funds with the direct or indirect aim of undermining “national unity”.

With legal protections shrinking, individuals and organizations working to advocate for human rights have been subjected to increasing threats by security forces—threats which have severely curtailed their ability to engage with the UPR process. Dozens of Egyptian organizations made submissions to the stakeholders' report; amidst a worsening climate of intimidation, however, most decided not to attend this week's session due to security concerns. Others who had been planning to travel to Geneva, later decided the security risks were too great and pulled out. These include the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, and other members of the NGO coalition with whom CESR has collaborated to produce a [joint submission](#) to the stakeholders' report (JS11), as well as a series of [briefing papers](#) on the state of specific economic, social and cultural rights in Egypt.

These organizations have been at the forefront of calls for greater protection of the socio-economic rights of vulnerable groups, as a matter of urgency. They have made proposals for equitable and sustainable economic reforms, and advocated for more open, transparent and participatory democracy in Egypt. It is crucial that in their absence, these issues not get overlooked in Egypt's review.

According to latest official estimates, a quarter of the Egyptian population is living in poverty, a third of young people are unemployed and one in three children under five are chronically malnourished. Women in Egypt have less access to basic social services and face widespread discrimination in employment, wages and work conditions. Children are particularly vulnerable to economic and social exploitation, such as child labor and forced marriages. The populations of informal settlements—characterized by lack of amenities, proper infrastructure

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and security of tenure—are swelling. And the rural poor suffer from limited access to basic public goods and infrastructure, such as water and sanitation.

However, in seeking ‘quick-fixes’ to stabilize the economy, Egypt has pursued damaging austerity measures that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, further exacerbating poverty and social exclusion. For example, taxes on essential goods and services have been increased and food and fuel subsidies arbitrarily cut without adequate alternative safety nets. There has been no community consultation, no rigorous assessment of the effects of these policies on vulnerable groups, and no meaningful consideration of equitable alternatives. At the same time, Egypt has not reversed the trend of underfunding key sectors such as health, education and housing.

More fundamentally, Egypt has failed to move away from the flawed development model that characterized the Mubarak regime. Rising unemployment, underemployment and the growing informal work sector have not been addressed; the social security system suffers from low social insurance coverage and regressive welfare subsidies crowd out more effective measures; and the quality of public services is rapidly deteriorating as a result of deregulation and privatization. By not addressing patterns of corruption and cooptation that deprive the population of their basic rights, Egypt has failed to maximize available resources to ensure the economic, social and cultural rights and well-being of the population, in line with its international human rights obligations.

The UPR is an opportunity for Egypt to express its commitment to a truly transformative reform agenda. To encourage this, we urge Council Members and observers to call for the repeal of laws that restrict civil participation; voice concern about increasing deprivations of economic, social and cultural rights; emphasize the importance of combatting corruption and ensuring transparent and participative decision-making; and stress the need to generate and allocate resources in line with human rights obligations, in order to address issues with affordability and accessibility that are exacerbating inequality and social exclusion.

We thank you for your attention.

Yours Sincerely,

Center for Economic and Social Rights

Additional information about the Center’s work on Egypt can be found at www.cesr.org/egypt, including:

- *A Joint Submission endorsed by 130 non-governmental organizations and labor unions: <http://cesr.org/article.php?id=1572>*
- *An accompanying series of short briefing papers summarizing the submission’s key concerns and suggest questions and recommendations on the state of economic, social and cultural rights in Egypt: <http://cesr.org/article.php?id=1650>*

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