

Cairo, Egypt, September 20 (Infosplusgabon) - The crackdown on freedom of expression under Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi has reached alarming new levels unparalleled in Egypt's recent history.

This is according to Amnesty International as it launched a campaign on Thursday calling for the unconditional and immediate release of all those who have been detained solely for peacefully expressing their views.

It said the campaign, "Egypt, an Open-Air Prison for Critics", is being launched in response to the "unprecedented severity of the crackdown" in Egypt, as people around the country increasingly express discontent with the economic and political situation.

In a statement, Amnesty International invited supporters from around the world to show solidarity with those risking their freedom to express their views by writing to the Egyptian government and calling for an end to the persecution.

"It is currently more dangerous to criticise the government in Egypt than at any time in the country's recent history. Egyptians living under President al-Sisi are treated as criminals simply for peacefully expressing their opinions," said Najia Bounaim, Amnesty International's North Africa Campaigns Director.

“The security services have been ruthless in clamping down on any remaining political, social or even cultural independent spaces. These measures, more extreme than anything seen in former President Hosni Mubarak’s repressive 30-year rule, have turned Egypt into an open-air prison for critics.”

Amnesty International said since December 2017 it has documented cases of at least 111 individuals who have been detained by the National Security Services solely for criticising the President and the human rights situation in Egypt.

Hundreds of Egyptian political activists, journalists, human rights defenders, members of the opposition, artists and football fans are currently in jail for daring to speak up. The reasons for their arrests range from social media activity to having a history of activism, the human rights watchdog said.

It pointed out that at least 35 individuals have been detained on charges of “unauthorised protest” and “joining a terrorist group” because they stood together in solidarity in a small peaceful protest against increased metro fares.

Comics and satirists are among those who have been targeted, including at least two individuals who posted satirical commentary online and were arrested by the police under the pretext of “violating public decency” or other vaguely defined offenses.

Amnesty International said the Egyptian authorities have recently passed new legislation that enables mass censorship of independent news platforms and pages belonging to human rights groups. Since April 2017, security agencies have blocked at least 504 websites without judicial authorization or oversight. The laws were adopted by the country’s parliament without any consultation with civil society or journalists, mainly under the pretext of “anti-terrorism” measures.

“President al-Sisi’s administration is punishing peaceful opposition and political activists with spurious counter-terrorism legislation and other vague laws that define any dissent as a criminal act,” said Najia Bounaim.

“The newly adopted media and cybercrime laws are further enforcing the Egyptian authorities’ near-total control over print, online and broadcast media.”

Amnesty International called on the Egyptian authorities to release all detainees who are in prison solely for peacefully expressing their opinions, end their repressive campaign of media

censorship and abolish legislation that tightens the state's stranglehold on freedom of expression in the country.

It said the Egyptian authorities' relentless and unjustified measures to mute peaceful voices have pushed hundreds of activists and members of the opposition to leave the country to avoid being arbitrarily arrested.

However Amnesty International also highlights the bravery of Egyptians who continue to speak up against injustice.

"Despite these unprecedented challenges to freedom of expression, and despite the fear which has become a part of daily life, many Egyptians continue to peacefully challenge these restrictions, risking their freedom in the process," said Najia Bounaim.

"That's why we are asking Amnesty International supporters around the world to voice their solidarity with all those detained in Egypt simply for peacefully expressing their opinions. We must show these brave individuals that they are not alone."

Amnesty International called on supporters to sign its petition and write to the Egyptian authorities, calling on them to immediately and unconditionally release all those detained solely for peacefully expressing their opinions.

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