



DEMONSTRATION LAWS VS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN EGYPT & AROUND THE WORLD

Within the framework of the 27th Session of the Human Rights Council, the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD) and the Ecumenical Alliance for Human Rights and Development (EAHRD) organized a side event on “Demonstration Laws and Freedom of Expression in Egypt and around the World” on 15th September 2014 at the United Nations Office (UNOG) in Geneva.

The event provided the space to clarify and discuss the current situation of freedom of expression in Egypt especially after the new law on demonstrations, which created local and international controversy. The panelists who attended the 27th Session of the Human Rights Council presented different perspectives to representatives of civil society and the public.



Dr. Hafez Abu Saada, prominent member of the *Egyptian National Human Rights Council* (NCHR), spoke about the current developments of the human rights situation and human rights laws in Egypt. He elaborated on how the new constitution includes articles guaranteeing international human rights treaties Egypt has signed such as the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. The Egyptian National Human Rights Council (NCHR) is participating in drafting such laws and ensuring that they are in accordance with international human rights standards. Dr. Saada addressed some of the challenges of safeguarding civil liberties while combating terrorism, identifying potential areas of tension in relation to politics and religion. The scope of protection afforded to the right to freedom of assembly in light of international law, which only protects freedom of assemblies that are peaceful, has raised many pressing questions that are being seriously and widely debated.



Mr. Hani Labib, a journalist and an expert on sectarian issues, spoke about the importance of media being objective and reflecting both the challenges and realities on the ground especially when it comes to sectarian stereotyping and non-discrimination issues. Political agendas that are implemented through radical media channels contribute in creating tensions and inflaming conflicts. To build bridges of communication and reconciliation, the question in the ongoing debate is where to draw the line between the facilitation of a critical dialogue in the revolution of consciousness in Egypt, and the obligation to prohibit incitement of hatred and avoid biased coverage. He stressed balancing what is professional with what is ethical, while emphasis on the later should often take precedence. Under the dissolved boundaries of an emerging democracy that most want to see made progressively more perfect through the rule of law, Egyptian media is facing the same tough questions as global media in relation to its connecting vs. protecting role.

Dr. Ahmad Abdel Halim, a political strategic analyst, and Mrs. Margaret Azer, member of the *Egyptian Organization for Human Rights* stressed that Egypt is on a reforming course with a roadmap towards more social justice and elaborated on how, slowly but surely, this current transitional period is critical for its future. Whatever their avowed purpose, the majority of the dynamically engaged civil society organizations are staying clean of the danger of political violence. The ideologically-driven few try to impose their intolerant beliefs on the many. Further work is urgently required to deepen the meaningful participation of all sectors of society and only the most severe forms of incitement warrant restrictive measures, compatible with international human rights law. The Egyptian people and their newly elected administration need the support of the international community and its encouragement to respond to the current challenges and overcome long decades of obstacles in the struggle for human rights.

Dr. Ihab Youssef, security expert and Secretary General of *People & Police for Egypt*, a nongovernmental organization, presented a comparative study of demonstration laws in various regions including Europe, North America and Asia. He showed through an illustration of cases different collective expressions, through peaceful assemblies and through extreme examples of violent demonstrations. In Egypt, as in other countries, peaceful assembly is essential to guarantee the right of protesters to express their dissenting views and voice their grievances and changing aspirations. It is impermissible to abuse anti-terrorism measures to curtail criticism of any state. However, laws across states are consistent in prohibiting the use of violence in any form against bystanders and/or police officers during protests. All civil rights are contingent, first and foremost, on the right to life being respected. Law enforcement agencies are responsible for protecting the lives of civilians and communities whenever and wherever violence is used. The adoption of legal measures for conflict prevention; therefore, is equally applicable and necessary worldwide. For clarification, he provided examples of constructive responsive measures comparing them with actions taken by USA and state members of the EU such as the UK.





The aim of the event was to reflect the reality of demonstration laws and freedom of expression in Egypt through different perspectives. Among the highlighted issues of common concern was the threat of violent extremism, especially followers of fanatic religious groups with radical militant agendas, who have abused freedom of expression on multiple fronts towards incitement of outrage and hostility, disinformation tactics, propaganda, and manipulation campaigns. We believe it is the responsibility of civil society organizations to be objective and transparent in identifying violations against human rights and presenting recommendations that help human rights defenders improve the current laws. It is also the responsibility of non-governmental organizations to help clarify controversial issues and provide the necessary space for discussion and dialogue on national and international platforms.

EAFORD

www.eaford.org
