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En defensa de las vidas: despoliticando a las familias de los presos políticos en el Egipto de la post-revolución

Committee for Justice-Geneva

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Politics of depoliticization. 2. Methodology. 3. Political and social climate in post-revolution Egypt. 4. Results: financial difficulties, career shifts, and self-realization. 4.1. Migration and resettlement prospects. 5. Mobilization and protesting decisions. 5.1. Family pressures. 5.2. Case type and duration of sentences. 5.3. Stirring up religious and cultural sensitivities. 5.4. The scenery dimension: numbers, voice and tension. Conclusion. References.

Abstract: Since 2017, Committee for Justice has been working on monitoring and verifying human rights violations inside Egyptian prisons and places of detention under its project «Detention Watch». Based on findings of in-depth interviews with 10 relatives of political prisoners during March and September 2022, this article presents the cases of families who are active

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Disclaimer: Committee for Justice reserves the true name of the author under the «no harm» principle. In the recent years, the Egyptian regime has been active in targeting researchers in the field of human rights. Ismail Al-Iskandrani, Ahmed Samir Santawy, Patrick Zaki, Walid al-Shobaki, and the murdered Italian researcher Giulio Regeni are few examples of the regime's brutality and arbitrary targeting of researchers. Meanwhile, this research was supported by the verification team of the «Detention Watch» project –Laila Hossam, Amr Hashad, and Shorouk Amjad– who facilitated the interviews for this article; Committee for Justice former UN Communication officer Tamer Salah; Dr. Erika Biagini at the School of Law and Government in Dublin City University, and Committee for Justice Executive Manager Ahmed Mefreh for helping with the review and refinement of this work.

and inactive social and economic agents representing different groups of the Egyptian population. It focuses on the impact of human rights violations on depoliticizing relatives of political prisoners –wives, parents, and children– and how this affected their efforts to over the economic hardship, as well as their attitudes regarding migration, protesting, and political reconciliation with the regime. In doing so, the article mires to explore the personal, economic, social, and political results of repression and how these have led to increased depoliticization among individuals who are affected indirectly by human rights violations.

Keywords: Egypt, repression, human rights violations, depoliticization, collective action, social agency.

Resumen: Desde 2917, el Comité de Justicia ha estado trabajando en el monitoreo y verificación de violaciones de derechos humanos dentro de las cárceles y lugares de detención egipcios, dentro de su proyecto «*Detention Watch*». Basado en los resultados de 10 entrevistas en profundidad con familiares de presos políticos mantenidas durante marzo y septiembre de 2022, este artículo presenta los casos de familias que son agentes sociales y económicos activos e inactivos que representan diferentes grupos de la población egipcia. Y se centra en el impacto de las violaciones de derechos humanos en la despoliticización de los familiares de los presos políticos –esposas, padres e hijos– y en cómo esto afectó sus esfuerzos para superar las dificultades económicas, así como en sus actitudes con respecto a la migración, la protesta y la reconciliación política con el régimen. Con ello, el artículo trata de explorar los resultados personales, económicos, sociales y políticos de la represión, y cómo esto ha llevado a una mayor despoliticización entre las personas que se ven afectadas indirectamente por violaciones de derechos humanos.

Palabras clave: Egipto, represión, violaciones de derechos humanos, despoliticización, acción colectiva, agencia social.

Introduction

This article provides a micro-level analysis of how repression and human rights violations impact the life of families of political prisoners in Egypt under the current context of authoritarian strengthening. In doing so, it explores the role of emotions in shaping their social and political agency in the realms of family, workplace, business enterprise, and contentious politics in post-revolution Egypt. After the wave of popular mobilization that affected the Middle East and North African Region in 2010-2011, and known as the «Arab Spring», authoritarian regimes have come back in full force in several of these states, including Egypt. Since the fall of former president Mohamed Morsi, the Egyptian state has worked to weaken the country's revolutionary forces that had led to the overthrow of former President Hosni Mubarak and the succession of Morsi, by repressing all opposition forces. At present, estimates refer to the existence of 114,000 prisoners in Egyptian jails (OHCHR 2020).

Since 2013, a body of literature examining the effect of repression from the perspective of individual activists has emerged. Part of this literature focuses on the role of emotions to explain processes of mobilization, demobilization, depoliticization and social trauma (Kienle and Sika 2015, Sika 2016a, 2016b and 2017; Allam 2018; Matthies-Boon and Head 2018). However, this literature remains largely focused on the actors who have mobilized in revolutionary process and in opposition to the regime, and who have been subjected to direct repression as a consequence, including imprisonment. In contrast, the effect of repression on the depoliticization of prisoners' family members remains virtually absent. This is despite repression in Egypt having reached unprecedented levels, and the prisoners' family members being affected by repression in both direct and indirect manners (Committee for Justice 2022a, 2022b; Freedom House Egypt 2022; Department of State 2021, Human Rights Watch 2019).

This article contributes to this literature by looking at the effects of repression on a broader category of agents. It acknowledges the limited number of cases interviewed for this purpose, and therefore the inability to generalize conclusions. However, it unveils some of the under-researched case studies in the Egyptian context that can trigger rigorous study under a better political climate.

The article uses the lens of human rights and politics of contention, so as to unveil the economic and social repercussions caused by having one or more of their members in prison. By focusing on the experiences of the prisoners' families, the study develops a subjective account on

the consequences of repression on family, social, and work networks, and contributes to the literature on depoliticization and political depression by extending the analysis to individuals who are neither politically nor legally active inside Egypt. This allows underlining the contradiction in perceptions of the state and highlighting individuals' strategic assessment of contention which differs according to the position of the repressed person, identification of the regime, and severity of the repression. Meanwhile, the paper makes a novel contribution by underlining the impact of disappointment and grief on families' ability to overcome the loss and engage in positive ways in the society.

The article proceeds as follows: First, it outlines the study's relations to existing research on the politics of depoliticization. Secondly, it discusses issues of data and methodology. Third, it elucidates the entanglements of repression on the life of prisoners' families, focusing on the strive for financial stability and self-realization. Lastly, it addresses the impact of repression on the socio-political realm in Egypt, especially the drive to migration, resettlement, and collective mobilization, before concluding by summarizing the main findings of this study.

1. Politics of depoliticization

The study is situated within the literature on politics of disappointment (Greenberg 2014; Gould 2009) in post-revolution Egypt (Matthies-Boon and Head 2018; Allam 2018). The focus in this tradition is on how excessive repression distorts the way individuals understand the society and authority and deepens their existential meaninglessness and desperation. Disappointment here, as a study of activist on post-uprising Serbia states, refers to «a condition of living in contradiction, of persisting in the interstitial spaces of expectation and regret» (Greenberg 2014, 8). As a result, the destruction of the socially shared understanding «symbolising, interpreting, framing and narrating the ongoing social praxis» (Sztompka 2000, 45) and the continued repression paralyses the possibility of collective action and social mobilization, and renders individuals self-centered on salvation strategies.

The experience of an unprecedented nation-wide revolution in 25th of January 2011 have shaken Egyptians' long standing political morals and values. Social protesting has been evolving through years of demonstrations against Mubarak's then active plan to pass the rule to his son Jamal. Protesting activities engaged wide sectors of the Egyptian

society -workers civil servants, teachers, bus drivers and others. All were expressing demands for economic welfare which became a pressing cause with Mubarak's unchecked «liberalization» policies (Korani and El-Mahdi 2012). Violent repression during the «camel» day, the bloody dispersal of protesters in the Rab'a al Adawiyya and Nahda sit-ins in August 2013, and the widespread repression against «all» current and possible opposition since 2014, have been instrumental in bringing about a social and economic agency that is self-centered and focused on individual salvation strategies. The unprecedented repression has caused individuals to set priorities of family reunion, starting business enterprises, acquiring new skills and careered employment, seeking autonomy and equality in family and workplace, and planning for migration or resettlement projects, all as mean to maximize the sense of «control» of their lives, after they had been shattered by a leveled military authoritarianism.

Fieldwork in this area has focused on politics of depoliticization, depression, and self-realization that represent the social agents' means of mending their shattered worlds and reinstating meaning into their daily lives through small controllable achievements in their personal lives (Matthies-Boon and Head 2018). However, they were focused on the «activist» agency, and their complex entanglements of disappointment and pragmatism giving rise to contradicting positions regarding political involvement, support for populist tendencies that promise stability, encouraging subtle mundane forms of activism to negotiate the regime's constricting limits, and, yet, revival of the social memory of resistance and the «old days» (Allam 2015, 2018). This study extends the focus of this tradition to the families of political prisoners who are not directly affected by repression, who are not «activist» in the legal and political sense, and whose imprisoned family members are not famous figures of political opposition. In doing so, it attempts to understand their coping strategies to mend the effects of repression on their environment, and it argues that depoliticization is *not* a one-off result of ongoing repression, but rather a strategic choice of individuals who assess opportunities in extremely volatile uncertain contexts, and who are challenging socio-economic constrains and ensure the safety and financial subsistence of the family.

2. Methodology

Committee for Justice is a Geneva-based organization that focuses on victims of human rights violations and unfair trials inside Egyptian

prisons and places of detention. Since 2017, the organization has carried out hundreds of interviews with families of victims of arbitrary detention. Under «Detention Watch» project, the organization has been verifying human rights violations against political prisoners and filing complaints through the UN complaint mechanisms, with the purpose of releasing political prisoners, identifying the detention place of forcibly disappeared victims, and improving the detention conditions of prisoners.

In doing so, the organization has been closely documenting how repression affect prisoners and their families' personal, social, economic, and political life. In 2021, the organization has corroborated 591 violations against 187 cases of victims of arbitrary detention throughout the republic of Egypt (Committee for Justice 2022b).

In doing so, our work has involved interviewing hundreds of families of political prisoners every year. This has prompted the organization to examine in-depth a sample of 10 families of political prisoners who were victims of arbitrary detention since June 2013 and afterwards. Participants were recruited and interviewed through online mediums on how the ongoing political repression has affected their lives on social, and economic levels. Interviews were conducted in March and September 2022 using three categorical questions on challenges that families face, their coping mechanisms, and future prospects. Selected cases were chosen in ways to ensure representation of different socio-economic parameters across five governorates –Cairo, Sharqiyya, Alexandria, Minoufiyya and Qalyoubiya–, and all were relatives of non-famous victims of arbitrary detention and unfair trials. These cases represent individuals who were supporters, direct and indirect participants in protests leading to the 25th of January Revolution and its aftermath. None of them or their incarcerated relatives are famous political activists. Their cases offer exploratory evidence on the extent and ways to which repression have led to their «tactical» depoliticization and mixed attitudes towards migration and protesting amid ongoing economic hardship.

The cases are:

- Case 1: A Cairean wife of a five-year incarcerated political prisoner, 30 years, middle-income, university graduate, politically active.
- Case 2: A Cairean wife of a six-year incarcerated prisoner, aged 41 years, low-income, teacher with a master in marketing.
- Case 3: A Cairean mother of a seven-year young prisoner, aged +65, middle-income, politically active, Islamic/salafi oriented.

- Case 4: A Cairean wife of a husband who is imprisoned for six-years in a military case, 34 years, middle-income, university graduate.
- Case 5: An Alexandrian wife, 28 years, married to a five-year incarcerated husband, university graduate, middle income.
- Case 6: A brother of a 20-years political prisoner incarcerated for over a year, 27 years, Cairo, carpenter, middle income.
- Case 7: A son of a 60-year-old incarcerated prisoner, 23 years, Minoufiyya, student in Faculty of commerce.
- Case 8: A sister of a two-year incarcerated prisoner, 34 years, Sharqiyya governorate, low-income, university graduate.
- Case 9: A father of an 18-year incarcerated young man, aged 60, Qalyoubiyya governorate, low-income.
- Case 10: A Cairean mother of a seven-year incarcerated university student, aged 61, low-income, educated.

Online «voice» interviews were chosen as the best method to collect data because they allowed interviewing participants who reside in Egypt safely, and thus exploring the impact of human rights abuses on families' social, economic, and political realms. However, limitation on the time and space of calls with residents inside Egypt, and concerns over «re-victimizing» the participants, had constricted the researcher's ability to engage in details of the participants' political attitudes and life before the incarceration of their beloved ones. Their shared position being non-famous political activists is their support to, direct and indirect, participation in protests pressuring for social and economic welfare.

Indeed, it was during the interviews that the effects of repression on families, as well as its contradicting outcomes, emerged. The 10 cases were selected on the condition that the imprisoned relatives have been politically active in a broad sense in post-revolution Egypt. This means that they have either engaged in organized collective action, or were active through non-organized informal means such as sharing political opinions on social media platforms. Hence, politically, the interviewees represented Islamist and non-Islamist households.

Interviews were conducted after a year of continued incarceration. Repression affected these families in several aspects and nearly all sought reconciliation with the regime and reflected different tactical positions regarding political mobilization. In order to understand the consequences of repression, interviews were conducted following a testimonial life-story method. Personal narratives were prioritized analytically over quantitative and qualitative interview questions, thus enabling the multi-faceted and contradicting implications to be

recognized (BenEzir 2009). Interviews were conducted in Egyptian Arabic and were translated into English.

Violent and instrumental repression by the authorities has nurtured a general feeling of desperation, isolation and unworthiness (Caracciolo *et al.* 2021; Committee for Justice 2021a, 2022a). Meanwhile, the destruction of communicative spaces where individuals develop shared pools of meaning for framing and communicating grievance, and the strategic abolishing of all forms of the collective «social» led families of political prisoners to feel alienated and demonized as enemies of the nation, of people, and of their own extended families. The severe disturbance of personal and social relations and mistrust in the political institutions and the judiciary that had the duty to succor and redress the victims, caused the interviewees to suffer deteriorated social existence, resulting in the strategies and choices of self-realization, political contention, and submission being deeply seated in their subjective hybrid assessment of outcomes.

3. Political and social climate in post-revolution Egypt

Since 2013, corrupt and authoritarian political and judicial institutions have constituted and maintained a «state of exception» in Egypt. Unprecedented physical violence, severe social and political polarization, and systemic judicial, legal, and political repression have accompanied a populist propaganda, co-optation and indoctrination of the people.

Physical oppression, capillary surveillance, arbitrary detention, and major human rights violations have recorded highest in Egypt modern history. Between January 2019 and until the first quarter of 2022, Committee for Justice has monitored the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of 17,969 victims, the forcible disappearance of 5,734 victims, physical and psychological torture against 731 victims (Committee for Justice 2020a, 2021a, 2022b). Moreover, since June 2013 to March 2022, the organization has monitored 1132 deaths in custody (Committee for Justice 2020b, 2021c, and the subsequent data on Uwazi platform). Legal analysis of more than 466 case files revealed thousands of Egyptians being tried according to the notorious Anti-terrorism law 94/2015, the Protests Act 10/2014, Law 13/2017 and 77/2019, in addition to those tried before exceptional courts -the Supreme State Security Emergency Courts, military courts, and the terrorism chambers at the Criminal Court.

Moreover, since 2013, poor detention condition, denial of health care, and ill-treatment of political prisoners has amounted to

systematic and systemic torture that extends from the moment of arrest throughout the interrogation, detention, trial, and imprisonment periods. National Security officers, prosecutors, judges, and prison staff collaborate in interconnected practices leading to the torture of political prisoners and death in custody (Caracciolo *et al.* 2021). In this «system», victims do not only die due to the pathological dispositions of corrupt officers but as a result of complex situations of intentional «neglect» of their health needs in prisons, and of testimonials of torture and retreat from false confessions, in courts. The normative legal expectation of being treated on bases of «primary innocence» is deeply undermined as the regime succeed in devising highly peculiar and corrupt judiciary that colludes in the ensuing of arbitrary punitive harms against victims and deny their access to justice and redress (Committee for Justice 2021b). With amendments no. 13/2017 and 77/2019 of the Law of Judiciary Authority 46/1972 and Law of the Council of State 47/1972, the authority has undermined the independence of the judiciary, including Egypt Court of Cassation, the Supreme Constitutional Court, the Administrative Court where victims and their families have been filing cases against law enforcement officers and seeking re-consideration of rulings.

Repression has been institutionalized in internal policies and procedures of the state bureaucracy, devising a number of legal and judicial frameworks to outlaw a wide range of politically «unwanted» practices and undermine defendants' rights to free trial. In 2020 and 2021 only, several death sentences were carried out against prisoners convicted through unjust trials (see for example Committee for Justice' analysis of case 9115 South Giza District).

Political retaliation and the neoliberal expansion of the military have prompted ad-hoc courts to confiscate the private property and assets of thousands of citizens and companies under the pretext of «financing terrorism». A list of 6,000 persons includes not only supporters of the former ex-president Mohamed Morsi but also businessmen, football players, academicians, and ordinary citizens. Court have been issuing arbitrary decisions without trials and with no attention to the victims' right to defense, leading to the ruin of some giant enterprises of the Mubarak era (e.g., cases of Safwan Thabet and al-Tawhid Wel Nour in Committee for Justice 2022a). The notorious laws 8/2015 and 94/2015 extended the definition of the «terrorist entity» to include any political association and the «act» to involve all acts that the authority deems «disruptive of law and order» whatever their purpose –ideological, religious, political or even personal. The laws also defined «financing terrorism» as to involve all, direct and indirect support even when

defendants are unaware of the act which the authority identifies as «terrorist» and even when the act represent genuine humanitarian solidarity with victims and families under severe despair (Committee for Justice, 2022c).

As a result, the Egyptian regime has succeeded in reorganizing and reframing the political, economic, and social realities in ways by which political repression and the resulting social trauma are not accidental results of political developments –i.e., the war on terrorism–, but an outcome of purposive and strategic act of repression that is publicly approved and legally justified. The politico-executive, judiciary and legislative institutions have collaboratively crushed the «communicative» space where individuals would have been able to use for public deliberation, solidarity and affection, and political participation. While the victims of repression suffer the consequences of violent and strategic «rationality», the imposition of an alternative system of thought, a set of values, and practices continue to shatter the assumptive worlds of their family members, and broader social and collective agency (Vairel 2013; Meijer 2013; Ezzat 2014; Nagah 2014; Meringolo 2015; Sika 2016a). The following section expands on the ways in which repression has shaped and affected the lives of families of political prisoners, who normally would have been active socio-political agents after two consecutive nation-wide political uprisings, in 2011 and 2013, and after the regime's efforts to coopt forms of non-contentious activism (Durac 2013; Abdelrahman 2014; Mirshak 2019).

4. Results: financial difficulties, career shifts, and self-realization

According to the interviewees, some of the examined families have been able to adapt quickly to conditions of detention, and other could not do so. In the majority of cases, the direct victims of oppression were themselves the main providers of income to families –elderly parents, wives, and children. The fact that this group is particularly targeted by the security authorities is evident in the documentation data of human rights violations that Committee for Justice has accumulated throughout the past years, as young and middle-aged male victims (18-35 and 36-59 years) suffer 70-80 percent of all documented violations (Committee for Justice 2020a, 2021a, 2022b).

Targeting «young» employed males is a painful blow to a large part of the urban population in Egypt, as families invest heavily in male education because it is generally perceived to prompt higher «financial» returns (Rosenzweig and Schultz 1982; Elsayed and Marie

2019). This is believed to increase the probability of employment, to improve job quality and raise family income, and it goes with a believe that women are educated for social and cultural outcomes. These include raising their status in marriages and enhancing their ability to share decision-making at the household. Hence, women are poorly equipped or enabled to undertake highly paid and stable jobs.

The centrality of males as breadwinners is mostly prevalent in sub-urban and rural parts of Egypt; however, dependence on land revenues and agribusiness redistributes financial responsibilities among heads of the household (the elderly) and middle-aged males. In case 7, the authorities targeted the elder family head in a rural county in Minoufiyya, but unlike the case in many urban cities where wives bear the scourge of income-earning, his elder son took the responsibility of renting property and running agricultural activities, leading him to change their career to support the family.

Nonetheless, all of the interviewees complained of the heavy burden of repression.

Case 9: «I am an elder man; I am sixty years old. I have had two surgeries in my backbone. I cannot visit my son in prison. I work on a taxi once every ten days and can hardly afford living... he was my only son and the one who could have helped me survive this age»

Case 6: «My brother is only a 'child'; whatever he wrote on facebook, it does not make him a threat to the regime. Me and my father are carpenters; our living condition have deteriorated significantly after his arrest. I am suffering to keep my second job as an air-conditioner engineer. In the last visit, they told me that I must pay 100 EGP because they were going to renew the prison's toilets. Every month we are required to prepare food to 30 persons and we have to pay the authorities to allow him receiving each and every thing that he needs. My work was affected by his arrest».

Women in urban cities were particularly affected by the absence of breadwinners, being responsible for income-earning activities along with raising children or supporting the imprisoned victim. Among the 7 interviewed women in this study, only four were financially independent through work, property rentals, or pensions. Among them, only one was able to secure income through employment, while another secured income via several short-term jobs. The rest were totally dependent on family assistance. Employment gaps, the husband's decision, lack of financial resources, harassment in the workplace, and fear of failure were the main reasons for interviewed women being unable to start and maintain a career.

Even when women in families of political prisoners succeed finding job, they are deemed morally vulnerable as widowed, single, or divorced women. This «vulnerability» renders them a loss of social status, increased probability of gender-based exploitation, and thus a loss of work.

Case 8: «I started working three months ago at a medical center, and the assistant manager asked me to become friends. I refused because I didn't know exactly what he wants. I have children and responsibilities. He resented my refusal and started harassing me at work, so I had to quit.»

Also, poor psychological health and daunting family commitments inhibit their ability to follow on their personal development plans.

Case 2: «I was working in a nursery after my husband was arrested... but I couldn't keep this work. The psychological stress holds me back from dealing with children and I can't reconcile work and home responsibilities. I am not a passive housewife... I wish to work in a publishing house, write and publish my books, and resume my studies... but dreams of work, writing and publishing are all postponed because my life is divided between housekeeping and childcare».

Case 4: “We live in a stand-by status, awaiting the release of my husband. I cannot ask my family to support my dreams financially. I dream of learning marketing and computer programming. I have the time but not the resources».

Even for one of the most successful cases, personal enterprises through the informal market –where women are less paid, and their potentials are poorly transformed into employable qualification– these enterprises were intermittent and short term.

Case 2: «I lost my job as a teacher in a private school when I decided to marry my husband and settle at home. After his arrest, I had to take several temporary jobs, the first of which working in childcare nursery. Then I started a business in beads, then women accessories, lingerie and marketing through social media. Then I started working as a home-based private teacher to earn income while looking after my children. No one in the family helps me with the children at all. They say, 'solve your problems on your own, don't pass them on to us'».

However, ongoing repression and the indirect consequences on families' life and psychological well-being have pushed nearly all the 6 young male and female interviewees to plan a career shift and several business enterprises, and two of them were keen in rights-defence, raising their potential of becoming active political and social agents.

Case 1: «I will learn law to defend the oppressed, represent their interests and raise their grievances to the authorities... I want to improve the image of the legal profession in the field of human rights and help the families... my study will help me to break the fear barrier between me and society... I aim to work in a large law firm and to gain deep experience and knowledge.»

Case 6: «I believe the only solution is through media campaigns, legal defence, and pressure by human rights organization».

In Case 7, a 23-years old young man, the arbitrary detention of the family's head led the young man to postpone his university degree in Commerce, follow on his father's career in veterinary medicine, and to start a business in pharmaceuticals.

In case 4, the 34-year housewife who used to work as a teacher in nurse reflected on her plans to learn programming and marketing to start a home-based retailing business in cheese, clothing, and house appliances:

I do not have energy to deal with people, bargain, and build relations. I feel there is a barrier separating me from the surrounding society. However, I plan to start this business with my brother anyway. Everyone is thinking of similar projects nowadays; my husband won't accept becoming a burden on our family. I am planning to learn programming and marketing to run my business.

4.1. *Migration and resettlement prospects*

Economic hardship, financial barriers to self-realization through education and training, as well as isolation and weakening of social networks around families of prisoners have prompted different insights on migration or resettlement prospects.

On the one side, legal, political, and social constraints have directed some families' thought away from migration, leading five of the ten interviewed cases to focus on resettlement, re-skilling themselves, and re-employing the victims after release, in order to survive a living.

Case 6: «Migration is not a solution because the regime will retaliate against parents, siblings, and families of released prisoners; they usually get released subject to house arrest or regular police observation».

Socio-cultural and personal concerns have also shaped some families' assessment of migration, as it involves losing established social, work, and education networks after a bitter struggle for financial

sustainability. For elder parents, the fear of losing their breadwinner and suffering loneliness in a time of need was paramount.

Case 2: «We can't be better than we are now, earn income and stay alive. The challenges I have been through made me satisfied and don't want to change anything; what we consider to be a change may be for the worst... we have no luxury other than to continue in the same vein... we are like a mouse in the trap».

Meanwhile, the repeated detention of political prisoners who completed their sentences or received a release order has become a systemic abuse by the Egyptian authorities to maintain control of arbitrarily detained citizens (Committee for Justice 2020c). Hence, newly released victims tend to change their addresses and residence governorates, but even then, release is widely reported to have been accompanied with house arrest or processionary measures that require victims to attend at a police station sometimes every 24 hours, during these visits, many verified cases have been re-detained. Many cases have reported on travel bans, ban of issuing or confiscating national ID and travel documents, and the high risk of arbitrary detention at the airport. These together have driven some families to accept and cope with the *status quo* at any cost, while others plan of resorting to migration –*by any mean*:

As to those considering migration, some families looked favourably on migration only through safe and official means or through marriage. Others considered migration the only mean to safety and better future notwithstanding any obstacles. Even in cases where migration might lead to further alienation and disunity of the family, some respondents preferred this being a choice than a *status quo*:

Case 8: «The first thing we think about when he gets out of prison is migration, even if we have to sell our clothes to collect the money needed for his travel... he must move away from the security authorities in order to stay safe... we only want safety. I cannot describe the pain we feel when we cannot touch or embrace him or even touch his fingers because of the wires and the barriers between us».

5. Mobilization and protesting decisions

Families reflected on different and contradicting positions regarding political protest. Their account of the husbands' attitudes also showed considerable variation on the latter's side.

Case 2: «Any resistance will only increase the number of victims in prisons».

Case 6: «Some people went to demonstration and received money in return; they deserve the prison for as many years as they lie there. My brother did not do anything, we are neither Islamist nor politicized. Egyptians are coward and deserve repression».

Case 1: «My husband insists that I do not write or share anything in social media... I don't want to worry him but I will be the first on the street if any protest breaks out because I want to vent my anger... I don't care about my safety because I am dead anyway... I only care about my children and that my husband gets out».

Overall, moral and religious values, fear of retaliation, and rationality where the main factors shaping family's attitudes in support of or against collective action, even when there is a legitimate need and a sufficient number of demonstrators.

Case 3: «We must protest to defend the raped girls and the oppressed; silence will lead to our torment in the afterlife because Allah will ask us why we accepted us to live humiliated».

Case 4: «I fear protest will lead to revenge against my husband or my arrest. I feel people do not care about their rights. If there are sufficient number of protestors, I may join them. But I usually get scared.»

Case 5: «I participated in protests and sit-ins and many of us were arrested, but this is not possible now... the oppressed party make concessions to regain freedom».

Case 7: «Protesting and filing complains does not change anything in reality. The only possible solution is to convince the authorities to revisit their decision on how 'threatening' the detained person is».

Also, as the regime enacts legal and institutional changes leading to complaint and redress mechanisms becoming meaningless, and despite the growing evidence of isolation, public shaming, and desperation among families of the political prisoners, families have not had a unified attitude towards the regime's identity. A tumultuous view of the judiciary and prosecution occurs in the interviewees' attitudes towards the «unjust» judiciary that denies basic principles of fair trials, enforce rulings based on torture-tainted evidence, enacts renewed charges of which victims were proved innocent, and acts complicitly with the executive authorities in imposing the prolonged detention of the victims. Meanwhile, families reflected on hopes for justice and redress through the country's «haven of justice», hoped to rule the

release of victims after completing half of their sentences, and the judiciary to accept cassation requests. Accounts on the «Pharaoh's Soldiers» who deserve God's punishment come along with accounts on the prosecutions and courts playing the role of the «dove of peace» in mediating between the National Security authority inside prisons and families requests of visitation and medical treatment for their imprisoned relatives.

Thereof, despite the regime's identification of political prisoners in the realm of «terrorism», the way in which the interviewed participants' identified the regime, and their choices and decisions over social mobilization have differed across their inter-subjective positions as well as the degree of repression enacted against their family members. In the majority of cases, refrain from collective political action was evident.

Thereof, decisions on protesting and mobilization differed according to a range of factors:

5.1. *Family pressures*

In three of the interviewed parents, two reflected on the futility of protest and collective action and expressed their optimal drive to have their children back to home, work and family and to «stay away of politics». Some interviewed wives also reflected on their parents' discouragement of taking a «public» action against the authorities, while two cases reported their mother-in-law encouragement of protesting behaviour.

5.2. *Case type and duration of sentences*

The extent to which repression leads families to organize in a contentious action differs along with the type of accusations addressed to their relative- terrorism, protesting, spreading false news, the duration of sentences, and their subjective positions. For example, two of the three interviewed elders expressed low agency in political, social, and economic terms, while one elder mother was a fervent instigator of protesting. Some of the interviewed wives have expressed confrontational attitudes and higher protesting tendency as they have little to lose- with low socioeconomic agency –and much to bear– i.e., their husbands serve long, terrorism-related, sentences with no opportunity to redress or claim justice. The more families tie their social, economic, and political becoming to the release of their relative,

and when they have little to lose, they tend to protest and organize in collective action.

5.3. *Stirring up religious and cultural sensitivities*

Women interviewed in this article reflected on disrespect of religious and cultural sensitivities as central motives for political contention, especially during family visits, court hearings, or prosecutorial interrogations. Accounts on the physical and verbal abuse of women and elderly persons repeated among wives of prisoners incarcerated in the Tora Maximum Security Prison (1) or accused before military courts. They recounted on hitting female lawyers before courts, pulling an elder parent's stick, insulting mothers of victims during the transportation to courts, and banning the entry of food and water to victims during Ramadan at heated summer (July 2017) as main incidents instigating contention before prison and court gates.

In these incidents, the authorities' reaction varied depending on the degree of popular contention and the officers' negotiation capabilities. Participants in this study account that repression is systematic but not evenly applied in Egyptian prisons. Prison administrators and security officers lack negotiation skills and crisis management; they are responsible for incarcerated convicts but cannot decide on their imprisonment conditions under a dominant «National Security» authority who decides on visitation, treatment, detention and re-detention of victims. A common finding is that pressuring the religious and cultural sensitivities escalates momentary protests and leads to either a temporary improvement in detention conditions or further abuse of victims.

5.4. *The scenery dimension: numbers, voice and tension*

The number of visiting families, political tension in the street, and calls of victims from inside deportation vehicles sometimes have temporary influence on families protesting behaviour, especially when the later feel safe from retaliation and arrest. This however may lead to the arrest of some families.

Case 1: «In my husband's case, the court agreed that families may see their relatives after the hearing. However, the security force accompanying the victims to Tora's Maximum-Security prison 1, revoked the court's permit. Families protested and held a sit-in on

the road. The authorities arrested five women and accused them of disturbing public peace and order. Afterwards, the court worked in agreement with lawyers on allowing a certain number of families to enter with the guarding force of prisoners and see their relatives. On the other side, families started to organize and take turns so that a few of them get in and see their relatives».

Conclusion

This article presented a micro level analysis of ten cases of families of prisoners in Egyptian prisons and places of detention. The focus is on how repression affects families of prisoners indirectly through a range of socio-economic hardships and the resulting drive into self-realization, financial independence, and depoliticization. As the Egyptian authorities worked since 2013 on weakening the political opposition through arbitrary detention and unfair trials, the vast body of literature has focused on repression of activist young agency of the 25th January demonstrations and afterwards. The fact that depoliticization and disappointment are evident among the majority of politically non-active agency who are indirectly addressed by repression have been little investigated. This paper offers in-depth examination of ten exemplary cases of families outreached through Committee for Justice's fieldwork activities in Egyptian places of detention. It explores how families respond to socio-economic crisis prompted by repression of their relatives, and their thinking about salvation and/or collective political action to change the status quo.

Results has shown that economic hardships following arbitrary detention of breadwinners have pushed family members to pursue career shifts and self-realization, while only two cases –of the ten examined in this study– showed tendencies towards political agency through rights defence and mobilization through media and international pressure. In these two cases, the drive towards a meaningful engagement with the society and politics is driven by a mixed identification of the authority as both corrupt but a relative «haven of justice». In the eight examined cases, individuals' assessment of the futility of contention appeared to have been affected by families' perception of their imprisoned relatives' weak «political» weight, the identification of the regime as the later is apathetic towards the severe consequences of contention –e.g., arrest and retaliation, and the moderate severity of repression which increases families' hope in «presidential pardons» and reconciliation.

As for prospects of migration or resettlement, the interviewed cases were evenly divided between the two directions. Interview results reflected individuals' deep feeling of alienation due to a heavy imposition of an alternative system of thought, a set of values, and practices that continued to shatter their assumptive worlds, rendering some incapable of building social networks with the broader society. Meanwhile, legal, political, and social constraints have affected their preferences of settlement in Egypt after the release of their family members. On the other side, the repeated detention of political prisoners who completed their sentences or received a release order has pushed the other five cases to consider migration scenarios especially through safe and official means. Although political migration of Egyptians since 2013 has represented a major shift in migration patterns that Egypt had previously witnessed in the 1970s, this tendency fails to promise socio-political change in the future, as migrants' main destination has been two politically conservative countries in the Middle East- Qatar and Turkey, which undermines the possibility of socio-political change after return (Tuccio *et al.* 2019).

Evidence garnered through the interviewed cases indicate individuals' contradicting positions regarding protest and collective mobilization. The article finds out that protesting is a temporal, pragmatic, and continuously reframed choice that is affected by a highly volatile social and political context. Families affected by repression consider protesting based on their assessment on opportunities -including the number of protestors, cultural or religious motivations, the authorities' poor negotiation skills, and the possible favorable outcomes. On the other hand, depoliticization appears as a strategic choice of individuals who share highly contradicting positions towards the authority and society. Thereof, all participants strongly supported a reconciliation with the authorities in exchange of family reunion and socio-economic stability. Also, in an extremely repressive and dangerous political environment, two factors have led interviewees to consider collective mobilization as a nonsensical strategy, compared to reconciliation. These were: (1) the abolishing of communicative public sphere on repression, as appeared in cases of arbitrary detention for expression of opinion on social media; and (2) the highly social and political polarization surrounding victims of political repression and their families.

The results of interviewing five women leading their families after the arbitrary detention of their breadwinners –cases 1, 2, 4, 5, and 8–, also showed interesting findings regarding women's feminine subjectivity which have risen through the struggle to autonomy, self-

realization and financial independence; the disappointment arising from lack of means and opportunities to financial independence in a male-centred society; the survival of a «social» becoming in two firmly separate worlds; the inability to remould the private and public spaces or communicate openly on repression and abuse; and the rising support for political reconciliation and family reunion after significant gains in the realm of socio-economic agency. Further research may focus on bridging the gap in the literature that focuses on women's political and legal «feminism», by considering the cases of unpoliticized women whose agency flourishes through, and in spite of, repression of their male-breadwinners, giving them a chance of reconstructing their gender identities.

Last but not least, results in this article provide supporting evidence on the role of emotions of disappointment and desperation in retooling the understanding of power, action and inaction (Gould 2009; Greenberg 2011; Pearlman 2013; Ryan 2015) among the interviewed members of prisoners' families. In their reflections, fear was instrumental in bringing about social and economic agency through self-centered salvation strategies, as they set priorities of family reunion, starting business enterprises, acquiring new skills and careered employment, seeking autonomy and equality in family and workplace, and planning for migration or resettlement projects.

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