Views: How Do Political Prisoners in Egypt See Life Behind Bars?

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On the first day of the coup of 3 July 2013, Egyptian police began to arrest those who opposed the new regime. The focus was initially on Islamists, who, being the ousted regime, constituted the chief opposition. As the months and years passed, however, and repression was cemented as a core practice of post-July authoritarianism, tens of thousands of citizens across the ideological, political, organisational, and professional spectrum were sent to prison, including citizens unaffiliated with any political ideologies or organisations.

At the time of writing, after President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has won another six year-term in a farcical, staged election lacking transparency and integrity, thousands of political prisoners are languishing in Egyptian prisons in grim conditions.[1] Some prisoners have been incarcerated for more than a decade, others just one or two years shy of that. These years lost in inhumane conditions without due process have left prisoners in dire psychological and intellectual condition. No distinction is made here between manifestations of psychological and intellectual states as I attempt to trace them, looking at and elucidating in detail the overlapping factors and causes of these two states with the aim of showing how prisoners have come to them.

This essay relies on four interviews with former male prisoners (at their own request, in fear of their personal safety and security, they are referred to here by pseudonyms). All of them left prison in the last three years, between 2021 and 2023. I reached out to a few former female prisoners for interviews as well but they declined, saying that recalling prison and its agonies causes them anguish and also citing their generally poor mental state due to the tragic events taking place in the Gaza Strip.[2] This article does not seek to observe and recount the general psychological condition of all political prisoners in Egypt held in various prisons, given the difficulty of such an endeavour. Rather, it attempts to give a brief overview of the condition of Egyptian political prisoners and its most significant psychological and intellectual manifestations. In addition, the article does not deliberately exclude or marginalise criminal prisoners, as if they are not part of the prison system, but the prison context dictates the reasons for arrest and release and other aspects of the research that are specific to political prisoners.

During the interviews, prisoners were asked about their term of imprisonment, the timing of their arrest and release, their personal psychological state inside prison, and the general situation. The interviews delved into the details of their daily lives, especially for the longest-serving prisoners who had exhausted all legal appeals: How did they live or spend their time? What were the outward manifestations of their dire mental state (suicide attempts, depression, mental illness) and how were 'irrational' practices identified? Through their answers, I try to understand the extent to which there was a general narrative, optimist or pessimistic, about the likelihood of release before the completion of their full sentence. I also inquired about how prisoners engage with news and political events. This takes us to manifestations of their general intellectual state, in terms of the ideological and organisational narrative within prison. In other words, did the prisoners remain attached to their ideas and organisations or did they abandon them?

Manifestations of the Psychological State

In the first three years following the military coup in Egypt, from July 2013 to mid-2016, political detainees—specifically Islamists and especially those affiliated, organisationally or non-organisationally, with the Muslim Brotherhood—did not think that the crisis of political prisoners would endure for so many years. They thought the issue would likely be resolved at any time, either by ending the military coup in one way or another or through a reconciliation process between the organisation and the new political authority, which was, and still is, headed by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This optimism about the release of political prisoners was reinforced by the narrative of senior leaders, as well as intermediate leaders in and out of prison, who repeatedly suggested that the coup regime was 'tottering' or that a reconciliation with the regime was imminent.

As the years passed, however, especially after the death of the deposed president Mohammed Morsi in mid-2019, this narrative evaporated. In the minds of many political prisoners, it was replaced by a narrative that held that there would be no end to the current regime, meaning no return to 2 July 2013. Ibrahim (not his real name) explained:

> Since 2016 and 2017, people in prison have started to disagree with the Brotherhood's narrative. You started to hear things like, 'That's it, anyone who's been sentenced is going to serve it', or 'People aren't getting out of prison', or 'The Sisi regime won't fall'. These statements upset many Brotherhood leaders and fuelled many disagreements between young people and leaders. But after 2019 and the death of President Morsi, the agreed-upon narrative has been that people will never be released from prison until after they serve their sentence.

Over the past years, the regime has not wanted to come to a genuine, serious resolution of the crisis of political prisoners, ignoring all the initiatives proposed to solve it, including those of Ziad Bahaa Eldin, deputy prime minister in the government of Hazem Beblawi in 2013,[3] and Ambassador Masoum Marzouk in 2018, prior to his arrest,[4] as well as the First Seven Steps[5] initiative proposed

by human rights organisations in 2021 and several others put forward by Egyptian and non-Egyptian[6] political and human rights figures. Instead, the Egyptian regime has released mere hundreds of prisoners through customary channels: presidential pardons for a very few, release after time served for many, or release pursuant to an order from the Public Prosecution in cases involving charges of spreading false news and joining a banned group. These methods offered only a partial solution to the crisis, especially given the security tactic of arresting thousands of citizens, including those who had previously been arrested. At other times, in what is known as 'recycling', prisoners who have been given a release or who have served their sentence may be re-arrested in connection with another case before they are even physically released from prison.

This is what happened to Ibrahim: 'I served my sentence in prison, seven years, between optimism and despair, and then when the date of my release came, the National Security Service disappeared me for three months. After that, I was recycled into a new case, for which I spent almost a year in prison before I was released'.

The same thing happened to Mustafa (not his real name): 'The national security officer told me I wouldn't be recycled and then I was recycled into a new case. I was desperate. A few days before that, one of my cellmates died. So when I was disappeared for more than two weeks and recycled into a new case, it was traumatic, and I felt totally hopeless', he said, recalling his dire mental state at the time.

This tactic not only induces shock and despair in the prisoner but may also lead to death. In August 2023, forty-one-year-old political prisoner Suhaib Amara died after the National Security Agency disappeared him for two weeks when his release date came, after he had served a ten-year sentence. When Amara learned that he would be recycled and charged in a new case, he died of shock, according to a person familiar with his death.[7] Political prisoners thus remain hostage to illegal practices adopted by the National Security Agency, which determines their release date at its own discretion rather than in accordance with the law and judicial provisions.[8]

On 26 June 2023, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms issued a report titled 'Unbearable: Suicide in Places of Detention in Egypt' in which it documented dozens of suicides in various Egyptian prisons.[9] Suicide is one of the most important psychological manifestations stemming from prisoners' severe living conditions, including the denial of their most basic rights as set forth in Prison Authority regulations. They are denied visits, the entry of food and clothing, and exercise. Prisoners may also be held in solitary confinement, stripped of their belongings, and punished with beatings, humiliation, and imprisonment in disciplinary cells, in addition to other forms of psychological and physical torture.

The hope of release fades amid such harsh conditions, producing a physically and psychologically devastated prisoner, isolated from everything around him in the prison. In such cases, prisoners may develop severe mental illness, the consequences of which are suicide attempts and various types of withdrawal resulting from psychological dysfunction. For example, Ibrahim says: 'We had a prisoner with us who claimed to be the Commander of the Faithful. When he would see the officers, he'd curse them and say, "I'm the caliph of the faithful on earth"'. Ibrahim also referenced suicide attempts: 'I have seen many suicide attempts. They were thwarted when

other prisoners discovered the attempt and then the prison administration would punish them with beatings and imprisonment in the disciplinary cell'.

As a result of systematic humiliation, the prisoner is psychologically defeated, coming to see himself and his body as worthless. These practices reflect, according to French sociologist David Le Breton, a 'subjective and social mirror', in which he a person sees himself as contemptible and fair game for abuse.[10] On this, Fathi (a pseudonym) recalls: 'There was a doctor who tried to commit suicide in the National Security headquarters because of deliberate humiliation by security personnel. He was always looking for any sharp instrument to kill himself. I also saw another unstable person who introduced himself as a psych patient because of what happened to him in state security headquarters'. These practices of domination not only make the prisoner vulnerable; in many cases, the prisoner may use these same practices against those weaker than himself with the aim of regaining part of the self. In his study on the psychology of the oppressed, Lebanese sociologist Mustafa Hijazi explains, 'The oppressed person dissolves into the world of the dominator by identifying with his lifestyle and adopting his values and ideals. Through this identification and adoption, he sees a solution to his existential predicament; his self is elevated to a rank that satisfies him and instils him with pride'.[11]

Mustafa agrees with both Ibrahim and Fathi about the generally poor psychological state of prisoners, which varies from one prisoner to another according to different general and specific life circumstances. 'I saw cases of severe depression, abnormal practices, and mental disassociation', Mustafa said. 'I also witnessed suicide attempts. We had one prisoner who tried to hang himself in the bathroom, another who took lethal pills, and prisoners who tried to cut their arteries with sharp instruments'. These are the most common methods of suicide inside prison. Since prisoners are stripped of any tools that may help them kill themselves, they try to fashion tools, smuggling in sharp instruments (iron spoons, razor blades) or pills that cause death, cutting clothing into long, thin strips, or even jumping from high places, if the architectural design of the prison allows for it.[12]

All these practices and individual cases have given rise to a general state of instability, desperation, and hopelessness in most prisoners, not only when it comes to politics and talking about their conditions, but also in regard to life in general. Prisoners no longer act like they did at the beginning of their terms, engaging in any activity no matter how trivial, which expresses their self and their hope of release. Prisoners pursue fewer recreational activities to alleviate the severity of the prison day, such as making a chess or domino set, acting out movies, and other simple games that can be invented and played inside the cell for entertainment. They also less frequently engage in reading, learning, self-education, and hobbies (poetry and drawing, for example), out of despair and because magazines, books, pens, and paper are denied entry.

Ibrahim describes the situation: 'In all the cells and the entire ward, there was a lot of sleeping, more calmness, more detachment, and also more fights and problems. There are people who just refused to leave the cell, even during exercise period, especially people whose family can't visit them. People lost hope of getting out of prison, which in turn led them to lose any sense of purpose

to life'. At other times, an external political event related in some way to the present and future of political prisoners in Egypt intrudes on and breaks this psychological state.

Manifestations of the Intellectual Condition

Gradually, with the passing of each year and the deterioration of the prisoners' mental state, intellectual and political conversations among prisoners become less frequent, whereas in the early years of imprisonment, politics was the overriding concern. This is logical, as they were arrested in the first place due to their ideologically motivated participation in politics, whether it was political Islam—the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Group, and the Salafi Front, and armed Islamist groups—or some brand of leftism, or even participation based on the intersection between politics, thought, and occupation, such as journalists, researchers, photographers, writers, rights advocates, and other professions whose work directly intersects with politics and power.

The majority of prisoners came to believe that the current regime would remain in power, just as surely as they would remain in prison. Talk about ideas and politics came to be viewed as useless, and in fact, it spurred arguments between prisoners in the same cell. This state of affairs was a microcosm of intellectual and political life outside prison, where the authoritarian regime has desiccated every intellectual and political space—and even cultural and artistic spaces—through repression, threat, prohibition, imprisonment, disappearance, and killing. It has barred the operation of parties and groups and listed them as banned entities, among them the Muslim Brotherhood, April 6th, the Revolutionary Socialists, and the Ultras, and it has prevented individuals from working independently as well by arresting, disappearing, killing, and intimidating them, as seen in the case of economic researcher Ayman Hadhoud, who died in April 2022 after being arrested by the National Security Service—according to one account, under torture.[13]

But inside prison, thought and politics again become a topic of conversation when an outside event intervenes, such as the demonstrations of 20 September 2019, the election of a new US president (Joe Biden in 2020), or the launch of the National Dialogue in April 2022. In the Egyptian presidential elections of 2024, dissident politician Ahmed al-Tantawi generated a grassroots political and social movement that brought in many Egyptians and greatly distressed the authoritarian regime. His showing threatened the electoral farce staged by both regime representatives and others for the benefit of audiences at home and abroad. These and other events revived a sense of political hope. Mustafa related:

> During the Mohammed Ali events [the September 2019 demonstrations], prisoners were standing at the cell door waiting for the prisons to open so they could get out. Some prisoners imagined they heard the voices of demonstrators coming towards the prison to free them. A few months later, when Joe Biden won the American election, some prisoners chanted that Biden would get them out since he belonged to the Democratic Party, unlike the right-wing Donald Trump, who called Sisi his

favourite dictator. Any external political event fuels hopes that the regime is changing and people will get out of prison.

Thus, in recent years inside prisons, the intellectual and political condition has fallen silent, only emerging again on the basis of the external political landscape, which sees some sort of movement only once every few years, through street protests, an authoritarian strategy, or a major political event such as presidential elections.

With regard to the abandonment of ideologies and organisational affiliations, some prisoners, despite the length of their imprisonment, their despair of being freed, and their abandonment of any thought of politics, reform, or change, nevertheless continue to cling to their affiliation to their organisation. Speaking specifically of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Fathi said: 'Some members of the Brotherhood don't talk about politics or ideas, or even the group's mistakes in governance, but they are bound to the group, defend it in discussions, and do not stop belonging to it. For them, the group is like a family, not an intellectual or political group you belong to that you can just leave when you want'.

Mustafa agreed with Fathi about political prisoners' sense of belonging to the organisation, but he specified older members. He also spoke about the dynamic of Islamist thought and organisation and the way it shifted inside prison:

> There are people who have completely disengaged from any ideas and organisations. Prisoners affiliated with Islamist ideologies move between them during their prison term. A guy belongs to the Brotherhood and then joins the [Islamic] State organisation and then returns to the Brotherhood, or gives up all organisational ideas or Islam as a whole. But the youth belonging to Islamist organisations were more disengaged and tended to abandon organisations more than older people.

Much research examines Brotherhood members' profound ties to the organisation itself, not to its ideas or practices, because the group is not merely an ideological or political organisation, but, more than that, it has social and economic significance for most its members.[14]

Mustafa made a distinction in the adherence to ideas: 'There were people who really were still committed, not to ideas in their ideological and organisational sense, but to values and occupational ideas, like professional concepts, exposing truth, freedom, and democracy. These were journalists, researchers, and rights people'. Ideas and organisations are forsaken not only inside prison; many former prisoners distance themselves from anything related to politics, ideas, and organisation out of fear. Fear is politicised—it becomes a form of politics itself. This is the fear of repeating the prison experience aroused by and on the self/body.[15]

Speaking of fear after prison, Mahmoud says:

> After getting out of prison, there is no chance to think about anything except not going to prison again. Security does not leave former prisoners alone, but arrests them again. This happened to me personally. They are also constantly summoned for questioning and to security facilities, in what is known as monitoring. So the majority of former prisoners prefer not to engage in any political or intellectual activity. They're very fearful and look for any way to leave Egypt.[16]

The security strategy of close monitoring thus dominates the lives of former prisoners, also turning them into self-monitors, out of fear of repeating the prison experience and the agony it brought them and their families.[17]

Finally, Egypt's political prisoners have been broken by the authoritarian repression of the July 2013 regime. For many years, they and their bodies have been devastated in a punitive, degrading manner, in a penal system that does not comply with prison regulations or provide the minimum necessary for human life. Those who have managed to come out of prison to continue their lives are at the mercy of a security regime that monitors and surveils them, summons them for interrogation, and arrests them again. This system represents what Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls 'invincible evil', one that is futile to resist.[18] Indeed, the strategy of regular surveillance trains former prisoners to reproduce 'self-enslavement', in the words of American philosopher Judith Butler. They are summoned to security facilities where they are held illegally for a few hours or a few days, generating a subjective surrender or submission to power.[19]

All of this is taking place in a society experiencing multiple economic and cultural crises, making it difficult for political prisoners to live a normal life and impossible to treat or build what has been deformed or shattered inside prison. Prisoners have only two choices: continue living with depression, isolation, and oppression, or travel abroad with the aim of redemption. But based on the experiences of those who have left Egypt due to police repression, travel or exile, whether voluntary or compulsory, does not necessarily allow former prisoners to live safely and with ease, or even rebuild what was destroyed in prison or Egypt. For some, it has only been a continuation of a life governed by fear, alienation, and isolation.[20]

About the author

Ahmed Abdelhalim is an Egyptian writer and researcher who writes on topics related to political sociology, the body and its relationship to power, and punitive policies in Egyptian prisons.

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