

The Sting of the Scorpion... Egypt's Darkest Corner was the forerunner to Guantanamo

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“Welcome to Tora Land”, declared the headline on a magazine rack which caught my eye as I was swept along during the rush hour inside Cairo’s chaotic railway station. The boldness of the declaration on the glossy front page confirms two things.

The first is that the people of Egypt have a great sense of humour; the second is that the Peoples’ Revolution continues to have a seismic impact on the country’s political landscape, for Tora is the name of a notorious prison complex on the outskirts of Cairo. Since most members of the former government – including Hosni Mubarak’s two sons – are now in residence there you can begin to understand the tongue-in-cheek headline.

Every day in Egypt sees new arrests and criminal charges among the corrupt elite; no one, it seems, is now immune from the Egyptian prosecutors. For many, this has turned into a revolving door revolution, with those once in prison for daring to stand up to Mubarak and his iron rule now on the outside while their tormentors and oppressors take their places behind bars.

It is indeed poetic justice, but sadly not for all; it seems there are some prisoners buried so deep inside the brutal “justice” system that they’ve been all but forgotten. As the Egyptian Revolution hurtles breathlessly towards its 100th day there is still a group of prisoners who appear to have been overlooked in the excitement of the Arab Spring.

The forgotten few are the 100+ inmates of Al’aqrab Prison; the word means “the scorpion” in Arabic. It’s an apt name for a prison buried away in the same desert sands that once concealed the treasures of Tutankhamun. Now they hide even more secrets, masking the depth of wickedness and depravity practised by Egypt’s Last Pharaoh, Hosni Mubarak.

The Scorpion Prison is a hellish institution that former prisoners told me was the blueprint for America’s Guantanamo, the world’s most notorious jail. It is reasonable to say that this is Egypt’s very own Guantanamo.

The maximum security jail is two kilometres from the main entrance to the official Tora cluster of prisons where former government ministers now reside in comparative comfort. Some of the monsters who served Mubarak and are now behind bars will even have authorised the torture endured by the Scorpion inmates whose daily routine is quite different to those such as Mubarak’s sons.

Many of the detainees have been held for years without trial or charge – very like thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli jails – simply for being critical of Mubarak’s regime in speeches

or articles. Others were convicted of trying to overthrow Israel's good friend Mubarak; the irony is that they did far less than those who rallied bravely in Tahrir Square just weeks ago.

But while the revolutionaries are rewarded for their heroism with hard won freedoms and liberties, the Scorpion 100 continue to languish behind its high walls, fearing that they have been completely forgotten. Their voices remain unheard in the forbidding complex hidden behind an imposing seven-metre high wall that is protected by heavily fortified, armour-plated gates.

According to the Muslim Brotherhood website, Al'aqrab was the brainchild of a group of officers who spent five years training in the US with the FBI. On their return to Egypt, The Scorpion and its H blocks were built; they opened on 30 May 1993.

Prison staff have the power to cut off water, light and electricity, and close individual windows at the flick of a switch, as punishment. Twenty cells are used purely for solitary confinement. It seems that the 'American inspiration' behind Scorpion was so successful that it was replicated in the spring of 2002 at the US military base of Guantanamo Bay in Occupied Cuba.

As I relayed the description of The Scorpion to Moazzam Begg, Director of the London-based NGO Cageprisoners, he winced. The layout was, indeed, very familiar to the former ex-Guantanamo detainee who spent three years in America's Scorpion.

Mubarak's Ministry of the Interior moved detainees from Liman, Istekbal Tora and Abu Zaabal to the new super-max jail and it is thought that at one point around 20,000 supposed "enemies of the state" were being held there without trial or charge. Moreover, while we know about The Scorpion's inmates, there could be other political prisoners held elsewhere within Egypt's prison system; at this stage, we simply don't know.

Rumours abound about what has gone on behind The Scorpion's high walls, up to today; the horror includes harrowing tales of torture, abuse and years of solitary confinement without sunlight.

While all of the Muslim Brotherhood's political prisoners have now been released across Egypt, the agony continues for the inmates of The Scorpion Prison that is well hidden from the desert highway about 20 kilometres from the Egyptian capital. Most belong to the now defunct group Talae al-Fatah, Jihad, al-Gama'h Al Islamia and other Islamic groups and although the majority signed so-called "adoption of repentance papers" years ago they are still being held with little or no prospect of a trial. Some have gone years without family visits; they've been whipped, flogged and subjected to electric shocks, as well as collective punishment. All of this defines the "Scorpion Experience". Of the 20,000 or so who passed through its gates around 15 per cent are believed to have died.

Mubarak's secretive and sinister Ministry of the Interior succeeded in hiding these men from the outside world, but even with today's freedom it seems that justice is as elusive as ever. We need to press for their release, and soon, so that they will be able to enjoy the Arab Spring and celebrate the 100th day of the Egyptian Peoples' Revolution. If justice is going to be one of the cornerstones of the new regime's policies, then the sooner the Scorpion 100 are set free, or at least put on trial with full due process, the better.

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<http://www.cageprisoners.com>

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