

What to Expect from COP27 in Egypt's Police State: An Interview with Sharif Abdel Kouddous

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The global climate meeting called COP27 (the 27th Conference of Parties) will be held in the remote Egyptian desert resort of Sharm El-Sheik, Egypt from November 6-18. Given the extremely repressive nature of the Egyptian government, this gathering will likely be different from others, where there have been large, raucous protests led by civil society groups.

So as tens of thousands of delegates – from world leaders to climate activists and journalists – descend on Sharm el-Sheik from all over the world, we asked Egyptian Journalist Sharif Abdel Kouddous to give us his thoughts about the state of Egypt today, including the situation of political prisoners, and how he expects the Egyptian government will act with the eyes of the world upon it.

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Medea Benjamin: For those who don't know or have forgotten, can you give us a quick overview of the nature of the present government in Egypt today?

Sharif Abdel Kouddous: The 2011 revolution against Hosni Mubarak, an uprising that was part of what has been called the Arab Spring, was very inspiring and had reverberations around the world, from the Occupy Movement in the United States to the Indignados in Spain. But that revolution was crushed in a very brutal way in 2013 by the military, led by General Abdel Fattah al Sisi—who later became president.

Right now, Egypt is ruled by a very tight and closed clique of military and intelligence officers, a circle that is completely opaque. Its decision-making process does not allow for any political participation and it does not brook any kind of dissent or opposition. It seems that the government's answer to any problems with its citizens is to put them in prison.

There are literally tens of thousands of political prisoners in Egypt right now. We don't know the exact number because there are no official statistics and this forces lawyers and the

very harassed human rights groups to try to painstakingly tabulate the thousands of people who are trapped behind bars.

Over the past few years, we've seen Egypt build several new prisons. Just last year Sisi oversaw the opening of the Wadi al-Natrun prison complex. It's not called a prison complex, it's called a "rehabilitation center." This is one of seven or eight new prisons that Sisi himself has dubbed "American-style prisons."

These prison complexes include within them the courts and judicial buildings, so it makes a conveyor belt from the courthouse to the prison more efficient.

MB: What is the status of this massive group of political prisoners?

SAK: The majority of political prisoners in Egypt are held in what is called "pre-trial detention." Under Egypt's penal code, you can be held in prison for two years without ever being convicted of a crime. Nearly everyone held in pre-trial detention faces two identical charges: one is spreading false information and the other is belonging to a terrorist organization or an outlawed organization.

The prison conditions are very dire. If you get sick, you are in big trouble. There have been a lot of deaths from medical negligence, with prisoners dying in custody. Torture and other forms of abuse by security forces is widespread.

We've also seen the number of death sentences and executions skyrocket. Under the former President Mubarak, in his final decade in office, there was a de facto moratorium on executions. There were death sentences handed down but people were not being put to death. Now Egypt ranks third in the world in the number of executions.

MB: What about other freedoms, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of the press?

SAK: Basically, the regime sees its citizens as a nuisance or a threat. All forms of protest or public assembly are banned.

Alleged violations carry very stiff prison sentences. We've seen mass arrests sweeps happen whenever there's any kind of public demonstration and we've also seen an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, with human rights organizations and economic justice organizations being forced to scale back their operations or basically operate underground. The people who work for them are subject to intimidation and harassment and travel bans and arrests.

We've also seen a massive crackdown on press freedom, a nearly complete takeover of the media landscape. Under Mubarak's government, there was at least some opposition press, including some opposition newspapers and TV stations. But now the government very tightly controls the press through censorship and also through acquisition. The General Intelligence Services, which is the intelligence apparatus of the military, has become the largest media owner of the country. They own newspapers and TV channels. Independent media, such as the one I work for called Mada Masr, operate on the margins in a very, very hostile environment.

Egypt is the third largest jailer of journalists in the world and imprisons more journalists on charges of spreading false news than any other country in the world.

MB: Can you talk about the case of Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who is probably Egypt's most famous political prisoner?

SAK: Alaa has been behind bars for much of the last decade. He is in prison ostensibly for the crime of "spreading false news," but he is really in prison for these ideas, for being an icon and a symbol of the 2011 revolution. For the regime, imprisoning him was a way to set an example for everyone else. That's why there has been so much campaigning to get him out.

He has been in prison under very, very difficult conditions. For two years he wasn't allowed out of his cell and didn't even have a mattress to sleep on. He was completely deprived of everything, including books or reading materials of any kind. For the first time, he started expressing suicidal thoughts.

But on April 2 he decided to go on a hunger strike as an act of resistance against his imprisonment. He has been on a hunger strike for seven months now. He started with just water and salt, which is a kind of hunger strike that Egyptians learned from Palestinians. Then in May, he decided to go on a Gandhi-style strike and ingest 100 calories a day—which is a spoonful of honey in some tea. An average adult needs 2,000 calories a day, so it's very meager.

But he just sent a letter to his family saying that he was going back to a full hunger strike and on November 6, on the eve of the COP meeting, he's going to stop drinking water. This is extremely serious because the body cannot last without water for more than a few days.

So he is calling on all of us on the outside to organize, because either he will die in prison or he will be released. What he is doing is incredibly brave. He is using his body, the only thing he has agency over, to organize and to push us on the outside to do more.

MB: How do these repressed civil society leaders view the fact that Egypt is playing host to COP27?

SAK: It was very disheartening for a lot of people in Egypt who work for human rights and justice and democracy when Egypt was granted the right to host the conference. But Egyptian civil society has not called on the international community to boycott the COP meeting; they have called for the plight of political prisoners and the lack of human rights to be linked to the climate discussions and not ignored.

They want a spotlight to be placed on the thousands of political prisoners like Alaa, like Abdel Moneim Aboul Foitouh, a former presidential candidate, like Mohamed Oxygen, a blogger, like Marwa Arafa, who is an activist from Alexandria.

Unfortunately, hosting this meeting has given the government a great opportunity to remake its image. It has allowed the government to try to position itself as the voice for the Global South and the negotiator trying to unlock billions of dollars a year in climate financing from the Global North.

Of course the issue of climate reparations to the Global South is very important. It needs to be discussed and taken seriously. But how can you give climate reparations to a country like Egypt when you know the money will mostly be spent on bolstering this repressive, polluting state? As Naomi Klein said in her great article Greenwashing a Police State, the summit is going beyond greenwashing a polluting state to greenwashing a police state.

MB: So what do you think we can expect to see in Sharm el-Sheikh? Will the usual protests that happen at every COP, both inside and outside the official halls, be allowed?

SAK: I think what we are going to see in Sharm el-Sheik is a carefully managed theater. We all know the problems with the UN Climate Summits. There are a lot of negotiations and climate diplomacy, but rarely do they amount to anything concrete and binding. But they do serve as an important place for networking and convergence for different groups in the climate justice movement, an opportunity for them to come together to organize. It has also been a time for these groups to show their opposition to the inaction by those in power, with creative, vigorous protests both inside and outside the conference.

This will not be the case this year. Sharm El-Sheikh is a resort in Sinai that literally has a wall around it. It can and will be very tightly controlled. From what we understand, there is a special space that has been designated for protests that has been built out near a highway, far away from the conference center and any signs of life. So how effective will it be to hold protests there?

This is why people like Greta Thunberg are not going. Many activists have problems with the structure of the COP itself but it is even worse in Egypt where the ability to use it as a convergence space for dissent will be effectively shut down.

But more importantly, the members of Egyptian civil society, including the allies and environmental groups that are critical of the government, will not be allowed to attend. In a departure from UN rules, those groups that manage to participate will have been vetted and approved by the government and will have to be very careful about how they operate. Other Egyptians who should be there are unfortunately in prison or are subject to various forms of repression and harassment.

MB: Should foreigners also worry about the Egyptian government surveilling them?

SAK: The entire conference will be very highly surveilled. The government created this app that you can download to use as a guide for the conference. But to do that, you have to put in your full name, phone number, email address, passport number and nationality, and you have to enable location tracking. Amnesty International technology specialists have reviewed the app and flagged all these concerns about surveillance and how the app can use the camera and microphone and location data and bluetooth.

MB: What environmental issues related to Egypt will the government allow to be discussed, and what will be off limits?

SAK: Environmental issues that will be allowed are issues such as trash collection, recycling, renewable energy and climate finance, which is a big issue for Egypt and for the Global South.

Environmental issues that implicate the government and military will not be tolerated. Take the issue of coal—something the environmental community is very critical of. That will be off limits because coal imports, much of it coming from the United States, have risen over the past several years, driven by the strong demand from the cement sector. Egypt's largest importer of coal is also the largest cement producer, and that's the El-Arish Cement Company that was built in 2016 by none other than the Egyptian military.

We've seen massive amounts of cement poured into Egypt's natural environment over the

past several years. The government has built nearly 1,000 bridges and tunnels, destroying acres and acres of green space and cutting down thousands of trees. They have gone on a crazy construction spree, building a slew of new neighborhoods and cities, including a new administrative capital in the desert just outside of Cairo. But no criticism of these projects has been or will be tolerated.

Then there is dirty energy production. Egypt, Africa's second largest gas producer, is scaling up its oil and gas production and exports, which will mean further profits for the military and intelligence sectors involved in this. These projects that are harmful to the environment but profitable for the military will be off the agenda.

The Egyptian military is entrenched in every part of the Egyptian state. Military owned enterprises produce everything from fertilizers to baby food to cement. They operate hotels; they are the largest owner of land in Egypt. So any kind of industrial pollution or environmental harm from areas such as construction, tourism, development and agribusiness will not be tolerated at COP.

MB: We have heard that the crackdown on Egyptians in anticipation of this global gathering has already begun. Is that true?

SAK: Yes, we've already seen an intensified crackdown and a massive arrest sweep in the run-up to the climate summit. There are arbitrary stop and searches, and random security checkpoints. They open your facebook and whatsapp and they look through it. If they find content that they find problematic, they arrest you.

Hundreds of people have been arrested, by some counts 500-600. They have been arrested from their homes, off the streets, from their workplaces.

And these searches and arrests are not restricted just to Egyptians. The other day there was an Indian climate activist, Ajit Rajagopal, was arrested shortly after setting off on an 8-day walk from Cairo to Sharm el-Sheikh as part of a global campaign to raise awareness about the climate crisis.

He was detained in Cairo, questioned for hours and held overnight. He called an Egyptian lawyer friend, who came to the police station to help him. They detained the lawyer as well, and held him overnight.

There have been calls for protests on November 11, or 11/11. Do you think people in Egypt will come out on the streets?

It is unclear where these protest calls started but I think it was started by people outside Egypt. I would be surprised if people come out on the streets given the level of repression we've been seeing these days but you never know.

The security apparatus was very surprised in September 2019 when a former military contractor turned whistleblower exposed videos showing army corruption. These videos went viral. The whistleblower called for protests but he was outside Egypt in self-imposed exile in Spain.

There were some protests, not very big but significant. And what was the government response? Massive arrests, the most massive sweep since Sisi came to power with over 4,000 people detained. They arrested all kinds of people—everyone who had been arrested

before and a lot of other people. With that kind of repression, it's hard to say if mobilizing people to go to the streets is the right thing to do.

The government is also particularly paranoid because the economic situation is so bad. The Egyptian currency has lost 30 percent of its value since the beginning of the year, precipitated by a variety of factors, including the war in Ukraine, since Egypt was getting so much of its wheat from Ukraine. Inflation is out of control. People are getting poorer and poorer. So that, combined with these calls for protests, have prompted the preemptive crackdown.

So I don't know if people will defy the government and go out into the streets. But I gave up trying to predict anything in Egypt a long time ago. You just never know what is going to happen.

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