



American Islamic Congress, Inc.

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**American Islamic Congress
Capital Hill Distinguished Speaker Series**

**Topic:
Democracy in Egypt: Can It Wait?**

Panelists:

Sherif Mansour: Program Officer for Middle East and North Africa, Freedom House

Dr. Dwight Bashir; Senior Analysts, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Atef Al-Saadawy: Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow, National Endowment for Democracy

Moderator:

Zahir Janmohamed: Advocacy Director for Middle East Program, Amnesty International

The US government has struggled to address Egypt's track record in the spheres of democracy and human rights. The enduring “State of Emergency” declared by president Hosni Mubarak continues to stifle democratic movements, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. On October 7, the American Islamic Congress hosted **Sherif Mansour**, Program Officer for the Middle East and North African program at Freedom House, **Dr. Dwight Bashir**, Senior Analyst for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, and **Atef Al-Saadawy**, a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy to comment on and discuss the problems Egypt faces in improving its human rights record and moving towards democratic governance.

According to **Atef Al-Saadawy**, “current conditions in Egypt show 3 types of actors in Egypt...First is the government regime, second are the secular actors, third is the Muslim brotherhood. The government regime is the most powerful, and has considerable capacity to impact political actors...it refuses to share power with other groups, especially opposition.” Under Mubarak, Egypt has its seen movement towards democracy stagnate. The “State of Emergency” instituted following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981 endures to this day, providing government unchecked power, including the ability to restrict freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Though initially instituted to combat the threat of terrorism, justification for the continued State of Emergency appears to have been nullified in 1998 as “Islamic terrorist groups announced publicly that they will abandon violence and will not use it against the government,” as **Mansour** explains. The groups’ avowal not to attack the government was undoubtedly welcomed, as it prompted people “to advocate for reform more seriously.” However, notes **Mansour**, “reform did not come. The President promised in a campaign two years ago that [emergency] status would be revoked. Now we’re three years on but still the same.” Delays in reform, says **Mansour**, “lead to corruption, angry citizens without peaceful expression...[and] can lead to terrorism.”

Freedom of religion and freedom of speech have also been severely limited under the Mubarak regime. As **Dr. Dwight Bashir** notes, “Freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental right.” Threats to these freedoms often serve as indications that “other rights are also threatened.”

Journalists and bloggers face many restrictions stemming from the government’s State of Emergency procedures. In the decade spanning 1998-2008, Freedom House has rated Egypt’s press as “Not Free.” Though Mubarak promised in 2006 that he would repeal provision allowing for the incarceration of journalists, the law remains unchanged. Though Mubarak recently pardoned journalist Ibrahim Issa, who had been jailed for insulting Mubarak and questioning his health, bloggers such as Abdel Karim Suleiman have been imprisoned indefinitely for their criticism of the government.

In Egypt, the government maintains strict controls over religion. **Bashir** attributes the government’s appointment of Imams as a “precaution to counter extremism,” though Human Rights organizations have expressed concern “that this type of Islam is advancing in Egypt with detrimental effects on rights, especially those of women and girls.”

Moreover, the Egypt’s sizeable Coptic community has also been suffering under the Mubarak regime. There has been an increase in attacks targeting the Copts, and the government has been slow to respond to and prosecute perpetrators. The government also makes the acquisition of permits to repair and maintain Copt churches very difficult.

Because Egypt is a major recipient of US Aid, seeing the nation embrace the tenants of democracy is in the interest of the United States. **Mansour** asserts: “the US is providing the Egyptian regime with billions in aid, and virtually no accountability.” The majority of the 1.3 billion dollars in aid sent by the US to Egypt going to the military, while the amount of non-military aid, such as funding for democracy and governance issues and education, has been decreasing over the past decade. Promoting democracy in Egypt, according to **Al-Saawady**, will include the need “to end the current state of emergency, to allow new political parties, to allow freedom of speech, and allot power to other branches” of government.