

**EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIME REPRESSION ON THE
OPERATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN EGYPT**

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Introduction:

According to Amnesty International, the crackdown on Egyptian civil society began in 2011, following the removal of former President Hosni Mubarak. Egypt's state security prosecutor and cabinet announced in September 2011 that a Justice Ministry report had identified more than 30 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receiving funding from foreign sources. The report also discovered that these NGOs had not registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity, as required by Egypt's Associations Law, which makes this offense punishable by imprisonment. Egypt's Associations Law empowers the Social Solidarity Ministry to deny funding for a variety of often arbitrary reasons, including determining that the funding's purpose is outside the receiving organization's mandate (HRW, 2022).

Continuing the trend of restricting civil society organizations (CSOs), President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime enacted a draconian NGO law in 2017, imposing an unprecedented level of state control over civil society, as well as another in 2019. Despite claims that the 2019 legislation improves on the widely criticized 2017 legislation, numerous Egyptian and international organizations have noted that the 2019 legislation only contains minor changes. According to the Project on Middle East Democracy's (POMED) fact sheet and comparison, the 2019 law continues to stifle local and foreign NGOs, suppress an independent civil society, and violate Egypt's human rights obligations (POMED, 2019). The 2019 Freedom in the World Report also finds that Egyptian NGOs have faced mass closures and government harassment through member arrests, protracted legal cases, and travel restrictions (Freedom House, 2019). Human rights NGOs in Egypt that fail or refuse to register under the 2019 law face increased pressure and risk outright dissolution, while others that do register continue to function, but are still subject to routine control measures and harassment by security forces. Registered NGOs also face delayed funding or refusal to approve funding for their projects by Egyptian authorities

(POMED, 2019). The continued restrictions that the 2019 law encompasses include immense state power over Egyptian NGOs and the criminalization of peaceful, legitimate civic work.

In the context of authoritarian states around the globe that are passing similar legislation and pursuing action to restrict the activities of civil society, it is important to examine why regimes choose to repress and close certain organizations and why others are not targeted for harassment or closure. To answer this question, I have selected three cases of CSOs that have been subject to repression or closure to compare. The first is the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), which was forced to close in 2022. The second is the Al-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture – this group’s physical clinic was closed by Egyptian security forces in 2017 but continues to function as an advocacy group. The last group is the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, which has not been closed by the state.

This thesis will investigate what motivated the Egyptian regime to repress ANHRI more severely than the others, even though all three organizations engage in very similar activities, including legal support and advocacy of human rights defenders, and the use of social media to spread awareness within the Egyptian and international publics of the declining state of human rights within the country. This thesis seeks to highlight functions that CSOs may perform that lead to increased government repression by investigating these discrepancies. I argue that groups that (1) have high levels of international attention and support and (2) can successfully publicize government abuses will attract higher levels of repression from the el-Sisi regime.

I show evidence for my argument by conducting a comparison across time of repressive actions carried out by the el-Sisi regime against civil society groups over the years from 2013-2023. I have chosen this period in order to best capture continuities and changes between the beginning of el-Sisi’s time in the presidency to the current period. I use reports published by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House that measure the state of

human rights in both country-specific and global contexts, to track repressive actions of the Egyptian government. I also use data from interviews with Egypt-country specific subject matter experts from universities and Middle East focused think tanks. In my interviews, I ask for their insights on the regime's view of human rights CSOs, what causes them to continue functioning, and what might lead to their increased targeting by the el-Sisi regime, along with their personal experiences conducting fieldwork and embedding themselves in their local communities.

A synthesis of relevant literature as well as the data collected reveals the overall finding that the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) is both more internationalized and more successful at publicizing abuses than the other two groups, and therefore has been more subject to harassment from Egyptian law enforcement and security forces. Based on the pressure that government groups have placed on ANHRI, the group was forced to close. The Al-Nadeem Center, my second case, initially fit into the international and publicizing scheme that would lead to closure. However, the government identified the center's physical clinic as a threat due to its administration of medical treatment, which lent legitimacy to its awareness raising and publicizing work, and closed the center. This moves Al-Nadeem into the category of both being less able to access international publics and less successful at publicizing its efforts and government abuses, allowing it to continue operating. The third group I focus on is the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). Due to a travel ban and exile placed on its founding director, Hossam Bahgat, this organization continues to remain internationally relevant but has been rendered less successful in its efforts to publicize its work and government repression. Based on these cases, organizations that are most internationalized and successful at awareness-raising will be targeted for not just heightened repression, but outright closure.

Existing literature focuses on how CSOs facilitate social change in autocratic regimes in the face of repressive atmospheres. This includes theory behind CSOs that organize protest

movements against autocratic regimes, and “coordinated dis-coordination,” in which CSOs divert authoritarian repression by spreading their activism and gathering efforts to spread a regime’s repressive resources thin. However, there is a gap in relevant research on how government repression affects CSO groups' ability to engage globally and publish accounts of repression. The gap extends to a lack of a theory explaining why authoritarian regimes regard certain CSOs as greater threats than others, which are viewed as virtually insignificant. This paper investigates this gap and aims to provide a theoretical and reasoned framework for why some groups are closed more than others.

This thesis begins with a background of the repressive state of Egypt from the year 2013, when el-Sisi assumed the presidency, to 2023, when the latest human rights reports were released. I then present a review and analysis of relevant literature on the functions and protest capacities of CSOs in other country contexts. Following this section, I share the methods used to carry out this study – overviewing the process I used to qualitatively code human rights reports to flag information about repressive NGO laws, arbitrary trials and mass arrests, and international actions in response to the Egyptian regime. I also share the methods used to conduct interviews with four country-experts, to help supplement the more general data gathered from reports with evidence from participants’ fieldwork in Egypt and personal experiences with research in an increasingly repressive regime. I then share results that emerged from my data collection and coding and analyze my findings in relation to my initial hypothesis and conclude with a discussion of limitations in this research and policy recommendations. This study ultimately seeks to provide reasoning for shrinking civic space that human rights organizations are affected by under autocratic regimes, and to advocate for increased international pressure on these regimes, to prevent them from stifling the voices of independent civil society groups that are working on behalf of the people, upholding their basic human rights.

Background:

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came into power in 2013, after deposing democratically elected Mohamed Morsi in a military coup. During his decade-long rule, el-Sisi's regime has been characterized by heavy government repression targeting dissidents, opposing political groups, and civil society organizations (CSOs) seeking to bring awareness of the regime's human rights abuses to the fore (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The declining state of Egypt's rule of law is exemplified by the detention of outspoken activists, defense lawyers, and other human rights defenders, as political prisoners. Directors and employees of CSOs face similar pushback from the state, including Hossam Bahgat, founder of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, who was arbitrarily banned from traveling under Case 173, known as the "foreign funding case" that has targeted several other NGOs. (Amnesty International, 2018).

The el-Sisi regime, similar to the former regime under Hosni Mubarak, has made changes to its civil society regulations due to international pressure. Mubarak-era policies maintained an emphasis on providing space for the private sector and to allow a limited, though controlled, degree of independent civic activity, holding a minimal social protection net intact (POMED, 2019). However, these goals only exist in principle within the current regime – in practice, the el-Sisi regime carries out repression tactics on groups that criticize the government or speak out against human rights abuses, including arbitrary mass arrests, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and attacks on NGO offices (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2020). These actions are not just violent in nature: they include the passage of legislation that blocks efforts to found and expand CSOs, secure financial resources for programs, and advocate for change.

Reports released by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House capture the landscape of repressive actions carried out by the state against human rights CSOs. I

flagged information related to (1) the passage of repressive laws focusing on regulating non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and (2) arbitrary trials and arrests of human rights defenders. The two indices are summarized in the following table:

Category	Key Words/Examples	Examples	Number of Occurrences
Repressive NGO Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic space curtailed • Registration required 	"However, punitive travel bans and asset freezes have not been lifted despite the judge's orders in August and September to do so"	38
		"In January 2021, the government issued implementing regulations for the 2019 NGO Law, confirming its restrictive nature and extensive government interference. Existing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register under the new law by January 2022 or face being dissolved."	
Arbitrary Trials and Arrests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal charges • Asset freezes • Travel bans 	"In March, a Cairo Emergency State Security court sentenced 29 rights activists belonging to the Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms, a human rights organization, to prison terms between five years and life following an unfair mass trial."	34
		"...key members of civil society continued to face arbitrary travel bans, asset freezes, and criminal investigations in retaliation for	

	their peaceful activism or criticism."	
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(1) Restrictive NGO Laws

Across the reports, there is a clear picture of the el-Sisi regime's passage and enactment of laws that are increasingly restricting the actions of NGOs. Similar language is mentioned throughout the reports about NGOs being mandated to register with the Social Solidarity Ministry so the government can maintain tight control over their activities (HRW, 2015). HRW reports from 2014 and 2015 highlight continuities from President Hosni Mubarak's regime – the el-Sisi regime kept with NGO Law 84, mandating NGOs to register to remain existing and operational, and established this requirement under the current Law of Civic Associations and Foundations (HRW, 2014).

Reports also trace the start of criminal investigations of NGOs, with 43 Egyptian and foreign NGO workers being subjected to prison sentences and suspensions by a Cairo criminal court (HRW, 2014). Reports also described an exodus of "several high-profile human rights defenders" from Egypt due to fears of arrest and persecution. Other groups were forced to suspend their activities because of fears of investigation. El-Sisi also passed an amendment to the penal code that mandates a life sentence and a fine of 500,000 Egyptian pounds (\$69,900 USD) for anyone who takes foreign funding to harm the national "interest" or "unity," a provision that was weaponized against Egyptian rights activists and NGOs (HRW, 2015). CSOs that continued to face closure included the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies -- government investigators visited their offices and demanded registration and financial documents. In addition, the executive director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, Mohamed Lotfy, was placed under a travel ban in advance of his visit to Germany to attend a roundtable at the German Parliament (HRW, 2016). These actions in the early years of the el-Sisi presidency exhibit a push

for tight control over NGOs, especially ones that have high levels of international activity and support, to restrict their influence.

Authorities continued to restrict freedom of expression and association in 2017 and 2018 by investigating independent NGOs and arresting human rights defenders on largely false “terrorism” charges (HRW, 2017). May 2017 saw the ratification of a new law on associations that criminalizes the work of NGOs if they fail to adhere to its provisions such as operating or receiving funds without government approval. If these standards are not met, NGO employees could face up to five-year prison terms determined arbitrarily. Adding to the previous law, in November 2017, parliament approved a new law regulating NGOs after no involvement or input from civil society. The related human rights report warned that this law “would effectively eliminate independent human rights work, placing all NGOs under the effective veto power of a council dominated by representatives of the General Intelligence Service and Interior and Defense Ministries and allowing the council to dissolve NGOs based on broadly worded infractions.” Along with a five-year prison term, individuals and NGO groups could be fined an amount between 50,000-100,000 Egyptian pounds, forming a severe chilling effect on the actions of rights and advocacy-oriented NGOs (HRW, 2018).

The HRW World Report released in 2020 shares information about a follow-on NGO law passed in 2019, which prohibits NGOs from conducting field research, surveys, or opinion polls without government approval. This law also restricts NGOs from accessing foreign funding and support, fining up to one million Egyptian pounds for sending or receiving funds without government approval or for operating without a license. To counteract these blatantly repressive actions, An Egyptian criminal court acquitted all 43 defendants in the retrial of the 2011 foreign organizations case, in which they were sentenced to 1 to 5 years in prison. According to the court, the charges "contradict democratic values and the country's obligations under international

law." The case involved employees from four American organizations and one German. Despite the ruling, authorities continued to impose travel bans and asset freezes on at least 31 prominent Egyptian human rights activists as part of the lengthy investigations into Case 173 of 2011, also known as the "foreign funding" case. One of these activists, lawyer Gamal Eid, was physically assaulted in October by armed men, indicating government involvement (HRW 2020). The el-Sisi regime expanded on the 2019 NGO law in 2021, by establishing implementing regulations, mandating that existing NGOs must register under the new law by January 2022, or face dissolution (HRW, 2021).

The most recent reports from 2022-2023 have captured the state of Egyptian CSOs operating under the 2019 NGO law, along with Case 173, the "foreign funding" case. Domestic and international pressure led authorities to drop charges and investigations against several groups implicated in 2011 under Case 173, but despite these steps, punitive travel bans and asset freezes have still not been lifted (HRW, 2022). Certain organizations such as the Arab Network for Human Rights Information the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights remain accused in this case, along with their respective directors, Gamal Eid and Hossam Bahgat. In January 2022, repression worsened, as ANHRI announced its closure after 18 years of operation. The group was described as "forced to close due to a series of threats, violent attacks, and arrests by the National Security Agency, as well as the looming deadline requiring all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register under the draconian associations law," a clear indicator of the strength that repressive legislation has in limiting and outright stopping the activities of important CSOs. Groups such as Mada Masr, an independent news organization, were also charged with "spreading false news," an arbitrary measure that can be easily weaponized by the repressive regime (HRW, 2023). The HRW report released in 2024 highlights a continued

shrinking civic space, with the continued existence of draconian laws, along with severe judicial and security harassment (HRW, 2024).

(2) Arbitrary Mass Trials, Arrests, & Harassment by Security Forces

Amnesty International reports covered arrests and harassment carried out by the Egyptian security forces against individual human rights activists and NGOs. The report covering 2014-2015 mentions the disruption of peaceful NGO activities and threats of closure issued by the National Security forces. Security forces notably raided the Alexandria offices of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights when it held a conference to support detained human rights activists. (Amnesty International, 2014-15) These actions carried into 2016-2017, when critics and opponents of the government continued to face arbitrary arrests and detention on ambiguous charges that included “inciting protests, “terrorism,” and belonging to banned groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the 6 April Youth Movement,” both associated with the Arab Spring popular revolutions. (Amnesty International, 2016-17)

Amnesty International’s reports from the years 2019-2023 saw a continued trend towards shrinking civic space, with increased arrests of human rights defenders and lawyers, such as Mahienour el-Masry, arrested while she was representing a detained human rights lawyer. In addition, Mahamed el-Baqer, a lawyer and director of the Adalah Center for Rights and Freedoms, was arrested after he represented a detained activist. Another human rights defender, lawyer, and journalist, Esraa Abdelfattah, was kidnapped by plain-clothes police, arrested, and tortured in an undisclosed location. All three human rights activists were arrested on the grounds of unfounded “terrorism” charges, pointing to the government’s increased vigilance and targeting of human rights actors who seek to expose governmental abuses. (Amnesty International, 2019-20)

In this same period, authorities added 620 people, including detained journalists and opposition politicians, to their “list of terrorists” without due process, effectively banning them from engaging in civic or political work or traveling abroad for five years. Security forces continued to crush forms of peaceful dissent and label outspoken human rights defenders as “terrorists,” blocking at least 600 news, human rights, and other websites. Security forces continue to detain eight human rights defenders and summon more than fifteen individuals and NGOs for questioning in relation to the decades-long investigation started by Case 173 in 2011 (Amnesty International, 2021-22).

Freedom House country reports on Egypt expand this picture. In the context of the highly restrictive bill passed in 2017, Egyptian authorities restricted freedoms of speech and assembly for human rights activists with various political leanings. Law enforcement officials also targeted media work, jailing journalists who reported on political opposition. The Freedom House 2020-2021 reports on Egypt highlight escalated repression of human rights advocates by authorities and law enforcement. Due to critical tweets he had published, Bahey el-Din Hassan, cofounder of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, was found guilty in absentia and given a 15-year prison sentence in August 2020. Researcher Patrick George Zaki of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) was arrested and allegedly subjected to torture in February 2021. Following a meeting between EIPR and thirteen ambassadors and other diplomats to discuss human rights in Egypt, security forces detained three additional EIPR employees in November, among them Executive Director Gasser Abdel-Razek (Freedom House, 2020-21).

This background information compiled from human rights reports captures the climate of fear that the el-Sisi regime has created surrounding independent civil society in the country. In the context of this climate, CSOs have had to adapt their operations to fit into rapidly narrowing

civic space, or risk closure. This study will be exploring an angle as to why this dynamic is the case.

Main Research Question:

I examine the impact that Egypt's draconian NGO laws passed in 2017 and furthered in 2019 has on restricting the activities of its civil society organizations. **This thesis asks: along with the Egypt regime passing legislation that restricts NGO activity, what explains why some CSOs can continue functioning while others cannot?** To explore this research question, I conduct a case-comparison over time and interviews with country experts to assess this discrepancy.

Selected cases: *(CSOs that have been subject to repression and/or closure)*

- Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) *(now closed)*
- Al-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture *(partially closed)*
- Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) *(open)*

Theoretical Framework:

Literature Review:

Literature surrounding civil society organizations and their functions (CSOs) encompass a few distinct topical buckets. These include how CSOs function, how authoritarian regimes deal with CSOs, and how international support affects the functions of CSOs. Although selected literature provides nuances to existing theories of social change through the work of CSOs, there is a gap in relevant research regarding how government repression can impact the access that CSOs have to vital resources and transnational advocacy networks. This paper seeks to explore

this resource-inequity gap to understand the relationship between why certain human rights-focused CSOs (HROs) can continue functioning in Egypt's repressive environment, as opposed to who others are subject to forced closure.

How do CSOs function?

The literature surrounding how civil society organizations (CSOs) function and impact countries' political and human rights landscapes takes a few dimensions into account. Previous literature holds that CSOs center around areas of grievance and mobilize populations to push for action to alleviate these grievances (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Resource mobilization theory pushes back at this framework to suggest a new approach that deals with dynamics and tactics of social movement growth, decline, and change (McCarthy, 1977). This perspective emphasizes the variety and sources of resources; the relationship of social movements to the media, authorities, and other parties; and interactions among social movement organizations in successfully effecting social and political change (McCarthy, 1977).

Literature by Hassan (2023) focuses on "coordinated dis-coordination," where CSOs introduce disorder into their activities intentionally, when information about their activities is publicly available, to counter the regime's repressive response. Under this framework, groups can "jitter" plans for an upcoming protest – organizing simultaneous events to the main protest and sharing more information about the main event so that the "jittered" event is kept to a small group of dissidents, allowing them to continue organizing. Groups can also engage in *takhfif* protests, where a large and disruptive simultaneous event redirects some of the regime's security presence from a heavily repressed site to a *takhfif* site, lightening some of the repressive response to a main protest event (Hassan, 2023). Coordinated dis-coordination literature also includes the

possibility of dissidents tapping into informal groups or interpersonal networks to organize, along with protests that aim to weaken authoritarian states' security apparatuses (Hassan, 2023).

Protests in Sudan by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) against Omar Al-Bashir's regime made use of these tactics through spreading information and building coalitions through social media. Some civilians were deterred from mobilizing because of the regime's brutal crackdown methods for all collective action efforts. However, the regime's weakness made it unable to counter the social media use in kind – rendering this strategy successful in mobilizing people, spreading information domestically, and garnering international awareness. In contrast, Egypt has a much more solidified repressive state, with a greater ability to crackdown on Internet and social media usage (Hassan, 2023). While these tactics have been employed by CSO groups in Egypt, the el-Sisi regime's greater state capacity for repression allows it to engage more heavily in stripping CSOs of resources and facilities to organize, hindering their collective action potential.

The theories of resource mobilization and coordinated dis-coordination are notably similar in that they center the effective use of resources such as access to media, inroads to the population to facilitate collective action, and funding sources in their view of what makes some CSOs more successful protesting unfavorable regimes than others. Despite the robust theoretical framework and applications to case studies, there is a gap in the literature here in terms of what happens when groups cannot access resources, leading to a few key questions: (1) does the resource mobilization theory apply more to privileged groups who can better access resources that facilitate their mobilization? (2) Given the forced closure of organizations such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, how does Egypt's state repression affect CSOs' ability to engage in resource mobilization or coordinated dis-coordination, given the regime's efforts to

deprive these organizations of the resources they require to recruit other members and carry out their functions?

How do authoritarian regimes deal with CSOs?

Civil society organizations are primarily understood to facilitate political participation and civic engagement. The liberal democratic view of civil society draws an explicit connection between CSOs and democracy, holding that they play a “crucial role” to influence political systems, facilitate transitions to democracy, and deepen democracy where it already exists. Scholars and policymakers have assigned CSOs a prominent role in resolving the MENA region’s “democratic deficit” (Doyle, 2023). However, the authoritarian nature of states in the MENA region lead to a different set of state-CSO interactions.

Research has found that authoritarian repression targets actors who challenge state beliefs, institutions, and actions. The goal of repression is to force compliance by demobilizing or annihilating opposition actors. These actions manifest in actual or threatened physical violence, arrests, assassinations, torture, disappearances, mass killings, and forced exile. Political control exerted by authoritarian regimes ranges between direct oppression – states target political actors for oppositional behavior – and threats of violence – states harass, intimidate, and impose administrative or legal blockages to induce dissidents to comply (Hassan, 2022). Authoritarian regimes exert political control by generating a “silencing fear,” where fear of individual harm can induce collective compliance, leading communities to self-police to avoid collective retribution by the state (Hassan, 2022). The above patterns also relate to a study by Chaudhry and Heiss (2020) investigating the closing of civic space by authoritarian regimes. They find that violent strategies used to restrict civic space are used to garner press attention and contribute to a

global crackdown against NGOs – these actions include arrests, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and attacks on NGO offices, all evident in the case of Egypt (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2020).

Literature focusing on the case of Turkey adds insight to this broad finding. Turkey, on the surface, has a large and active civil society, but it becomes apparent that the state regulates a wide range of civil society activities and behaviors. In a study conducted by Doyle (2023), members of women's rights CSOs pointed to the effect of the EU, stating that they were only successful influencing state policy when the EU was pushing for policy changes at the same time. Rather than pushing for expanded rights, women's rights CSOs are working to protect the rights they already have. In addition, the method, and not the fact of oppression has changed in Turkey, from more overt forms of intimidation such as threats of violence, police interference, and closure, to covert forms such as debilitating financial punishments for challenging state power, under the shadow of an immensely repressive regime (Doyle, 2023). These dimensions indicate that Turkey's regime has imposed a silencing fear around civil society in the country, fitting into the model of political control put forward by Hassan (2022).

CSOs in the MENA region can also extend state power in society, serving a regressive role. In addition to the direct repression mechanisms mentioned above, methods of control include passing legislation that severely restricts the activities of CSOs, direct closure of CSOs, and the creation of 'state-friendly' or government 'non-governmental' organizations (GNGOs) by the state to replace independent CSOs (Doyle, 2023).

The case of Jordan as examined by Wiktorowicz (2000) has several parallels to Egypt, as civil society is organized and regulated almost identically across the two countries. The Jordan case highlights trends of political change in the Middle East that are mostly driven by regimes without significant pressure or mobilization from civil society. The Hashemite regime in Jordan adopted a new legitimization strategy to counter riots by initiating political liberalization measures.

This phenomenon, called “defensive democratization,” describes the survival strategy employed by many regimes in the MENA region in the face of economic crisis and political instability.

“Domestic colonization” is also used to describe the arrangement of civil society in Jordan – this refers to the ways in which public administration can be used as an instrument of state power vis-a-vis civil society. This pervasive rather than hegemonic system of control makes use of entrenched bureaucratic mechanisms over more overt forms of repression, similar to the shift exemplified in the Turkey case (Wiktorowicz, 2000).

The Hashemite regime in Jordan also compares to Egypt in its control of the visibility of civil society groups. The state limits collective action by requiring that all group work is done in the open through ensuring that CSOs are within reach of administrative practices. The state also penalizes activism outside specifically delineated spaces through passing repressive legislation. The Law of Public Meetings (Law 60) prevents informal gatherings and collective action, particularly when such gatherings are political in nature. Another piece of legislation, the Law of Societies and Social Organizations (Law 33), gives the state legal standing to regulate the minutiae of organizational activities and institute mechanisms for surveillance which help sustain the administrative divisions and maximize social control. The legislative mechanisms with which the Hashemite regime in Jordan regulates civil society exemplifies an alliance with legislative bodies to regulate and restrict the functions of CSOs and also provides a legal basis for the dissolution of CSOs on any arbitrary grounds that the Jordanian security force (*mukhabarat*) may utilize. These grounds usually involve a CSO not fulfilling its specified goals, engaging in activities for which it is not registered, failing to meet regularly, or not providing the administrative agency with relevant, especially financial, records. (Wiktorowicz, 2000)

These repressive NGO and associations laws compare directly to the functions of Egypt’s Ministry for Social Solidarity, which enforces Egypt’s Case 173, Law 84 on NGOs that carried

over from the Mubarak-era, and Egypt's Law 32 out of 1964, which includes the same language and requirements as Jordan's societies and social organizations law, and outlines a similar system of social control that emphasizes order and visibility (Wictorowicz, 2000). These pieces of legislation penalize CSOs for receiving foreign funding and require that they register as human rights organizations within the Ministry of Social Solidarity, or else risk closure by the state. However, once CSOs register under these laws, they are subject to arbitrarily high political control levels that put them at the mercy of a hostile state apparatus for civil society. In both Egypt and Jordan, it is easy to correlate the empirical growth of civil society organizations with rising democratic potential, but it is critical to note that these regimes institutionalize robust oversight of CSOs to limit and control their influence.

A study conducting a most different case study analysis comparing Algeria and Mozambique highlights the state co-optation of CSOs as a legitimation strategy. These countries have vastly different political, economic, and demographic makeups, but are similar in their brand of competitive authoritarianism that uses civil society as a legitimation mechanism to maintain power and control. This piece lays out five patterns that characterize the relationship between authoritarian regimes and civil society.

The first pattern refers to using civil society as a facade for democracy. The presence of registered CSOs allows authoritarian regimes to portray a semblance of conforming to a "global discourse on civil society," gaining international legitimacy. The second pattern involves making civil society "play by the rules," by embedding CSOs in a network of bureaucratic practices and legal codes. This allows regimes to pass restrictive legislation that curtails NGO activities and limits foreign funding to CSOs to "safeguard national sovereignty." CSOs may thus contribute to legitimating authoritarian rule. The third pattern refers to using CSOs as feedback mechanisms and for limited participation. Algeria and Mozambique accomplish this depoliticizing social

discontent by facilitating collective action that does not threaten the authoritarian political order. CSOs act as feedback mechanisms in these countries when they feed into the creation of official laws or policies. The fourth pattern is related and entails regimes using CSOs as a method to increase output legitimation, co-opting organizations so that regimes can take credit for the services they provide. Welfare-oriented CSOs can function as part of this pattern because they fulfill fundamental social needs not met by the state apparatus. International donor funds channeled through CSOs can also enhance the regime's resource base and increase their output legitimation. The fifth pattern laid out is the function of CSOs in authoritarian contexts to proliferate favorable regime discourses (Lorch & Bunk, 2017).

All five of these patterns apply in some way to the Egypt case – where registered CSOs, or GNGOs exist at the behest of the el-Sisi regime to bolster its reputation without doing the human rights work that they were purportedly created for. CSOs in Egypt are also subject to several rules and regulations that tighten the red tape around their activities and limit their scope and access to vulnerable populations. Development NGOs are also allowed to function in the country because their provision of social services go beyond what the regime can offer, making an association with these groups favorable to the regime so they can co-opt their outputs and increase legitimation.

Although the literature in this bucket highlights different country case studies, they intersect to demonstrate the ways in which authoritarian regimes may use CSOs to legitimize their rule, opposing the idea that a robust civil society is positively associated with a sound democracy. There are numerous ways in which authoritarian states take advantage of CSO apparatuses to enhance their degrees of control over their populations, which is exemplified in Egypt as well. This region-specific literature is therefore applicable to analyzing the reasons why liberal theories of change through civil societies might fall short in the Egypt context.

How do CSOs leverage international support or transnational networks?

International support can go directly into CSOs or support governments in the form of developmental assistance and humanitarian aid. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's "Linkage and Leverage" lays out the two dimensions along which the post-Cold War international environment operates. "Western leverage" refers to the degree to which governments are vulnerable to external democratizing pressure. "Western linkage" refers to the density of political, economic, diplomatic, social, organizational, and cross-border flows between particular countries and the US, along with nations that are part of the "West." In examining the interaction between linkage and leverage and democratization, Levitsky and Way have set up a few trends. The first pattern is that leverage in the absence of linkage has rarely contributed to democracy. The second pattern is that linkage has raised the cost of autocratic abuses by increasing the international salience of abuses. As a result, there is a greater chance that strong and well-known opposition forces will respond externally, and there are more domestic players who are at different stages of the political, economic, or professional spectrum when it comes to upholding international standards (Levitsky & Way, 2006).

Studies cited in this literature have shown that most direct forms of Western intervention, such as military force, diplomatic persuasion, conditionality, and democracy assistance programs, have not consistently produced democratic outcomes. Linkage adds another nuance to how international pressures for democracy become adopted as domestic demands, as it blurs the distinctions between international and domestic sources of pressure to present a more domestically-driven democracy agenda. Levitsky and Way present a model of examining international influence in democratization which sets up the framework for analyzing where Egypt falls in the linkage and leverage spectrum (Levitsky, 2006).

The above framework presents general patterns of international influence, but other scholarship narrows the frame of reference to the Middle East to present region-specific findings. General international relations theories hold that international influence leads to differentiation across countries and polarization within them. Differentiation refers to the difference in terms of outcomes after international intervention. This is not the same concept as diffusion, which involves the spread of practices and policies to countries around the world. International pressure can lead directly or indirectly to differentiation (Bush, 2017).

The polarization effect within countries relates to how international pressure can shift the alignment of countries' domestic politics. This can be deliberate in some cases, where international actors provide allies with various forms of monetary, technical and security, and rhetorical support. For example, voters in Lebanon became more polarized on the issue of foreign relations when they were externally exposed to messages about electoral interventions. The polarization effect can also happen unintentionally. Survey experiments in Jordan and Tunisia suggest that election observers and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can have this polarizing effect as they attempt to provide new political information to local audiences. For example, when international NGOs endorsed women's representation in an authoritarian environment, their statements prompted more favorable responses among people who support the incumbent regime (Bush, 2017).

In the case of Egypt, the polarization effect is evident in the existence of a civil society that contains both development-oriented organizations and human rights organizations. The presence of groups that aim to combat government repression and hold the government accountable for human rights abuses could have emerged motivated by international pressure on authoritarian regimes to democratize and respect the rights of their civilians. In terms of differentiation and diffusion, the Egyptian regime aligns with other authoritarian governments in

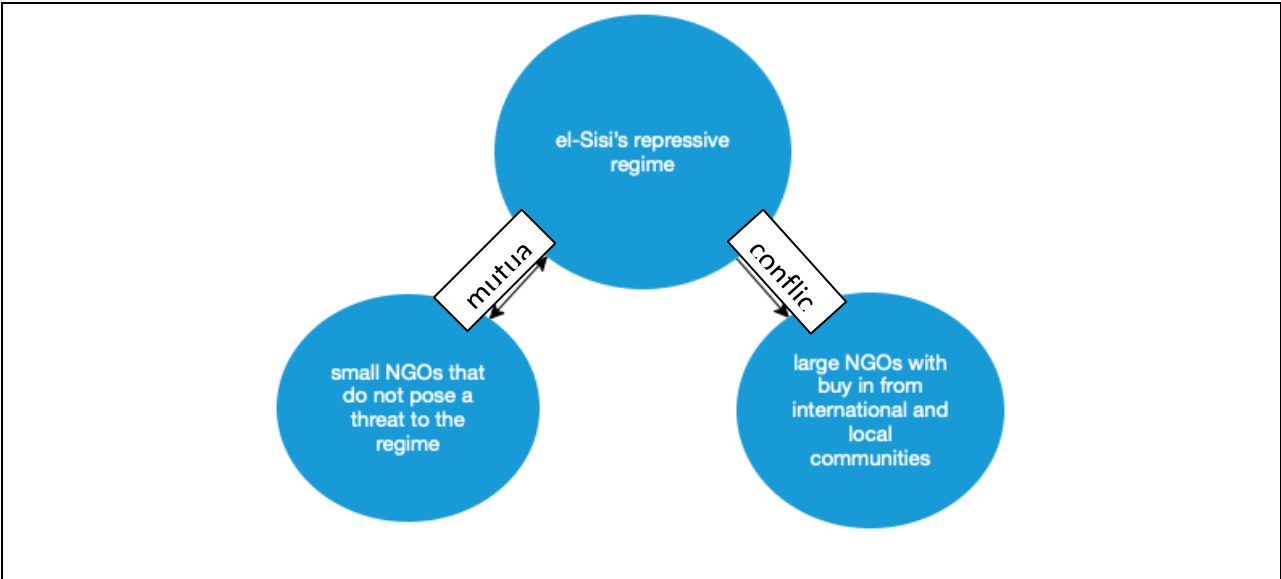
the MENA region, effectively putting up “firewalls” to protect itself against the pressures of international influence. Authoritarian states also perceive foreign aid to NGOs as threats to their sovereignty because they it is seen as supporting political opponents (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2020) This perception also explains the Egyptian regime’s passage of legislation that requires CSOs to declare their sources of foreign funding, as well as the governmental crackdown on CSOs that receive foreign funding but do not report that they do (Bush, 2017).

Frameworks built using this literature points to why and how authoritarian governments repress human rights organizations, but there is a gap regarding inequities in access to resources that exacerbate the impacts of government repression, preventing CSOs from effectively holding their governments accountable and in using transnational and international networks to engage in pressuring the regime. This thesis would provide a useful case study analysis that could be used to assess why authoritarian regimes crack down on certain human rights organizations more than others, to better inform the activities of domestic and transnational civil society strengthening programs and of NGOs working in other authoritarian regimes.

Theory:

In the context of a climate of fear that the el-Sisi regime has created and consequently, a shrinking civic space, civil society in Egypt follows two typologies. The first includes organizations that have such high levels of repute domestically and internationally that the government cannot fully close them down without facing a substantial backlash. In contrast, the second category includes the remaining “human rights” organizations known as GNGOS, or government-non-governmental organizations. These groups are allowed to exist because they serve the government’s interests and as they are performative indicators of the regime’s attention

to upholding human rights, they allow the Egypt regime to court wealthy donor countries to access funding and aid.



Analyzing the CSOs that continue to operate in Egypt, I have identified two categories of organizations: **mutualistic** and **conflictual**. Mutualistic organizations serve to support state legitimacy and to improve the perception of the regime’s human rights record, usually to the international community. Conflictual organizations spread awareness of human rights violations, taking away from the picture of a benevolent or fully democratic government that the regime attempts to put forward to the domestic and international community.

	INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION	LESS INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION
SUCCESSFUL DOMESTIC PUBLICIZATION	Conflictual	

LESS SUCCESSFUL DOMESTIC PUBLICIZATION	Mutualistic	Mutualistic/Negligible
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I argue that human rights civil society organizations that publicize human rights violations and support victims of human rights abuses have high levels of domestic and international support, and thereby threaten the el-Sisi regime’s ability to control for possible political opposition and uprisings. I hold that the el-Sisi regime will not allow such organizations that are both international in scope and highly useful to the public to continue functioning in their full capacities. The government will engage in repressive activities to limit one of these dimensions at least, to diminish CSOs’ effectiveness in achieving their goals, providing services, and accessing international attention and support.

	INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION	LESS INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION
SUCCESSFUL PUBLICIZATION	Arab Network for Human Rights Information Al-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (pre-partial closure)	
LESS SUCCESSFUL PUBLICIZATION	Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights	Al-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (post-partial closure)

Based on this typology, CSOs such as ANHRI, that are both highly international and highly useful, will be targeted for closure. I establish that ANHRI had a high international and

local scope when it was operational, and that the comparative cases, Al-Nadeem, and EIPR lack strength along either one or both dimensions. Al-Nadeem did have a high level of international and regional attention and support, along with domestic support, but the government closed its physical clinic, limiting its domestic presence and support. EIPR is a well-known organization locally, with membership made up of Egypt nationals, but lacks the international and domestic attention to be effective, thereby posing less of a threat to the el-Sisi regime.

Hypothesis:

I posit that human rights CSOs under el-Sisi's regime fit into the categories of mutualistic or conflictual and that the Al-Nadeem Center and EIPR are now mutualistic, and ANHRI is a conflictual organization, leading to its closure. While the government did not outrightly shut the organization down, it was all but forced to halt its activities because of mounting repressive acts such as facility raids, and arbitrary arrests of founding members and employees, thus hindering the organization's functions and mission.

Based on my theory, I hypothesize that human-rights oriented civil society organizations are more likely to stop functioning when their actions and work garner international recognition ("internationalized hypothesis"), posing a threat to the regime. I use ANHRI as a case that illustrates this conclusion because its work has garnered a significant amount of international and regional attention. ANHRI has also been selected for human rights awards by organizations operating in the U.S. and participated in international and regional forums on human rights abuses in the Arab World. In comparison, the other groups do have international components but are more internally focused, and do not have as much connection to the surrounding international and regional community in terms of communication and association. I also investigate two alternative hypotheses. First, the Egyptian regime could be targeting the ANHRI more heavily

than other selected CSOs because its decision to close and halt its activities could discourage other CSOs from working against the regime (“intimidation” hypothesis). The aim could be to intimidate other human rights defending organizations through the disproportionately harsh mechanisms used to target and contribute to the closure of a long-standing organization such as ANHRI. The existence of a strong network of CSOs continuing to uphold human rights and support victims of repression may contradict this explanation. Second, the government may have targeted ANHRI for closure because it works closely with victims of torture and with personal accounts of physical abuse by the government, making it more difficult for the regime to counter the validity of their reports (“physical evidence” hypothesis).

Methods

Research Design

To examine the determinants of CSO closures in Egypt, I qualitatively compare CSOs that have been closed and those that have not. I will use the “most similar systems” design derived from Mill’s comparative method (Meckstroth, 1975). This design involves choosing cases as similar as possible, so similarities can be eliminated as explanations for patterns of behavior. Rather, any set of variables that differentiates these cases in a way that corresponds to the observed differences in behavior can be used as an explanation for the difference in outcome.

I use NVIVO to qualitatively code along the dimensions of (1) the passage of increasingly restrictive laws to regulate NGOs and to restrict free speech and (2) unfair and arbitrary mass trials to give the semblance of due process without the true work to achieve it. Using this tool, I code 25 reports released by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Amnesty International between the years of 2013-2023 to capture the international implications of this work. I then conduct interviews with think tank professionals and Egypt-specializing

academics to add a domestic bent to the data that I have collected, to best answer my research question and address the two segments of my hypothesis.

Data Collection

I conducted four interviews with participants who have experience living in Egypt, studying the country's political makeup, and pursuing development work focused on Egypt. More specifically, I requested interviews from scholars who have conducted research on Egypt's government and civil society environments, and with employees of the think tanks focused on the Middle East and North Africa. During this first wave of interviews, I asked participants if they can point me to other individuals or groups who have expertise surrounding Egypt's political atmosphere and included the contacts they pointed me to in additional interviews to enhance my collected data. In terms of interview questions, I asked interview participants to share their understanding of why the Egyptian regime engages in cracking down on civil society in the country. I also asked about what organizations are most prone to being targeted by the government.

To carry out my process tracing method, I conducted an analysis of the differences between the three cases I have chosen and their respective functions and activities before and after the 2019 NGO law was passed. I have decided to contrast these four CSOs' 2010 operations, which took place before the 2017 and 2019 laws were passed, with their 2023 operations, which took place after the laws were passed. I reviewed human rights reports released between the years of 2013-2023 to gauge their current state of civil society in Egypt and to gain insight into how the international community views repression by the Egyptian regime. I qualitatively coded for the categories: repressive NGO laws, arbitrary mass trials and arrests, and international responses in the Freedom in the World Report, publications by Human Rights

Watch, and reports by Amnesty International. I took the presence of terms such as "abuse/s," "human rights," "government crackdown," and others to point to government repression against civil society groups. These reports formed my picture of international responses, and I then used interview responses from study participants to assess the success that my three cases had with spreading awareness of human rights abuses by the government, domestically.

Cases

To test my hypothesis, I will conduct a case comparison over time, examining the functions of selected CSOs in 2010, before laws were passed, to their activities now, in 2023. Table 1 presents a chart containing the four selected cases, their status as “open” or “closed,” and relevant characteristics that may help to investigate, or control for, alternative hypotheses.

NAME	YEARS ACTIVE	SIZE	INTERNATIONAL/ LOCAL NETWORKS	FUNCTIONS	STATUS
Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)	Founded in 2004, active for 18 years before closure	Large	Participant in international forums on human rights abuses in the Arab world, received awards for work on freedom of press and expression	Largely independent organization, led police and media reform initiatives, supported bloggers and journalists by creating the Katib blogging platform and Wasla newspaper,	CLOSED – Legal advocacy services provided for state repression victims

				advocate for victims of torture and repression	
Al-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (pre-closure)	Founded in 1993, active 24 years before closure of physical clinic	LARGE	Member of 4-5 networks across the MENA region, founding member of 2 regional networks	Works with victims of torture, releases reports on abuses by Egyptian security forces	OPEN – Physical clinic + advocacy platform
Al-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (post-closure)	Founded in 2002, active for 21 years	SMALL	Still participates in international civil society conversations but smaller scope and access	Releases reports on abuses by Egyptian security forces	PARTIALLY OPEN – Physical clinic forcibly closed by Egyptian security forces
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)	Founded in 2002, active for 21 years	SMALL (membership within Egypt)	Local membership, operates in Egypt	Releases reports on abuses of power by the state	OPEN – online platform

My first case is the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI). The organization was founded in 2004 by Gamal Eid, a prominent lawyer and human rights activist, and worked to provide legal representation to victims of torture and repression by the state. ANHRI has operated mostly independently of the Egyptian political establishment (Freedom House, 2023). The group has also created platforms (*Katib, Wasla*) for journalists and bloggers to safely disseminate their work and views. Historically focusing on advocating for police and media reform efforts, the group had a strong focus on ensuring freedom of press and expression. In 2022, ANHRI made the decision to close their operations after sustained harassment by the Egyptian National Security Agency, which has pursued actions ranging from summoning

members of the group for questioning, to physically abusing staffers and their director, Eid, along with arbitrarily jailing employees (Freedom House, 2023).

I compare ANHRI with the Al-Nadeem Centre for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, an NGO founded in 1993 that provides legal and psychological support for victims of violence and torture, including domestic and prison violence. The center releases reports documenting torture accounts, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence perpetuated by Egyptian security forces. The center's physical clinic was closed in 2017, when security forces forcibly entered the center and shut it down (TIMEP, 2017). According to their website, the center was supposed to engage in a reopening process in 2021, but there is no information regarding whether those efforts succeeded. The clinic center is still closed and its activities are halted (Nadim Center, 2019). However, the organization continues to publish reports on the state of human rights in Egypt and coordinates with local and international human rights organizations to continue this advocacy work.

I then compare both cases to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), which was not closed down by the state. EIPR was established in 2002 to complement the work of other Egyptian human rights groups by adopting as its mandate, and focus of concern, a group of rights and freedoms that are closest to the human-being: bodily autonomy, privacy rights, and housing rights. EIPR believes that "the crucial importance of public freedoms and political rights must be grounded in an understanding of the indispensability of full protection for personal rights." EIPR also facilitates and leads debates about the state's legitimate powers and engage in critiques of the el-Sisi government. Since November 15, 2020, three employees of the organization were arbitrarily arrested and detained by the Egyptian security forces, Karim Ennarah, Director of EIPR's Criminal Justice Unit, Mohammed Basheer, EIPR's Administrative Manager, and Gasser Abdel-Razek, the Executive Director of EIPR. Despite government crackdowns on founding and

executive members, EIPR's functions do not appear to have changed. The group released a recent infographic about the death penalty in Egypt, crackdown on political candidates, climate realities, and other critiques of the current regime (EIPR, 2023).

ANHRI is a sizable organization of repute that has been in operation for nearly 20 years, gaining international recognition and support through engaging in Arab and international human rights organizations and producing reports that spread awareness of the work of human rights organizations geared toward shedding light on civilians' grievances. These attributes provide a special combination of elements that appear to lead to increased government repression. While the other three groups possess traits that make them prime targets for government harassment, they do not match ANHRI in terms of size, duration of activity, global reach, and accountability functions.

Results and Discussion

The first part of the section outlines instances of repression as covered within various iterations of human rights assessment reports put out by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Amnesty International, from the years 2013 to 2023. As these reports were written and published internationally, I have used them to inform findings about international exposure that Egyptian CSOs have been able to garner. These reports highlight three trends that feed into the cyclical nature of international attention interacting with actions taken in response by the el-Sisi regime. This cycle involves: (1) international pressure to drop criminal charges against human rights defenders, (2) criminal charges being dropped, and (3) continued human rights abuses by the el-Sisi regime under the cover of this "leniency". Together, I take these trends to provide valuable context for the state of human rights in Egypt and to assess the international dimensions underpinning highly particular closures of certain human rights groups as opposed to others.

Adding to this framework, the second part of the section synthesizes these trends with insights provided by interviewees to connect to my theoretical framework: that the two groups of CSOs that are allowed to continue functioning either hold the most domestic and international importance or are ineffective at human rights advocacy but bolster the regime's outside reputation. By interviewing academics and practitioners who were well embedded in Egyptian domestic communities, I use their testimony to capture CSOs' success with domestic publicization.

Themes from Human Rights Reports:

International Responses and Actions

All three reports highlight increased international pressure on the el-Sisi regime in their more recent iterations, but efforts by the global human rights community have been met with differing degrees of success.

Recent Statements Released and Immediate Reactions:

Recent human rights reports cover the release of statements from member states of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the European Commission, and the European Union expressing their concern over the el-Sisi regime's suppression of freedom of speech and association. They point to the imprisonment of journalists and human rights defenders as particular concerns. The European Parliament also adopted a fourth urgency resolution on Egypt, urging the government to end its repression ahead of the presidential elections that occurred in 2023. (HRW 2023, 191) Despite signaling international awareness of the Egyptian regime's declining state of human rights, member states of these transnational organizations have stopped at making these statements of "occasional, faint criticism," continuing to provide Egypt with

security and military support (HRW 2023). This dynamic could explain the regime's backsliding into continuing to perpetrate repressive actions against human rights defending actors and organizations, because the Egyptian regime is not facing any additional pressure to improve its human rights record beyond vague "calls to action."

Earlier Statements Released and International Reactions:

This pattern was also observed in reports released in 2019. After being imprisoned for allegedly receiving illegal foreign funding, "43 employees of several international and local democracy-support NGOs were acquitted in December 2018" (2019 Freedom House). The organizations involved were US-based: International Republican Institute (IRI), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and Freedom House. However, despite the release of these employees, these organizations' offices were later ordered to close. (Amnesty International 2022) Reports released in 2022 also highlighted the release of 13 human rights defenders, journalists, and politicians who had been held in pretrial detention for years, in response to international calls for justice. However, thousands remained in detention following trials that occurred without legal basis (Amnesty International 2022). Similar to the previous examples, the Freedom House Egypt country report of 2021 shared information about the escalated repression of human rights advocates in Egypt, with prominent researchers from EIPR being detained and imprisoned, as mentioned above. International pressure led to the release of two staffers, but one remained in prison at the time. (Freedom House 2021)

These examples highlight immediate actions by the el-Sisi regime to improve the perception of its tolerance for civic space in response to international concerns, but once the attention has shifted back to maintaining a military or security-oriented relationship, efforts to be democratic and tolerant of CSOs vanish. In this way, the Egyptian regime has created a perpetual

state of intimidation under which all CSOs operate, stunting the growth of an independent civil society that can hold the regime accountable for its abuses.

Themes from Interviews:

The human rights reports establish the backdrop of repression that surrounds civil society in Egypt, pointing to the passage of repressive legislation, arrests and harassment by security forces, and ineffective international engagement as pivotal to shrinking civic space. The interviews that I conducted with think tank professionals, researchers, and scholars add domestic nuances to this picture by drawing on their personal and academic experiences researching the human rights landscape in the country across the Mubarak-era to the current el-Sisi regime. I interviewed four country experts who have extensive experience conducting fieldwork in Egypt and embedding themselves in the local community. Relevant characteristics of my interviewees are summarized in the following table.

Name	Occupation
Interviewee A	Assistant Professor, researcher, author of book focusing on non-governmental foundations in Egypt (extensive fieldwork in Egypt)
Interviewee B	Researcher and Project Manager at a Middle East focused think-tank in Washington, DC (extensive work with Egyptian NGOs)
Interviewee C	Director of foreign affairs think-tank and author of several Egypt-focused books (extensive fieldwork in Egypt)

Interviewee D	Practitioner/employee within two Egyptian NGOs (HRO and development org), Ph.D. candidate (extensive work experience within Egyptian NGOs)
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Below, I describe the three themes that emerged from my interviews with country experts: (1) characteristics of CSOs that attract repression, (2) NGOs, publicization, and public perceptions, and (3) foreign support and funding.

Theme 1: Characteristics of CSOs That Attract Repression

Each interviewee laid out a slate of characteristics that seemed to lead to certain groups attracting government repression. Interviewee A designated any activity or speech that can be deemed political as a sensitivity of the regime, including organizations that work on human rights, with marginalized populations, and with religious organizations. She mentioned that these characteristics are highly dependent on who is in power and the politics of the ruling regime. (Interviewee A) Interviewee C offered a view that looks at who is being repressed and what they might represent to the regime, such as “liberals, homosexuals, people connected to the West in some way, democratic advocates.” (Interviewee C) He also mentioned that CSOs that receive foreign funding are a particularly “sensitive subject” for Egyptian leadership because they are seen by the government as groups that violate its sovereignty. As a result, it is easy to repress people or groups who are receiving money from the European Union or the United States and say that they are not “good Egyptian nationalists.” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee D shared that CSOs that the government has reason to fear attract repression, because groups that do not pose a threat to the regime add to its legitimacy (Interviewee D). Finally, Interviewee B offered examples of political issues that were areas of sensitivity for the regime.

“The sensitivities around corruption, and military run businesses is a clear example of something that can trigger the regime. Documentation around the military campaign in Sinai over the past decade has also been a trigger.”

For example, there were some protests around islands that were going to be given to Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea that led to a great deal of arrests and targeting. These incidents can be lumped into the category of challenges to the government’s sovereignty, sensitivities that triggered the regime to act repressively.

While each interviewee pointed to a different slate of characteristics that engendered repression, Interviewee C shared that at the higher level, these groups all highlight

“the gap between principle and objective reality. [Their] work can be quite fatal for an authoritarian regime because some political entrepreneur can step in and use that gap in order to advance their own political agenda at the expense of Sisi and others.”

While the el-Sisi regime is sensitive to the work of groups that have specific military focuses or broad-ranging political activities, the reasoning underlying why CSOs are repressed for being openly critical of the government is because they illuminate to the public and international community the government’s willingness to violently suppress counternarratives that expose its subpar human rights record and devaluation of the rights to free speech, press, and assembly. By targeting groups and voices that seek to hold the regime accountable, the el-Sisi regime’s repressive efforts are self-preservative and almost existential in nature.

Theme 2: NGOs, Publicization, and Public Perceptions

Egypt’s NGO landscape consists of groups that operate for general development and economic well-being, along with the more maligned human rights groups. Interviewee D captures the difference in government perceptions of these groups, stating that human rights groups and government relations are characterized by mutual animosity, but development NGOs

have a “cautious partnership” with the government (Interviewee D). The Egyptian government is still able to pressure development NGOs with “everyday forms of repression” -- for example, the Ministry of Social Solidarity or other institution may stop funding for certain projects for 7-8 months, just to exert control. This sort of repression can affect even international NGOs that are very well-known and operating in relatively non-controversial sectors. Human rights groups do not generally have the protection of operating in a non-problematic space, and are coming under fire for funding sources, and thus “have it worse if they do register.” (Interviewee D)

Returning to the work that human rights groups do in highlighting the gap between principle and objective reality (Interviewee C), they are described to be “absolutely vital for any understanding of what really happens inside the country” due to the documentation they do on the human rights situation. Interviewee B added that in the relatively little space that HROs in Egypt have, they can document extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and a litany of human rights abuses in more detail than other groups in expressly authoritarian environments (Interviewee B).

Public perception of NGOs can complicate notions of how they are seen and legitimized in Egypt apart from government recognition. Interviewee A first made the point that there are “many different publics,” the Egyptian public and the international public. To solidify their legitimacy, some organizations use social media and Internet platforms. Interviewee A also mentioned that human rights organizations can serve as an “important bridge between publics, between the international public, between the local public” as well. However, they can publicize all they want, but if they do not have the legitimacy to have influence, this work is rendered moot. There is also a distrust of human rights NGOs as instruments of Western influence. Interviewee D mentioned that even progressive-minded Egyptian peers and family members “were upset that I worked in human rights,” seeking evidence that HROs were “puppets” of the

West and that they are not needed in the country. (Interviewee D) He added that the human rights movement is not very effective in mobilizing popular support due to this skepticism of the movement. This is in part because these organizations have never been member-based, and because they have always comprised of elites, leading the general public to view HROs as “other” and distinct and alien from the grassroots movement, counteracting their effectiveness in the country.

Theme 3: Nuances of Foreign Support and Funding

The above theme feeds into the domestic perceptions of CSOs based on their international engagement. Interviewee A mentioned that all non-governmental organizations need money to operate, and because there is so little internal funding, organizations need foreign funding (Interviewee A). However, this “invites not only crackdowns by the government, but it raises suspicions by the general public, that they are tools of Western agendas.” This distrust was fomented and cultivated in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, according to Interviewee B, who shared that “there was a sort of steady support for civil society in Egypt” before the revolution against Mubarak, with programs such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative launched by the Bush administration as part of its Freedom Agenda. This initiative signaled a willingness to do capacity building work for HROs even if the host country was not too keen on adopting these efforts itself. However, the passage of Case 173 by the el-Sisi regime along with other measures that criminalize foreign funding have dissuaded the United States from continuing the flow of democracy aid, based on the targeting of groups that receive it. Lack of international support now hinders the efforts of pro-democracy activists and has hurt civic space in Egypt as a result (Interviewee B).

Despite reduced support for building up independent civil society in Egypt, international backlash can be effective in countering the arbitrary arrests and trials mentioned previously. Interviewee B mentioned the example of EIPR’s director Hossam Bahgat being detained, but after an outcry from international human rights groups and other nations, he was quickly released. However, on the other side of this coin, a human rights defender or organization may attract the ire of the regime and will withstand international pressure to continue to hold this actor in detention. Interviewee C mentioned that “there is some modicum of safety for [well-known HROs and activists], but it’s never permanent.” Interviewee D conceptualized this trend using Martha Finnemore’s Boomerang Model of civil society groups – CSOs are effective in utilizing international support when an organization knows how to do international advocacy. An organization that might be protected because of its international exposure, but “others are also hit because they make a lot of noise domestically.” International action here can thus serve as a temporary protecting force but remains a targeting force as well.

Synthesis: Applying this Framework to my Cases

	INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION	LESS INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION
SUCCESSFUL PUBLICIZATION	Arab Network for Human Rights Information Al-Nadeem Center (pre-partial closure)	

<p>LESS SUCCESSFUL PUBLICIZATION</p>	<p>Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights</p>	<p>Al-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (post-partial closure)</p>
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Revisiting my theoretical framework and typology of CSO cases, I now use the results gathered from coding human rights reports and conducting in-depth interviews to apply my findings to my selected cases. The cycle of international pressure, dropped criminal charges, and continued repressive acts applies to all three of my cases as they all operate under a repressive environment for civil society that the el-Sisi regime has created. This cycle's impact on the functions of my CSOs is most evident with the previous and ongoing investigations and arrests of senior staff members and directors of these CSOs.

For example, the founder and director of ANHRI, Gamal Eid, has been the target of the Egyptian National Security forces since 2016 until 2022, when ANHRI was forced to close. In 2016, the Cairo Criminal Court confirmed an order to freeze the personal funds and assets of Eid and other human rights defenders, justified through Case 173 (foreign funding case). Eid's appeal, along with that of Hossam Bahgat, director of EIPR, was postponed twice in 2019, and finally rejected in 2020. This maintained the travel ban against Eid and Bahgat, restricting their access to international communities and audiences (Front Line Defenders, 2019). The founders of the Al-Nadeem Center underwent similar repression by authorities, being called in for investigations, facing asset freezes and travel bans, and finally being forced to close their medical clinic after security forces raided the center (Atlantic Council, 2017). Despite the similarities in the cycle of repression faced by these groups, ANHRI is the more internationally recognized group, having received two awards from think tanks in Washington, DC for their human rights work. The Al-Nadeem Center has also been active in regional networks to support torture victims across North Africa but has not garnered the same amount of information. EIPR,

similarly, does not have as wide of a reach with international publics, despite being covered by human rights reports.

Groups differ along the three themes developed through conversations with my interviewees. In terms of the characteristics of each organization that may attract repression, ANHRI is also a clear fit. As a politically oriented organization, with domestic and international recognition, ANHRI received the Leaders for Democracy award from the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Roland Berger Human Dignity Award (Front Line Defenders, 2019), pointing to its substantial international influence. ANHRI's work advocating for the release of prominent human rights defenders, holding elements of the justice department accountable, and sharing information about the damaging impacts of Case 173 put it squarely in the crosshairs of some of the regime's most acute sensitivities. Their inherently political work and blatant calling out of the government and security forces for detaining named human rights activists, along with pieces published that comment on the human rights records of other governments across the Middle East and Arab World point to its significance internationally and domestically, which could be a large part of why ANHRI was put under so much pressure by the government that it was forced to close.

In contrast, the Al-Nadeem Center and EIPR do not operate at the confluence of international and domestic effectiveness. Rather, Al-Nadeem is more internationally acclaimed and less tied to the domestic public due to the closure of its physical clinic, and EIPR, as a information sharing platform, has less attention from both international and local publics. The Al-Nadeem Center's co-founder, Dr. Seif Al-Dawla said to reporters during their investigation by Egyptian prosecutors:

“If there is a clinic that treats torture victims, it means that torture exists, it means that Egyptian citizens have a real need for it. So they close it down. There cannot be anything hinting from close or from far that there are violations.” (Atlantic Council)

Both organizations have lost their teeth and have become less threatening to the regime because harassment by security forces of their founders, directors, and staff members, and attempts to forcibly close their physical spaces and centers lose them legitimacy in the eyes of the Egyptian public. They now lack grounding in actual evidence of government torture and abuse that can back reports that they release and their human rights defending work generally. This has effects on the Al-Nadeem Center’s international sway as well – despite their connection with the domestic public and membership in international and regional networks, the loss of a center to mentally and medically treat victims of state repression, a crucial part of their human rights work, contributes to a loss in the impact of their voice, internationally. As a result, they continue functioning with the effect of bolstering the el-Sisi regime’s human rights record because their activities are stunted, and because they have the goodwill of the domestic public and good reputations internationally.

Conclusion:

This thesis used a case study analysis of three CSOs: the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the Al-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights to examine what leads Egypt’s el-Sisi regime to close human rights organizations outright versus continuing to place them under repression, when these groups have very similar functions. ANHRI was international in scope, with strong domestic ties before being closed; Al-Nadeem was international in scope with similarly strong domestic ties, until the el-Sisi regime forcibly closed the center’s medical clinic, removing some credibility and limiting their voice internationally; and EIPR has a strong international

reputation, but due to its elite-level membership, does not hold much sway with the domestic public.

To investigate my research question, I used a combination of qualitatively coding human rights reports and conducting interviews with Egypt country experts. I coded a set of 25 human rights reports released by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Amnesty International, over the period from 2013-2023. I also conducted in-depth interviews with four Egypt country experts to get a sense of the domestic perceptions of the CSOs that I have selected. I used these methods to capture insights about the domestic and international elements of my hypothesis.

My methods led me to conclude that my hypothesis is upheld – that civil society groups focusing on human rights, that speak out against regime abuses of human rights in Egypt are likely to be closed by the government if they are successful at internationally and domestically publicizing actions taken by the government to repress and silence human rights defenders within the country. Organizations with high levels of internationalization and domestic ties, such as ANHRI, engender not just repression but also outright closure. However, organizations with international attention can also be protected by it – to a certain extent, international awareness and support can serve as a shield for CSOs in Egypt. Closing these groups could cut the regime off from funding and support from other governments and international organizations that the el-Sisi regime wants to access.

Research Benefits & Limitations

My research strategy was effective in that it employed both interview and comparative coding methods to draw conclusions about how the Egyptian regime represses similar human rights CSOs. Examining expert testimony and comparing the functions of these cases over time assisted me in analyzing the differential impacts of the el-Sisi regime's cultivation of an

extremely repressive environment for civil society on similar human rights groups and pointing to some of the reasons for why certain groups are targeted for closure versus continued repression, through the lens of my three case studies, ANHRI, the Al-Nadeem Center, and EIPR. One potential limitation was that the interview participants may not have been as familiar with my selected organizations, leading me to gather broad answers and general conclusions about Egypt's repressive actions towards CSOs and then apply these frameworks to my cases separately. However, by combining interviews with report-coding methods, I attempted to alleviate this limitation.

Policy Recommendations & Future Scope of Research:

The objective of the domestic and international human rights defenders should be to protect the activities of an independent civil society in Egypt to protect the basic human rights of free speech, press, and association for civilians in Egypt. Democracy holds that government operates with the consent of the people governed, seeking to represent their voices and viewpoints in policies enacted and in upholding the rule of law. In the context of a regime that is dedicated to eradicating free and independent civic space in favor of increased social and political control, it is the responsibility of the international community to provide support for the brave activities of civil society groups in Egypt who dare to fulfill their role of holding the autocratic state accountable for not upholding human rights. I would recommend that the international community take three steps to fulfill this responsibility:

- (1) Continue the work of these NGOs from outside the country, allowing their websites to be accessed by civilians across the world to spread awareness of the el-Sisi regime's attacks on human rights defenders.

- (2) Use international organizations and institutions as accountability mechanisms, imposing sanctions rather than soft critiques on the repressive regime.
- (3) Recenter foreign nations' focuses on providing aid that is contingent on an actual improvement of the El-Sisi regime's human rights record.

The US's role in enabling repression should also be examined – military support provided to the el-Sisi regime for counterterrorism purposes, for regional security and stability, for balancing against powers like Iran in the region have been misused and allow the regime to grow its repressive capacity.

This thesis has unpacked the reasoning behind a repressive regime's unilateral actions to actively infringe on the rights of its people in favor of maintaining control over its population, and there are parallels across countries that have backslid into autocracy after the revolutions of the Arab Spring in 2011. This research may have important implications for similar analyses of other country cases where civilians' rights are being denied and provide a set of steps forward for the international community to assume the important role of advocating for civilians left in the balance of authoritarian regimes' calculations, making the world more mindful of protecting the rights of oppressed peoples.

Appendix:

I conducted semi-structured interviews and used the following interview questions as a starting point to the conversation. This research has been approved by Duke IRB (#2024-0221).

Interview Questions:

1. Based on your Egypt-facing research/work, what are some of the reasons behind the el-Sisi regime's crackdown on civil society organizations?
 - a. How does the el-Sisi regime's strategies of control and co-optation carry forward or diverge from Mubarak-era policies?
2. Are human rights CSOs disproportionately affected by repression compared to development or welfare-providing NGOs?
3. What other characteristics of CSOs make them prone to harassment or repression by government forces? These could be related to organizational structure or functions.
4. All of the cases I focus on engage in publicizing abuses that the government perpetrates. How effective is this publicization, and how much does it impact public awareness?
5. How does international pressure affect the Egypt regime's repression of CSOs?
 - a. What are some of the nuances behind continuities and changes in international support and funding of Egyptian advocacy NGOs?
6. The government seems more interested in closing some NGOs down over others. Why would you say this is the case?
7. Have you/how have you been affected by repression by the Egyptian regime?
8. How have local Egyptians you've interacted with been affected by government repression?
9. How willing were you to publicly speak about or criticize the government when in the country?

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