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Human rights: Egypt's black holes

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By Borzou Daragahi

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The disappearance of thousands of government opponents is raising fears of a new generation of jihadis

Barred: journalists from Al Jazeera and others, accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, watch courtroom proceedings from cages in Cairo's Tora prison He had been missing for more than three weeks when his family received the phone call. The man on the other end told them that Ahmed Abdul-Samiyeh, a 31-year-old father of three, was being held at a prison called Azouly. Then he hung up.

Mr Abdul-Samiyeh's family and lawyer had worked day and night, going from prison to prison, begging officials from the ministries of justice and interior to tell them where he was. But they had never heard of Azouly.

"We had been looking for Ahmed for a whole month and we had not even heard of this place," says Saida Ahmed Awad, who had not seen her son since the day of his January 14 arrest in western Cairo.

Egyptian and international human rights advocates say that Mr Abdul-Samiyeh disappeared into a vast network of clandestine detention centres and camps that are in effect black sites unacknowledged by the government. Rights groups say the facilities, long in existence, have swelled in size and number since security forces began rounding up dissidents after the July 3 military coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi, the country's Islamist president.

Neither ministry would respond to requests for information about facilities such as Azouly, the existence of which they officially deny. But Azouly is thought to be one among perhaps dozens of undeclared detention sites used by security forces to hold, interrogate and torture thousands of political opponents swept up from antimilitary demonstrations, homes and offices. Detainees have mostly been Morsi supporters or suspected members of his now-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organisation and its allies. But they also include leftists opposed to the post-coup government installed by Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, the former army general who is now running for president.

Many of the leftists manage to find their way out on bail while high-profile Islamists often wind up in the network of ordinary prisons. But the bulk of the arrested Islamists remain locked away as the government attempts to stamp out a smouldering armed insurgency, rights organisations say. Just as the attitudes of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaeda leader, were shaped in Egypt's prisons 30 years ago, some rights observers worry that the next generation of violent jihadis is being moulded now in the country's detention sites.

FT Video

Sisi's challenge will come after the election March 2014: If elected, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi would face a tired and impatient population "We will see types like Ayman Zawahiri or even worse models after this ends," warns Basma Zahran, a lawyer for El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, a rights group. "Because we have never seen people held in detention without charges for so long."

Egypt's 42 official prison facilities, including the notorious Tora in Cairo and Burj al Arab outside Alexandria, where Mr Morsi is held, have always been the focus of allegations of torture and others forms of mistreatment. But critics say the undeclared prisons, often created by ministerial or presidential decree, take the abuse and lack of oversight to a new level.

Prisoners who have emerged from the black sites describe grossly overcrowded detention rooms, unhygienic conditions, a lack of medical care, no access to family or lawyers and wanton, near-constant abuse – including severe beatings, electrocution and sexual assault. A toilet might be a hole in the ground surrounded by a shower curtain. Dozens of men are sometimes crammed into space suitable for two.

"Our day started at 9am when the cells were opened and people who had been sleeping on top of each other like sardines would be allowed to exit to use the bathroom," according to Karim Beheiry, a journalist who was among more than 1,000 people arrested at an antimilitary protest.

"The day ends with senior officers coming in to count the prisoners, a routine usually followed

by more insults, cursing, beatings,” he continued in his account of life inside an east Cairo camp of the Central Security Forces, a paramilitary branch of the Ministry of Interior.

Egyptian rights activists say an attitude of impunity among the security forces could lead to further instability in a country that has already been rocked by a revolution and a coup since 2011.

“This is a very exceptional moment in Egypt in terms of human rights,” says Mohamed Abdelaziz, a lawyer at al-Haqanya, a group that monitors prison conditions. “They have given the security forces free rein and that only means reverting to torture and killing. The more the security apparatus is running the country, the more it will lead to suppression and anger and the danger of another uprising.”

A sordid history

Egypt’s prisons have long been a weapon used by authoritarian rulers against Islamist and leftist opponents. A 1956 prisons law allows for the creation of an unlimited number of “special prisons” designated by the decree of the president and interior minister. President Gamal Abdel Nasser used it to lock up tens of thousands of his Islamist and leftist rivals after the coup that brought him to power. Remote detention centres swelled in number in the early 1990s as the government stepped up efforts to crush an Islamist insurgency, drawing the condemnation of the UN.

In depth

Egypt after Morsi

The prospect of Egypt descending into civil war is growing as the army tightens its grip and the death toll from its crackdown on the opposition mounts. Makeshift prisons include camps in or near bases of the Central Security Forces. The basements of police stations are also used for the interrogation of prisoners before they are released or transferred to larger detention centres.

Such facilities were used to house Hosni Mubarak’s opponents during Egypt’s 2011 revolution, as well as Mr Morsi’s rivals during his one-year rule. But experts say the number of facilities and prisoners has expanded dramatically since the coup, especially after the violent mid-August dispersal of the Rabaa and Nahda Square protest camps in Cairo, and the armed Islamist insurgency against security forces. Dozens of police and soldiers have been killed in attacks claimed by Islamist militant groups over the past nine months.

“The situation has worsened exceptionally since Rabaa,” says Reda Marey, a lawyer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a group in Cairo engaged in efforts to identify all the black sites used to hold inmates. “Ever since, many police have been killed, many Brotherhood members have been killed and the prisons are overfull with more than 20,000 new detainees, whom they don’t know where to put.”

In the absence of a public registry of special prisons, those who are sent to them are often

unaccounted for. Requests to Egyptian authorities for details of the number of special prisons and prisoners held in them go unheeded. One official at the State Information Service says he was told no such detention centres exist. The commander of the CSF has repeatedly and publicly denied that any people are incarcerated in the paramilitary group's bases in spite of mountains of testimony by former detainees.

Experts estimate that people are being held at more than 30 CSF camps and perhaps a dozen military bases. They say people are held for up to two weeks at hundreds of police stations. "There is very little information about these prisons and we usually hear about them accidentally," says Mahmoud Belal, an attorney at the Egyptian Centre for Economic Social Rights.

Often families stay quiet about relatives in detention for fear they will be treated even worse if they complain. Many Islamists and their families mistrust prisoner advocacy groups because they also agitated for reform during Mr Morsi's reign. But such considerations sometimes fall away once their loved ones have been physically abused.

Fatemeh Gharib, 15, gave her name and testimony to rights groups after she was arrested on January 25 and beaten ferociously at a police station in central Cairo, She was then taken to the CSF camp next to Tora prison where she was interrogated for three days before being released on the equivalent of \$1,500 bail.

"We learn about these things when people have been tortured," says Baho Abdullah, a human-rights activist. "People don't complain until there is torture involved because they hope they might be released. Right now, many people are being tortured."

Wall of silence

Mr Abdul-Samiyeh, who studied law but worked in his family's dairy business, was described by his brother, Sobhi, as a middle-class Brotherhood sympathiser but not a member of the group or even an activist. He was not passionate about politics and rarely attended the many pro-Morsi demonstrations from which police swept up dissidents. His family says he was buying ingredients for making cheese when he was arrested on January 14 under unclear circumstances. His car and the \$500 in cash he had with him have yet to be found.

Rights groups say that Mr Abdul-Samiyeh's disappearance is typical. "We have stories of people who were taken to basements of buildings belonging to the Ministry of Interior for immediate interrogation or even punishment," says Giorgio Caracciolo, a researcher at Dignity, a Danish prisoner rights group.

"This detention is done without any degree of transparency; people would not know where they are being kept and this is considered a sort of temporary disappearance."

In a recent case, Mohamed Waguih, a suspected Brotherhood member, was dragged away from his workplace in eastern Cairo on March 3 without an arrest warrant and remains in detention at

a CSF base, according to rights activists. “There are cases that are close to kidnappings or forced disappearance,” says Mr Abdelaziz.

Advocates for the Islamists rarely approach the mostly liberal activists who are overseeing the country’s main human rights groups, obscuring the scale of those inside the facilities.

On the day of his arrest, Mr Abdul-Samiyeh managed to get word to his family that he was being held at the so-called “10.5 kilometre” CSF base before he disappeared.

After badgering lawyers and rights advocates, Mr Abdul-Samiyeh’s family eventually learnt that Azouly was a remote prison camp run by Egypt’s 2nd Army near the Suez Canal city of Ismailia, a two-hour drive from the capital. His relatives began visiting the site regularly, attempting to glean information about him from guards, mostly without luck.

“The biggest dilemma when it comes to special prisons is people don’t know where their children are or whether they’ve been arrested,” says Ms Abdullah. “It’s a completely different network of prisons. Officials don’t respond to requests for information because they only follow the official prisons.”

Searching for someone in charge proved fruitless. As the family dug, they found out more about Azouly. Originally built to house soldiers facing disciplinary measures, the camp was beyond any kind of judicial oversight. Mr Belal, the human rights attorney, says: “We don’t know who really manages the facility at Azouly.”

Gomaa Ahmed, Mr Abdul-Samiyeh’s lawyer, says he was told that Homeland Security, the successor to Egypt’s notorious State Security, had taken control of a section of the prison with the consent of the 2nd Army’s commander. “State security is able to get people and question them with no observation there and with complete freedom,” the lawyer says.

Special prisons do not receive the supplies of food, blankets and other goods sent to the network of mainstream prisons that are under the supervision of the justice or interior ministries. At the mainstream prisons, inmates are usually granted access to lawyers, doctors and family members. Prisoners held inside police stations near their homes receive blankets and food – but only from relatives.

Guards eventually took pity on Mr Abdul-Samiyeh’s mother and allowed her to send in some blankets and a change of clothes. Some time later, the clothes he had been wearing on the day of his arrest came back to the gate, tattered but the first proof that he had at least been inside Azouly.

“Anyone could have taken off his clothes and he could have been dead inside,” she says.

Creating extremists

Formal requests to bring Mr Abdul-Samiyeh out to meet his lawyer have been refused, say his family. Part of the problem is logistics, experts say. The police unit in charge of transferring

prisoners from ordinary detention facilities to courts and meetings with lawyers does not serve special prisons.

Mr Ahmed, the lawyer, had not taken on a human rights case before, and only agreed to represent Mr Abdul-Samiyeh because he was a close friend; they had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca together.

After talking to fellow lawyers and released prisoners, Mr Ahmed began piecing together Mr Abdul-Samiyeh's story. He was held and interrogated for about 10 days by Homeland Security before he was transferred to Azouly, where he endured torture that included being hung by his arms for so long that he required medical attention.

Such abuse is not uncommon, fuelling concerns that a new generation of extremists is being created inside detention centres. Like Mr Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, many of the Arab world's most ruthless Islamist militants have been radicalised inside its prisons. "Tyranny, the absence of justice, and torture are things that create extremists," says Mr Marey. "Experience has taught us that these people, when they get out of prison, are more ferocious and vicious than when they get in."

Ten weeks into his arrest, Mr Abdul-Samiyeh has yet to be given a day in court, formally charged or even listed as a detainee. "The military prosecution denies having Ahmed," says Mr Ahmed. "They even showed us their directory of prisoners, and Ahmed's name was not on it."

Frustrated and sleepless from her inability to confirm whether he was dead or alive, Ms Awad devised a series of questions that only her son would be able to answer during visits to the prison gate. In one, she asked where a certain amount of money was hidden and how much it totalled. She begged a guard to take the question to the prisoners and present it to Mr Abdul-Samiyeh. The correct answer came back a few days later, the first conclusive evidence that her son was alive.

"Only after that," his mother says, "and only after he had given many secrets did I actually believe that he was inside and alive."