

“No climate justice without human rights”

The human rights situation in Egypt has steadily deteriorated since Abdel Fatah El-Sisi took power in 2014. Samar Elhussieny, member of the Egyptian Human Rights Forum, hopes that the UN climate conference in Egypt will bring change. So far, however, there have only been a few bright spots.

Klimareporter^o: Thousands of delegates, NGO and media representatives are in Sharm El-Sheikh to attend the COP27. What do you expect from this conference?

Samar Elhussieny: We had high expectations for the COP. We demanded the release of arbitrarily detained political prisoners and to stop the ban of 700 websites from NGOs and independent media. Only a few prisoners were released, but much more were arrested during the last weeks, as they called for decentralized protests in Egypt. And the access to only two websites have been opened, one being the website of Human Rights Watch. We had high expectations, but in Egypt, you can only hope for the minimum.

Before we talk more about the protests and human right situation in Egypt, let's shortly address the COP27 itself. Fossil fuel companies are expanding in Africa and climate hazards in the global south are getting worse and worse. Do you believe that this COP will lead to more global justice?

Well, for global justice, we also need to address national injustices. So, we hoped that there would be more analysis of national climate policies. To put a spotlight on countries, which are ignoring ecological issues. Egypt is certainly one of them. The international community needs to criticize that because in Egypt there is no critical discussion about climate action possible. The regime has monopolized all NGOs and prohibited others.

But of course, the developed countries, like Germany and the US, have the biggest responsibility for climate change and therefore need to support the most vulnerable countries financially. Until now, there hasn't been a breakthrough at the COP27.

But it also needs to be made sure of that the money is used for climate action or given to communities that have been affected by climate change. In Egypt, money from international funds that was given for a certain purpose, was often used for something completely else. So financial support can only help if it is actually used accordingly.

There have been protests at the COP from climate activists and also human right activists. Are you surprised that that's possible?

Well, the COP itself belongs to UN. So, on site, certain protests are allowed. But outside this area, protest is impossible. While there were protests at the COP, the regime arrested 1.500 Egyptian activists in other cities.

It's very different to past COPs. Last year in Glasgow, for instance, there were thousands of protesters in the street.

Also, as a host city, Sharm El-Sheikh is quite exclusive and difficult to get to. Not the best prerequisite for participation of civil society.

It is no coincidence that Sharm El-Sheikh was chosen by the Egyptian government as host city of the COP. The city is literally in the desert. There is nothing besides expensive hotels and resorts. So yes, it was impossible for many organizations, especially from Afrika, to join.

You mentioned 1.500 arrests during the last weeks. Egyptian organizations, like COP Civic Space, called for decentralized protests on the 11th of November. Were there any?

No. There wasn't even a small protest, there was nothing. The government arrested 1.500 activists before there even were any protests, but just because they called for protests. Because of that, no one dared to protest on the 11th.

There were several events in which the human rights situation was issued. For instance, a speech of Sanaa Seif, the sister of Alaa Abdel Fattah, an imprisoned political Blogger. Do you think these events will have an impact on the situation in Egypt?

Yes, there have been a couple of very valuable and important events. In some discussions, even organizations of Cairo that were not allowed to attend the COP, joined online. So, there have been some windows for criticism and to inform the public about the situation. During the last two weeks, there has been written more about the situation in Egypt than during the last eight years.

In these events, a lot of the security stuff of the COP filmed the participants. Do you expect legal repercussions for Egyptian citizens, who attended?

There is a general speculation of reprisal acts by the regime. It is the responsibility of UN and other countries to prevent that. When the world keeps watching what happened in Egypt, the regime can't do what they want. But yes, a lot of people are afraid of that. There are even jokes by activists, whether the UN could not extend the COP for a whole year, so that Egyptians can enjoy the freedom a little longer.

You and all the other members of the Egyptian Human Rights Forum don't live in Egypt anymore. When was the last time you've been there?

2017 was the last time. I wanted to go back at the end of 2018, because my dad was detained, and I wanted to support him. But I was strongly advised by my lawyers and other activists not to go back, because they were afraid that I would immediately be arrested in the airport.

Every member of the Egyptian Human Rights Forum has a travel ban, was publicly shamed by the state media, or was even threatened by the Egyptian authorities to be assassinated. So, we all can't go back. Therefore, we want to connect Egyptians in diaspora and create a movement outside of Egypt to support the people in Egypt.

Talking about movement. Do you hope that the COP leads to a cross-movement between the climate movement and human rights movement?

That is until now the best outcome of the COP. The climate movement clearly shows solidarity with the struggle in Egypt. Most climate activists understand that there is no climate justice without human rights. And it would be very hypocritical of environmental organizations to come to Egypt and pretend that everything is fine.

Also, the Egyptian regime does not only oppress human rights activists, but any form of activism, including environmental activists. A cross-movement benefits both fights

How can international delegates and media representatives support your struggle?

Keep the spotlight on Egypt. The regime can't oppress media outside of Egypt. And other countries should ask for human rights as a requirement for collaboration.

Journalists need to accentuate political prisoners' stories, reveal the true face of this regime, and utilize this opportunity to make media coverage that reflects the reality of the Egyptian people.