



# Under the rainbow

On 22nd February an Amnesty report criticised Egypt for its worst clampdown on LGBT people in over a decade. With arrests, threats and accusations of ‘debauchery’ intensifying since the 2013 military coup, gay Egyptians face danger every day. In Cairo **Tom Faber** meets the activists who are fighting back

Once he arrived home from the fabric shop in the busy Cairo suburb of Zeitoun, Ahmed Ismail just needed a needle and thread. He measured out sections of cloth in seven different colours, cut them into strips and carefully sewed them together. When he had finished, the flag was about as wide as his outstretched arms. He felt satisfied. It would definitely be visible from the stage.

A week later, on 22nd September 2017, Ismail met his friends to go to a concert by Lebanese indie band Mashrou’ Leila. The group was performing to a crowd of 35,000 in Cairo’s affluent El Tagamoa El Khames district, and Ismail wasn’t the only one to bring a rainbow flag. The lead singer, Hamed Sinno, is one of the only openly gay public figures in the Arab world, and a group of young LGBT Egyptians had come out to support him and his bandmates. Ismail remembers four other flags flying over the crowd at the moment he unfurled his own. “It was a crazy moment,” he told me as we spoke in October.

“Someone told me to be proud and raise it up. So I forgot everyone around me, the cameras, all the homophobia, and raised the flag.” It was one of the very few times the rainbow flag had been displayed publicly in Egypt. “We were saying that we are here. We won’t hide any more.”

The next morning, Ismail woke up and checked his phone. Everyone was talking about the flags. “Social media had caught fire,” he recalls. “The haters were out.” Within days, seven people who had attended the concert had been arrested. Two would later be charged with membership of an illegal group aiming to “disrupt societal cohesion” and “incite debauchery”. They were brought in front of the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which is usually only employed for suspected terrorists.

Those first arrests were followed by a general crackdown, as the homes of known LGBT people were raided. Within a month the police had arrested more than 65 people on charges of “debauchery”. Ismail believes



A rainbow flag is waved by a fan at a Mashrou’ Leila concert in Ehden, Lebanon in August 2017

REUTERS / JAMAL SAADI



An election advertisement for incumbent president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo, pictured on 16th March 2018

that the only reason he avoided arrest was because of the low profile he kept on social media.

The backlash to the flag-raising wasn't limited to arrests and raids. Egypt's media regulatory body branded homosexuality "a sickness and a disgrace that is best kept hidden, not promoted". Television presenter Ahmed Moussa compared the threat Egypt faces from homosexuality to the threat from Isis. Mashrou' Leila were banned from performing in Egypt again by the country's official musicians' union. The band issued a statement on Facebook in response to the arrests: "The [Egyptian] state apparatus is hellbent on executing the most atrocious of human rights violations... It is sickening to think that all this hysteria has been generated over a couple of kids raising a piece of cloth that stands for love."

Homosexuality is not technically illegal in Egypt. But a 1961 law against *fujur*, loosely translated as "debauchery" and originally introduced to clamp down on prostitution, has long been used to criminalise homosexual acts. If convicted, defendants can be sentenced to between three and 15 years in prison. The *fujur* law is applied broadly. In December 2017 two

separate cases saw Egyptian pop singers Shyma and Leila Amer arrested for starring in provocative music videos. Shyma's case, which resulted in a two-year prison sentence, centred around her suggestive on-screen consumption of a banana.

**W**hile homosexuality has never been publicly accepted in Egypt, veterans of Cairo's underground gay scene remember the 1990s, midway through Hosni Mubarak's 30-year presidency, as a time of relative freedom as long as they kept their sexual preferences hidden. That all changed in May 2001, when 52 men were arrested on the Queen Boat, a nightclub moored on the Nile that was known for its gay clientele.

Nearly half the men were convicted of the "habitual practice of debauchery", and Human Rights Watch reported that most were tortured while in detention. The men's names and faces were printed on newspaper front pages, so that even if they were acquitted they faced shame and prejudice when they returned home. The headlines referred to them as "sexual perverts" and "Satan worshippers".

Matthias Toebe/DPA/PA Images

Following the 2011 uprising a spirit of hope and liberation gripped the country's youth. Even during the short presidency of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi optimism prevailed. "Under the Muslim Brotherhood we had gay night clubs, we had [political satirist] Bassem Youssef, we had freedom of speech," says Tarek Nagy, founder of online activist group No H8 Egypt. "People were changing."

This period of growing openness was short-lived. The persecution of LGBT people intensified when Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power following a 2013 military coup. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a Cairo-based advocacy group, recorded 232 arrests of LGBT people between October 2013 and March 2017, more than in the previous 13 years combined. Detainees reported being beaten and raped in detention, both by police and other prisoners. Many were forced to submit to forensic anal examinations intended to ascertain whether they had engaged in homosexual sex. Such examinations have been widely discredited and compared to torture by Amnesty.

Alongside the clampdown on LGBT Egyptians, Sisi's rule has been characterised by a deteriorating quality of life and new threats to civil liberties in Egypt. Spontaneous protest has been banned, activists have been "disappeared" and human rights groups claim that there are as many as 60,000 political prisoners in the country's jails. In 2016 the government's decision to float the Egyptian pound led to the abrupt devaluation of the currency and rocketing prices for essential goods. Meanwhile, the country has suffered an increase in brutal terrorist attacks, particularly in Cairo and the Sinai peninsula. In a 2017 Gallup survey, Egypt was one of four countries, alongside Colombia, Russia and India, in which the public had rated their lives worse every year since 2014.

Despite this general dissatisfaction, Sisi did not face any real opposition in the presidential election on 26th March 2018 – his only registered opponent, Mousa Mostafa Mousa, was a little-known politician whose own political party had previously endorsed Sisi. Any candidates who posed a genuine threat to the regime were arrested or intimidated into standing down in the months leading up to the election: Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat dropped out of the race, citing intimidation of his supporters; former military chief of staff Sami

Anan was seized from his car and taken into military detention after announcing his plans to run; and former prime minister Ahmed Shafik abruptly renounced his candidacy after the Egyptian government threatened to investigate past corruption charges, his lawyer told *The New York Times*. On 2nd April it was announced that Sisi had won more than 97 percent of the vote on a 41 percent turnout.

Some suspect the crackdown on the LGBT community is part of a calculated move by Sisi to distract the public from the country's woes. "It's like a media bomb," says Mahmoud Ashraf, a law student from Cairo who came out to his family in 2015. "The media will obsessively talk about homosexuality and everyone forgets about the economic crisis and the disappearances."

But the obsessive media focus on Egypt's LGBT population can also be subverted to create a platform for activism. Two such cases went viral on Egyptian social media in summer 2017. Dalia Alfaghal's confessional posts showed how she struggled with her sexuality for years before travelling to the US and finding happiness in a relationship with a woman. Meanwhile Carla Masoud, who had grown up as a boy experiencing gender dysphoria in southern Egypt, moved to Germany and transitioned to become a woman. She is now happily married to a German man.

What was unusual about both cases was how defiantly the two narrated their stories on Facebook, despite receiving hundreds of hate-filled comments and death threats. Both found some messages of support and love from Egyptians among the unpleasant and aggressive posts. They continue to share their experiences online, although neither currently lives in Egypt.

**T**he long waterfront promenade that hugs the Nile in Cairo was once known as a prime nighttime gay cruising spot. Kareem Sabry sits there in the sun, feeding a pair of dust-coloured cats as boats pass by on the sluggish river. He used to come here regularly to meet men, but in the digital age it's an unnecessary risk. He recalls being brutally mugged and beaten by men he met while cruising. "I never do it any more," he says. The recent arrests have resulted in widespread paranoia. When we walk around the city, Sabry asks me to walk a few paces behind him, so passers-by don't



“ Egyptian singer Shyma was given a two-year sentence, based on her suggestive consumption of a banana ”

Bolhuis Press/ABACA/ABACA/PA Images

get the wrong idea. “Meeting guys online and in private feels much safer,” he says. Today with a few swipes of a smartphone, he can conjure up a grid of available men.

The arrival of gay dating apps hasn’t just helped Egyptians hook up. It has also fostered a sense of community. Law student Ashraf first spoke about his homosexual feelings to a foreign friend he made on a language-learning website. “I told him that I felt so alone,” he recalls, “I didn’t think there were any other gay people in Egypt at all.” The online friend, who also happened to be gay, encouraged him to download dating apps Grindr and Hornet. “I told him that I’d never find another gay guy on there in Cairo. But when I downloaded the apps I found that there were thousands of people. I was suddenly able to make friends who were like me. I felt that I was not so different. I was not some untouchable thing.”

For all the self-acceptance they can offer, gay dating apps also pose a new danger to LGBT Egyptians. Police are known to create false profiles and entice men to meet them in public. When the unsuspecting man arrives for his date, he is arrested on the spot. Nude photos sent via the application are sometimes used as evidence in court hearings. Isolated, lonely men can become easy prey for police entrapment. Human Rights Watch reports that police using fake profiles sometimes chat with men for months, slowly gaining their confidence before finally meeting and arresting them.

The technique is so common that when a user opens the Grindr app in Egypt, a message comes up warning of possible police entrapment and advising them to turn off location tracking.

On 2nd January 2018 it was reported that Ahmed Alaa and Sarah Hegazy, the best-known of the group detained for waving rainbow flags at the Mashrou’ Leila concert, had been freed on bail, three months after their arrest. Their cases continue in the Egyptian courts. Meanwhile on 14th January, ten more suspected LGBT people were arrested in Alexandria.



While the community is still reeling from the crackdown, No H8 Egypt’s Tarek Nagy sees the increased visibility of LGBT Egyptians as a step forward. “At least people are talking about it now,” he says. “Some will listen and open their hearts and minds. Others will not. But eventually, hopefully, Egyptians will accept that there are homosexuals among them and that they want to live in peace.”

Six months after the concert, I sit with Ismail on a litter-strewn beach near Alexandria, looking out over the glittering blue sea. He is wearing a silver hoop earring, an unconventional choice for an Egyptian man, and which some friends begged him to take out, frightened what people might think. Ismail refused. “I guess being myself makes me an activist,” he says. “I want to be true to who I am.”

He reflects on the moments after the concert. After he realised how narrowly he had avoided arrest, he deleted all photos and videos of the gig

on his phone. He didn’t want any evidence that could incriminate him. Then he took his rainbow flag to his bathroom and burned it. Finally, he flushed the ashes down the toilet. “Back then I was terrified,” he says. “But if the opportunity came now, I’d do it [raise the flag] again. I can make another flag. It’s just cloth, after all.”

*Names have been changed to protect interviewees.*

“Online I found that there were thousands of gay people in Cairo. I was not so different, not some untouchable thing”

## NOTES

### Egypt’s human rights crisis in numbers

**21**

Imprisoned journalists (as of May 2018)

Source: Association of Freedom of Thought and Expression

**98**

Blocked news websites (as of May 2018)

Source: Association of Freedom of Thought and Expression

**240+**

People arrested between April and September 2017 on charges relating to online posts the authorities considered “insulting” to the President

Source: Amnesty International

**800+**

People sentenced to death by criminal courts since July 2013

Source: Human Rights Watch

**1,500+**

“Enforced disappearances” from July 2013 to July 2017

Source: BBC

Grindr