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Egypt: Administrative Court bans human rights activities of prominent legal aid advocacy group

On 31 July 2017, the Egyptian administrative court endorsed the Social Affairs Ministry's decision to prohibit United Group's recognition as a civil society group for purportedly violating the *Law on Associations and non-governmental organizations (No. 84, 2002)*. The ruling effectively prohibits the legal firm from conducting awareness raising activities and workshops about the same Associations and non-governmental organizations law to civil society.

United Group is a law firm in Egypt that provides legal representation and consultations for civil society organizations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights defenders. The firm also engages in monitoring and documentation of human rights violations pertaining to freedom of expression and opinion. The firm has also conducted workshops as part of a project aiming to raise awareness among civil society organizations on the Law on Associations and NGOs.

[Negad El-Borai](#) is a lawyer, and the Senior Partner of United Group. He is a well-known figure in Egypt's human rights movement and has been active in promoting a draft anti-torture law. He has carried out workshops on good governance, given lectures on electoral processes and has authored several publications. The human rights defender was also a columnist for Al-Shorouk newspaper and has advocated for freedom of expression, assembly and association. Negad El-Borai resigned from Egypt's National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) in January 2014, protesting its politicised and inconsistent position on human rights abuses in Egypt.

On 31 July 2017, at an appeal hearing regarding the Social Affairs Ministry decision to deny NGO status to United Group, the Egyptian administrative court endorsed the previous ruling, effectively prohibiting the firm's awareness raising activities. The Court claimed that the firm contravened and violated the Law on Associations and non-governmental organizations (No. 84, 2002) by providing legal services in a manner that did not comply with regulatory mechanisms. The court decision cited in particular a project funded by Australian Aid conducting awareness raising activities and workshops on the Associations and non-governmental organizations law to civil society.

Law 84 of 2002 regulates the establishment and functioning of NGOs, and provides Egyptian authorities with various means to exercise political control over the work of NGOs, including restricting their access to foreign funding and their ability to join international associations. It also provides the government with wide powers of dissolution. A recent law replacing the Law on Associations and NGOs (No. 84, 2002) was approved by the Egyptian parliament in November 2016 and came into effect on 30 May 2017. This new NGO law, *Law 70 of 2017 on Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civil Work* places further restrictions on the work of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, including a prohibition of engaging with human rights work or work that may be said to "*disrupt public order.*" Moreover, under this law NGOs need to register themselves with the Ministry of Social Affairs and must work in compliance with state development plans. Additionally, NGOs require prior approval from the government to issue publications. The bill carries with it potential fines of over \$55,000 USD, as

well as up to five years imprisonment for failure to comply.

This is not the first time that Negad El-Borai has been targeted by Egyptian authorities in connection with his human rights activities. Front Line Defenders has previously reported on the ongoing [judicial harassment](#) of the human rights defender. On 26 January 2017, Egyptian authorities [banned](#) the human rights defender from travelling out of Cairo International Airport, preventing him from boarding his flight to Jordan, on the basis of his involvement in case no. 173. This case led to several travel bans and charges against more than 37 Egyptian rights organisations and their leaders and staff members, for, inter alia “*illegal receipt of foreign funding*” and “*working without legal permission*”. Prior to this, on 15 May 2016, Negad El Borai was [summoned](#) by an investigative judge for a fifth interrogation session related to an anti-torture bill he had drafted and submitted to the President.

Front Line Defenders condemns the ongoing judicial harassment of Negad El-Borai, and the legal ruling against United Group, as it believes that these actions were taken in order to restrict the organisation’s human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Egypt to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally quash the ruling against United Group, as Front Line Defenders believes that this action is in reprisal for the organisations’ legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Cease targeting all human rights defenders, including lawyers, in Egypt and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

