Hundreds of Egyptians arrested in latest wave of protests against Sisi

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Hundreds of Egyptians have been swept up in a campaign of arrests targeting protesters, as demonstrations against Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi’s rule continue.

The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), a Cairo-based NGO, reported on Sunday that at least 220 people had been arrested since protests began on Friday night. The organisation said it had set up an “emergency room” to deal with the spike in arrests, and that at least 100 more people were likely to have been detained after protests in Suez, Alexandria and Giza. Another NGO, the Egyptian Centre for Economic & Social Rights, [stated](https://www.facebook.com/ecesr/posts/2504761279567418) it had recorded at least 274 arrests since the demonstrations began.

“We’re continuing to get cases around the clock,” said Mohamed Lotfy of ECRF. “I think the riot police and the ministry of the interior didn’t expect this size of protests.” ECRF recorded arrests in at least 12 locations, including Cairo, Giza, Alexandria, Suez, and towns such as Dakahlia, Qalyubia and Kafr el-Sheikh.

On Friday protesters had taken to the streets across [Egypt](https://www.theguardian.com/world/egypt) for the first time in years, in defiance of a de facto six-year ban on demonstrations. Those who came out to call openly for an end to Sisi’s rule risked immediate arrest as well as the use of teargas, rubber bullets and live rounds.

“The Friday protest was such a shock to me because people were not able to voice any of their anger. So this was a sign of hope that people still have a voice, they’re not dead. I feel encouraged to protest next Friday, the same as many others,” said 32-year-old Hafsa, a teacher who protested in Cairo’s el-Matareya district on Friday.

“Now in Matareya, there’s a heavy police presence with riot police at the entrance to all main streets. There are also plainclothes policemen who search people at random. 24/7 there are mobile patrols roaming the streets to intimidate people,” she said.

Riot police and security forces surrounded Cairo’s Tahrir Square on Saturday evening, to prevent potential demonstrators accessing the symbolic site. But in the north-eastern city of Suez, [crowds of protesters chanted](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/22/protesters-and-police-clash-in-egypt-for-second-day-running?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR3f6xb0YE74ACW33bKmhAKW0ywz3BjiZlK7qTsPcgNLQXxm0Pp_bZ9hTTE) against the president before being broken up by a wave of teargas, live rounds and arrests.

Arrest data shows that protesters were either too young to fully partake in the 2011 uprising that overthrew [Hosni Mubarak](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/24/hosni-mubarak-returns-to-cairo-home-after-six-years-in-custody), or are part of an older generation less accustomed to demonstrations. “It’s the average Egyptian who has never protested in the past, perhaps they joined the millions in Tahrir when they were younger,” said Lotfy. “But if you look at the list, many are in their 20s. This feels like a new generation of protesters.”

Those documenting events were also targeted for arrest. A man named Mohamed Saied who filmed protests in Suez and posted footage to social media recorded an emotional message Saturday night. “The police are downstairs from my building, they’re coming to arrest me,” he says. “All I did was film.”

The number of arrests in Cairo on Saturday overwhelmed the capacity of all nearby police stations, with detainees being housed in a barracks meant for Egypt’s central security forces. From there, detainees are taken in groups for questioning by the police as well as Egypt’s national security agency, both known for their use of “systematic, widespread enforced disappearances and torture that most likely amount to crimes against humanity”, [according](https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/14/egypt-set-independent-torture-inquiry) to Human Rights Watch.

But there has been little official response to the protests. Egypt’s State Information Service released a statement targeting Cairo-based international journalists on Saturday evening, warning them to “abide by internationally recognised professional standards”, in covering the protests.

“Many world capitals witness daily incidents without anyone jumping to conclusions or exaggerations that are usually not even remotely close to the truth,” it said. The presidential spokesman Bassam Rady was not reachable when contacted by the Guardian.

The call for this weekend’s protests came from Mohamed Ali, a former military contractor and actor who released a string of videos accusing Sisi and the military of high-level corruption. His accusations were previously dismissed as “lies and slander”, by the Egyptian leader. Ali has since called for a “million-man” march this Friday.

Protests looked set to continue with Sisi on a trip to New York where he was due to give a [speech](http://sis.gov.eg/Story/141658/Sisi-delivers-Egypt%27s-speech-before-UNGA-74/?lang=en-us) on “preserving world peace and security as well as fighting terrorism” at the UN general assembly. His absence underlines a dilemma facing Egyptian security forces at home, who are under pressure to contain demonstrators without using excessive force.

“Protests are likely to continue if the government failed to devise an appropriate ‘political’ response. Confusion and inconsistency inflame protests rather than contain them,” said the political analyst Nael Shama. “Shrewd authoritarian leaders survive when they choose the right mix of repression and concession.”

“This movement is not run by high-ranking politicians or activists. It’s normal people protesting,” said Assem, a 35-year-old lawyer from Alexandria.

“Mohamed Ali is not a hero but he got people talking and getting angry. I will participate in whatever protests occur, but I will be careful because the level of police response last Friday was suspicious. Anything is possible, and who knows what might take place.”