

When Pride is a Death Sentence

By Marissa Ephron



P.C. Jane Arraf via NPR

“To my siblings—I tried to find redemption and failed, forgive me. To my friends—the experience [journey] was harsh and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me. To the world—you were cruel to a great extent, but I forgive.”

These were 30-year-old Sarah Hegazy’s final words, written before she took her own life on June 14.¹ Three years earlier, on September 22, 2017, Hegazy made one fatal move: waving a rainbow flag at a Mashrou’ Leila concert in Cairo, Egypt.^{2,3}

In Hegazy’s home country of Egypt, public displays of LGBTQIA+ pride constitute a dangerous act of resistance. The performance of Mashrou’ Leila—a Lebanese band with an openly gay lead singer, Hamed Sinno, and a history of LGBTQIA+ advocacy—was, then, dangerous in itself. However, Hegazy and several other concertgoers waving the pride flag created the perfect storm for the violent crackdown that would soon follow.²

“It was an act of support and solidarity—

not only with the [Mashrou’ Leila] vocalist but for everyone who is oppressed. We were proud to hold the flag. We wouldn’t have imagined the reaction of society and the Egyptian state. For them, I was a criminal—someone who was seeking to destroy the moral structure of society.”⁴

An outspoken gay and socialist activist, Hegazy received death threats after photographs of her holding the flag went viral on social media.^{5,6} The Egyptian state and conservative media were enraged by what they viewed as a brazen act of defiance.

In the few weeks following the concert, authorities intensified their anti-LGBTQIA+ campaign, arresting people on charges of “debauchery.”⁷ At least 75 people were arrested after the concert, some of whom were given sentences ranging from one to six years in prison.

Hegazy was arrested just days after the concert and transported to a detention center, where she was tortured with sensual deprivation

and electric shocks.⁶ From there, she was taken to a police station and charged with “joining a banned group aimed at interfering with the constitution” and “promoting sexual deviancy and debauchery.”^{3,4} Hegazy said authorities at the police station encouraged other detainees to sexually assault her.^{4,6}

After three months of solitary confinement in a women’s prison, Hegazy was finally released on bail.^{4,6} Shortly after her release, she reported suffering from hallucinations, severe PTSD, and depression.

“Prison killed me. It destroyed me.”⁴

Fired from her job and fearful for her safety, Hegazy fled to Canada, where she was later granted asylum.⁶ But although she physically escaped from Egypt, she was unable to escape the trauma of her experience there.

While in Canada, Hegazy detailed her thoughts and feelings in her writing. She discussed her panic attacks, nightmares, anxiety, and multiple suicide attempts. Life in exile was bleak and lonely. A month after she arrived in Canada, Hegazy’s mother died of cancer. She was unable to return to Egypt to grieve with her siblings, which only compounded her already debilitating pain.

“Home is not land and borders. It’s about people you love. Here in Canada, I haven’t people, I haven’t family, I haven’t friends. So I’m not happy here.”

Hegazy also hoped to go back to Egypt to continue fighting against discrimination, capitalism, and Western imperialism, and to help others being targeted for their political beliefs or sexual orientation.

“If I get the help and I can feel like I’m finally free from it, I’ll be able to not only help my brother and sister, but hundreds of people who I know need it.”⁷

She never got that chance.

Hegazy should not have been arrested, tortured, or imprisoned without due process of the law. In fact, Egypt’s actions at every step of the way were illegal under international law.^{8,9} Importantly, the United Nations has reaffirmed that international human rights law protects people from discrimination based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.¹⁰ Egypt’s own constitution also outlaws torture and physical and mental abuse of detainees.¹¹

Still, no one has been held accountable in the case of Hegazy and many others.³ The prevailing culture of repression and intolerance of LGBTQIA+ people that exists within Egypt and the majority of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

overpowers the force of international law.¹² In fact, most MENA countries criminalize LGBTQIA+ behavior.¹³

Even though homosexuality is not explicitly illegal in Egypt, authorities have executed an organized crusade against the LGBTQIA+ community since President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took power in 2013. Police have used dating apps and social media for monitoring and entrapment, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of Egyptians for consensual same-sex conduct.^{2,14} They are typically charged with “habitual debauchery” under a 1961 law intended to combat prostitution.¹⁴

In September 2017, Egypt’s Supreme Council for Media Regulation issued a statement prohibiting the promotion or dissemination of homosexual slogans, calling it a “sickness” and a “disgrace.”¹⁵ The state’s Forensic Medicine Authority also subjects people to forced anal examinations, which they believe can provide “evidence” for homosexual conduct.² Forced anal exams are considered torture and have been widely condemned. Egypt is one of the only countries in the MENA region that still uses this harmful practice.¹⁶

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In addition to the escalation of violence against Egypt’s LGBTQIA+ population from 2013 to 2017, arrests, trials of civilians in military courts, forced disappearances, and death sentences have also increased during this time.¹³ Regrettably, these circumstances have not improved; to this day, Egypt routinely subjects its people to these very same things. Anti-government protests are rare, as political dissidents are often arrested and detained.

Egypt is responsible for numerous human rights violations, but it is particularly hostile towards girls, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community.¹⁷ At least 17 LGBTQIA+ people have been arrested this year.⁶ As an openly gay woman who actively opposed the Egyptian government, Hegazy’s mere existence was a threat to the state.

“[In Egypt], every person who is not male, Muslim, Sunni, straight, and a supporter of the system, is rejected, repressed, stigmatized, arrested, exiled, or killed.”³

Hegazy’s story is infuriating and excruciating, but she was nowhere near the only one to suffer at the hands of Egyptian society. It is essential that we continue her work of resisting oppression and advocating for human rights. Only through this fight can we hope to prevent more tragedies like hers.