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Americans don't know how good we have it

By Doug Bandow

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“I could be arrested when I leave here,” said a journalist I met at the tony Marriott near Cairo’s Tahir Square. A student activist acting as an interpreter observed that he, too, could be detained at any time. A veteran human rights activist calmly stated, “Some of our groups will be closed. Some of us will be imprisoned. It is inevitable.”

Most foreigners travel to Egypt to play tourist. I visited with a human rights delegation. As a result, I came away with a very different picture than do most foreigners of this fascinating nation.

I was also reminded how lucky Americans — and, indeed, most Westerners — are. Forget American exceptionalism or manifest destiny.

Most important are the basic characteristics of a free society. [The rule of law](#). Civil liberties. Criminal procedures. Legal safeguards. Democratic processes. Obviously, even nations that purport to have all of these often fall short. However, few Americans, Europeans, or citizens of democratic Asian nations live in constant fear of arrest, imprisonment, and torture. Those in rule-oriented societies rarely see every authority figure as a threat.

In Egypt, the uncertainty began when I arrived. On both of my trips the government knew about me because my host organization had requested meetings on my delegation’s behalf. Both times I was pulled aside. The first time an entry guard took my passport and I waited for an hour before being waved on. The second time the delay was far shorter, with security officials formally welcoming me — after asking for my phone number and hotel destination.

Of course, the United States occasionally stops people from entering, but not typically because the visitors want to assess America’s human rights record. Most often, foreigners get blocked from visiting if officials believe they want to stay.

Even after leaving the arrivals area on my first trip, I had to wait again while the videographer joining us unsuccessfully tried to persuade officials to let him bring his camera into the country. The Egyptians said no. (He went on to rent a smaller one.) While there are places in the United States where you can’t film, no one’s going to stop you from having a camera of any sort.

Both visits were filled with interviews relating all sorts of harrowing stories. Most every society has injustice, and errors are sadly common in US jurisprudence. However, most Americans don't expect a visit to a friend to turn into a stint in prison.

In Egypt, for reasons of political repression and personal revenge, people face arbitrary arrest, perpetual detention, fraudulent trials, and horrific imprisonment. No doubt, some of the accounts we heard could be exaggerated or even false, but reports from people in many walks of life and across the political spectrum were consistent and demonstrated that the slightest resistance to state authority risks freedom and even life. Indeed, being in the wrong place at the wrong time can be equivalent to a death sentence.

Moreover, those with whom we met were vulnerable to arrest. Students told us about classmates arrested at demonstrations. Journalists discussed colleagues detained after criticizing the regime. Attorneys reported on lawyers detained while representing defendants. Family members described the arrest of husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. No one is exempt from persecution.

Nor is there any effective oversight or appeal to limit official abuse. If you were tortured or suffered from inhumane prison conditions, you can complain only to the public prosecutor. But that government office seems strangely uninterested in following up on allegations against government officials. Accountability obviously is less than perfect in the United States, but here, at least, there are alternative channels of protest: private lawsuits, media coverage, public demonstrations. That's one of the advantages of pluralistic societies. Authoritarian regimes rarely view themselves as bound by any rules.

While members of my delegation, largely Americans and Europeans, felt relatively secure, we knew other foreigners had been arrested for various offenses. At least in the United States no meeting other than one involving a criminal conspiracy could land a listener in jail.

In fact, on my second trip we found ourselves attacked by a pro-coup television talk show host (government critics long ago were driven off the air) and the head of a "human rights" council (sponsored by the regime) who cheerfully mixed fact and fantasy. No harm was done since I don't plan on running for office in Egypt, but the regime obviously has tools short of prison for use against foreign critics.

Evidence of extreme force is everywhere. Tanks next to prisons; armored personnel carriers in city squares and on city streets; concrete blast barriers, barbed wire, and armed sentries around sensitive government installations; portable fences piled high near potential protest points; and a ubiquitous mix of uniformed and plain clothes security personnel.

It is unsettling enough to be stopped by a policeman in the United States. After hearing stories of dubious arrests followed by months of detention, no one wants to end up anywhere near an Egyptian cop. After clearing passport control to leave on my second trip, I waited with a friend for a couple of other members of our group to emerge. While we were talking, a border agent came over and asked us for our passports. I assume we were targeted since we were conveniently

nearby. He gave our passports back after barely glancing at them. But I felt uneasy the entire time.

Egypt is a fascinating country with hospitable people. Although there was much to frustrate typical Westerners — for instance, we joked about being on “Egypt time” — the chaotic streets were a source of energy. The economic and social challenges facing Egypt would be enormous in the best of cases, but, tragically, the nation suffers under an unashamed military dictatorship. Consequently liberty is limited and frequently at risk.

Despite all of the problems faced by those in the West, even imperfectly free societies offer extraordinary advantages we should never forget and should work to protect. Walking the streets of Cairo, I thought: there but for the grace of God go I. With my US passport I can leave and return to a society that, despite enormous problems, generally respects people’s lives, liberty, and dignity.

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