

Mediterranean Review



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

In Focus	1
North Africa	2
Northeast Africa	4
Horn of Africa	6

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This document provides an overview of developments in the Mediterranean Basin and other regions of interest from 06–12 November, with hyperlinks to source material highlighted and underlined in the text. For more information on the topics below or other issues pertaining to the region, please contact the members of the Med Basin Team, or visit our website at www.cimicweb.org.



In Focus: The Impact of Islamist Politics on Women in Egypt By Trista Guertin

During the [2011 revolution](#) in Egypt that removed former President Hosni Mubarak from power, women were an integral part of the protests in Tahrir Square, demanding democracy alongside men. The successful toppling of the long-time dictator seemed to promise change; however, the hope that was once inspired during the [Arab Spring](#) has since led to fear and frustration. Under Mubarak, [women's rights](#) had actually progressed somewhat, especially since 2000 when a series of laws were passed in parliament providing women for the first time the ability to request a divorce without having to prove abuse and granting more favourable child custody rights to mothers.

However, almost immediately after the revolution, human rights groups became concerned that the increasingly [influential Islamist parties](#) were seeking to retract many of the rights obtained under the former regime in order to placate their ultraconservative supporters. Many of the ultraconservatives began arguing that women's rights laws passed under Mubarak, like all remnants of his regime, were illegal and [needed to be retracted](#). Following the 2011 elections, some of the activists' fears began to be realised: the now dissolved Islamist-dominated parliament passed legislation that impinged upon women's rights, including lowering the [age of marriage from eighteen to fourteen years](#), and restricting a woman's right to end an abusive marriage. There have also been increased calls for women to dress modestly in public places, and very few women have been included in [key political and leadership roles](#).

Currently, the new constitution is being drafted by the Constituent Assembly, a committee originally elected by parliament in [March 2012](#), before subsequently being dissolved and then re-established in

Continued on page 8



North Africa

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Algeria

Following a meeting with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on 08 November, UN special envoy for Sahel Romano Prodi stated that military intervention should be a [last resort](#) to solve the problem in Mali and every effort should be made to avoid it, reports *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*. Subsequently, West Africa's regional bloc ECOWAS decided on 11 November to [send 3,300 troops](#) to help the Malian government reclaim the northern region. Meanwhile, Ansar Dine, a radical Islamist group in northern Mali with ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), announced their willingness to hold open dialogue and end the violence. However, Kamal Rezzag Bara, terrorism and security advisor to President Bouteflika, said that “[t]he question in Mali is an [internal matter](#) and there is no need to further internationalise it”, adding that would only worsen the situation, reports *Associated Press (AP)*. According to Bara, international assistance should go towards helping Mali create a plan of its own to resolve the crisis. Bara's remarks reflect the continued Algerian discomfort regarding an international invasion of northern Mali.

The European Union (EU) and Algeria signed three agreements to provide Algeria with [EUR 58 million](#) (USD 73.7 million) in grants, informs *RTT News*. The grants will be used for reforms in the transportation, culture and youth employment sectors. The agreements were signed by Algeria's Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci and EU Foreign Policy chief Catherine Ashton during a ceremony in Algiers. Ashton emphasised the importance of the occasion by saying: “The three agreements we have just signed are also a manifestation of just how important this relationship is: it is so crucial to support young people seeking employment and we cannot underestimate the importance of protecting our cultural heritage, while supporting a transport strategy is crucial for developing the economy with the infrastructure it needs.” EUR 21.5 million (USD 27.3 million) of the grants will be used for “protecting and enhancing” the cultural heritage of Algeria.

Libya

International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, during her address to the United Nations Security Council on 07 November, urged Libya not to grant [amnesty for war crimes](#) committed in the country during the Arab Spring revolution, reports *Reuters*. Bensouda said “I encourage the new Libyan government, scheduled to be sworn in tomorrow, on 8 November, to ensure that there is no amnesty for international crimes and no impunity for crimes, regardless of who the perpetrator is and who is the victim”, in reference to a recently approved Libyan law which includes the phrase “acts made necessary by the 17 February revolution”. The law makes amnesty possible for revolutionary fighters who committed war crimes. Libyan Deputy UN Ambassador Ibrahim Dabbashi said that Libya is not “neglecting any case (based on) the identity of the accused,” but added that Libya will be focusing on the prosecuting the Gaddafi Regime. In related news, the last Prime Minister of the Moammar Gaddafi era, Al-Baghdadi al-Mahmudi, was brought to the Tripoli [criminal court](#) on 12 November on accusations of “committing prejudicial acts against the security of the state and financial crimes”, reports *AFP*. Mahmudi, the highest ranking Gaddafi era official to stand trial in Libya, argues that he is innocent. The court session was adjourned until 10 December at the requests of both the defence and prosecution.

Benghazi has been the focus of violence in recent months including the 11 September attack on the US Consulate. A car bomb [exploded](#) outside of a former regime officer's house on 07 November, reports *AFP*. Hussam al Raaid, who served in the internal security services during the Gaddafi regime, was wounded in the blast. A day before the car blast, a retired colonel was found shot to death on his farm in [Benghazi](#). Hours after that incident, a car exploded near a police station, igniting clashes between the police and the attackers.

The Zawiya oil refinery in Tripoli resumed [regular operations](#) on 07 November. A group of civil war veterans had blockaded the refinery for two days earlier in the week demanding government compensation and preventing employees from entering the refinery, informs *Reuters*. A company spokesperson said that employees now plan to hold protests to demand that the government provide better security measures for the refinery.

Source: [PBS](#)

Morocco

Only a few days after the Moroccan Ministry of Interior announced it had dismantled a terrorist cell, arresting nine of its members, authorities arrested eight more [suspected terrorists](#) from another cell, reports *Middle East Online*. The latest suspects are members of

the group Ansar al Sharia in the Islamic Maghreb, which was planning to “commit acts of sabotage against strategic sites”, according to the Interior Ministry. The group was also establishing contacts with other al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups and preparing to visit Islamist groups in the Sahel to garner financial support.

Morocco expelled fifteen Spanish and four Norwegian nationals from annexed Western Sahara on the basis that they were unauthorised [journalists](#) who had entered the country as tourists and planned to meet “separatist” elements in Western Sahara’s capital Laayoune. According to the ministry, they were planning to engage in demonstrations on the second anniversary of the deadly clashes in Gdeim Izek between the Moroccan police and some protesters. Spanish media sources reported that most of those expelled were activists rather than journalists. In a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the Polisario Front Mohamed Abdelaziz [denounced the expulsions](#) and urged the Secretary General to take necessary action to open Western Sahara to international observers, reports *Sahara Press Service*. He also demanded that the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) be given the capabilities to “credibly and transparently” conduct a referendum for independence and “protect, monitor and report about human rights” in the region.

Activists gathered in front of a Rabat courthouse on 09 November to [protest the trial](#) of a Guinean advocate for sub-Saharan migrants, reports *AP*. The demonstrators called the prosecution of Laye Camara, the founder of the Council of Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco, “part of a wider crackdown” on sub-Saharan migrants. Camara was arrested on 20 October for selling alcohol without a licence and smuggling cigarettes. His attorney, Lekbir Lmssegeum, said that “Camara signed a statement he couldn’t read because he does not read Arabic. He admits to having 20 packs of cigarettes and in the report, the police wrote 240 packs”. Forgery was added to Camara’s charges during the court session, along with claims that he falsified the documents for his residency. Abdessalam Belafhel, president of the Rabat chapter of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, said that Camara was preparing a report accusing security forces of using violence against migrants when he was arrested. Many sub-Saharan migrants arrive in Morocco every year with hopes of crossing to Europe, although many are killed during attempts to cross the Straits of Gibraltar. According to the Anti-Racist Group to Defend Foreigners and Migrants (GADEM), Morocco expels 14,000 migrants every year and the number of illegal sub-Saharan migrants living in the country is estimated between 10,000 and 25,000.

Tunisia

Hundreds of [Salafists demonstrated](#) outside the Ministry of Justice on 06 November, demanding the [release of those](#) arrested in recent months, informs *AFP*. The demonstrators claim about 900 Salafists have been incarcerated since last year’s uprising; however, the Ministry of Justice reports only 150-200 arrests have been made in connection with Islamist violence, primarily after the US Embassy attack. In related news, Nasr al-Din al-Alawi, a Salafi cleric and imam, called on Salafi youth to [declare jihad](#) against the ruling Ennahda party during a television interview, during which Minister of Interior Ali Larayed was also present, reports *al Bawaba*. Al Alawi brandished a white cloth representing a coffin, to show his willingness to sacrifice himself, and then asked the youth to do the same. Following the incident, political analyst Salah al-Din al-Jurshi emphasised that Ennahda’s attempts to gain support of Salafis have failed. On the same day, another Salafi Imam, Bilel Chaouachi, was [arrested](#) on charges of inciting violence, reports *Magharebia*. Ministry of Interior spokesman Khaled Tarrouche said Chaouachi is also suspected of involvement in the September 14 attacks on the embassy and the American school. Chaouachi, a member of the Ansar al Sharia, appeared on television the previous day, where he denounced politicians who reject Sharia law, and praised al Qaeda, its former leader Osama Bin Laden, and its current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, Tarrouche said the imam’s arrest was not related to his speech on television.

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Northeast Africa

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Egypt

Egypt expects to [finalise a loan](#) for USD 4.5 million with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by 15 November, reports *Ahram Online*. The government is developing an economic programme, upon which the loan will be subsequently approved by the IMF's board in Washington, DC. In related news, President Mohamed Morsi is currently making plans for his first official [visit to Washington](#) in order to secure a USD 450 million aid package from the US, in addition to meeting President Barack Obama for the first time, reports *Ahram Online*. Morsi is looking to strengthen American-Egyptian relations, and political and economic ties, which remains a priority for the Morsi administration as he continues to work to strengthen the economy. The funding package was promised to Egypt during the first quarter of 2011, in the aftermath of the revolution. However, in an interview with *Al Arabiya*, Egypt's [former Minister of Finance](#) Samir Radwan issued a warning that economic conditions in the country could worsen if more steps are not immediately taken to strengthen the economy. Radwan also stated that currently there is zero foreign investment in the country and the deficit is much higher than originally anticipated. He also warned that the Egyptian public has not received sufficient information regarding the domestic economic situation.

Over 10,000 protesters gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square on 09 November calling for the [new constitution](#) to be based on Sharia law, reports *Haaretz*. The Constituent Assembly expects to put the final draft before the public in a referendum by the end of the year; however, liberal members have threatened to walk out of the assembly due to the controversy concerning the reference to Sharia, while ultraconservatives throughout the country are becoming more vocal about its inclusion. Meanwhile, the Coptic Church's new pope Tawadros II stated that an explicitly religious constitution will not be acceptable.

Egyptian women have complained about the lax response by authorities concerning their [complaints of harassment](#) for years; however, so called vigilantes have taken to the streets of Cairo to provide retribution for or prevent harassment of women, reports the *New York Times*. Some groups of men and women have taken upon themselves to patrol the streets, in an attempt to deter or stop harassers, grabbing them and spray painting their backs with the words "I'm a harasser." Women claim that harassment, which was carried out with impunity during the regime of former President Hosni Mubarak, increased following the 2011 revolution without regard by the new government and in fact, even the military carried out assaults on female protestors. Attacks reportedly increase during the public holiday celebrations; during the recent *Eid al-Adha* holiday, 1,000 complaints were filed with the police.

Egyptian police have arrested five people for operating what they believe to be an extensive [infant trafficking](#) ring in Cairo, reports *BBC*. Police report that staff at a Cairo hospital sold 300 "unwanted" babies to childless couples for approximately USD 570 over the past three years. The mothers had come too late for an abortion and were instead given a caesarean section and then the babies were sold. Abortion is illegal in the country, unless the mother's life is in jeopardy, and adoption laws are restrictive.

South Sudan

South Sudan agreed to withdraw its armed forces from the recently established [demilitarised zone](#) along the border with Sudan, reports *Sudan Tribune*. Military delegations from the two countries are holding a series of meetings in Juba to discuss the implementation of security arrangements agreed upon in September. In other security-related news, although there has been a decline in militia activity in South Sudan since many militia members have been integrated into the South Sudanese army (SPLA), the return of [militia leader](#) David Yau Yau to Jonglei state poses a threat to the stability of South Sudan, reports the *Small Arms Survey (SAS)*. Cattle-raiding, the need for community self-defence measures, and the political and tribal fractures within the government and military are "all internal factors that create a conducive environment for militias" in the country. Fighting between Yau Yau's forces and the SPLA has resulted in significant SPLA losses.

South Sudan [expelled](#) a UN human rights investigator, accusing her of writing "unjustified" reports, according to *al Jazeera*. A government spokesman did not provide examples of reports the government finds untrue, nor would he say if the expulsion was linked to her August report accusing the army of torturing, raping, killing and abducting civilians in Jonglei state. The UN has stated that expelling the investigator is in violation of the country's legal obligations under the UN charter. In other humanitarian news, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) began [airlifting](#) 1,370 extremely vulnerable South Sudanese from Khartoum to Aweil in Northern Bahr El Ghazal state. The operation will comprise two charter flights a day over the next two weeks with the support of the governments of Sudan and South Sudan.

Sudan

Sudanese rebels (SPLM-N) claimed they shelled the military's headquarters in the South Kordofan capital of Kadugli on 05 November in response to air strikes and [ground attacks](#) by government forces, reports *Reuters*. Witnesses reported shells falling in the city,

but the Sudanese military has yet to confirm the attacks. *Agence France-Presse (AFP)* reports that the SPLM-N claimed that on 07 November they shot down an air force [Antonov bomber](#), the second to be shot down since fighting began in June 2011. The government has not confirmed the incident and journalists are unable to access the restricted area. Rebels report an upsurge in government bombings and fighting since Sudan and South Sudan agreed on a demilitarised border zone, designed to cut South Sudanese support for insurgency operations in the Sudanese border-states. SPLM-N spokesman Arnun Ngutulu Lodi stated that before the Antonov was hit, it had bombed the rebel-held town of Kauda, as well as the Heiban and Habillia areas.

An international plan developed by the UN, African Union (AU) and Arab League in February to deliver aid to populations affected by war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states recently [expired](#) because an agreed-upon ceasefire was not implemented between the government and rebels, reports *AFP*. The government, with support from the international community, has provided assistance to areas under its control; however, it has cited security concerns for restricting the operations of foreign aid agencies in rebel-held areas. A Sudanese top aid official stated that there was not a humanitarian crisis in the rebel-held areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile states but rather there is a “humanitarian need” that is at the “natural level” with regard to health and drinking water. The UN has reported that there are serious food shortages and a lack of adequate health care in rebel-held areas. More than 900,000 people are estimated to have been displaced or severely affected by the fighting in the two states, with more than 240,000 seeking refuge in South Sudan and Ethiopia.



Source: [BBC](#)

Human Rights Watch urged the government of Sudan to investigate the 02 November attack on the North Darfur village of Sigili that [killed thirteen](#) civilians, including two infants. The government has yet to investigate the incident although it is obligated to do so under domestic and international law. Members of the Popular Defense Forces, an irregular militia allied with the Sudanese government, blocked African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) peacekeepers from visiting the area until 06 November, at which point the peacekeepers discovered [burned homes](#), dead animals and ammunition littering the ground. Rebels from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the region’s most militarily powerful rebel group, in cooperation with the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi rebel group, claimed to have successfully attacked a large [government convoy](#), capturing a tank and other military vehicles in North Darfur on 10 November, reports *Reuters*. Though UNAMID is the world’s largest peacekeeping mission, fighting between rebels and government forces has continued, alongside banditry and tribal clashes. Also in Darfur, [yellow fever](#) has reached epidemic levels, with the disease causing 79 deaths and a total of 329 suspected cases as of 11 November, reports the World Health Organization (WHO). Yellow Fever vaccination plans have been finalised and will cover approximately 3.6 million people.

Official figures showed that Sudan’s annual [inflation rate](#) rose from 41.6 per cent in September to 45.3 per cent in October mostly due to increases in food prices over the past year, reports *Reuters*. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects Sudan’s economic situation to remain “difficult” during the next eighteen months, with the chance that tensions along the border with South Sudan could lead to an increase in military spending thereby putting pressure on the budget. The IMF further predicts that inflation in the country will likely decrease to seventeen per cent by 2013 if Sudan continues to implement reforms aimed at restoring macroeconomic stability and reducing the economy’s dependence on oil exportation.

Humanitarian Issues along Sudan and South Sudan Border

UNHCR is taking pre-emptive measures, focusing on key areas such as shelter, health care, food rations and non-food items, to prepare for a likely [accelerated influx](#) of refugees traveling from Sudan into South Sudan. During the last week of October, UNHCR registered 72 new arrivals in one camp, the highest weekly arrival since the rainy season began in May. Between now and the end of the year, up to 30,000 new arrivals are expected as previously flooded travel routes become passable with the start of the dry season in mid-November. Refugees will also increase if food shortages continue and fighting between Sudanese forces and the SPLM-N escalates. Within the refugee camps, UNHCR has warned that humanitarian agencies’ capacity to contain an outbreak of [hepatitis E](#) among the refugee population is “increasingly stretched” as funding continues to be limited. There have been 1,050 cases of the disease in the camps, with 26 deaths as of 08 November. Risk of infection is high in densely populated settings such as refugee camps, and is contracted and spread through consumption of contaminated food and water.

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Horn of Africa

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Ethiopia

Ethiopia is planning to [sell government assets to private investors](#) in order to raise additional cash, reports *Bloomberg*. The government has invited bids for six state-run companies, including the Arbagugu Coffee Plantation, in the hopes of generating approximately USD 55.1 million in revenue. The funds will help finance a five-year development plan, including investment in housing, energy and transportation. Interested investors will have until 20 December to submit a bid. Ethiopia currently has a mixed economy whereby state-owned companies control key industries such as telecommunications, banking and power, while allowing private investment in manufacturing and agriculture.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) alleges that the Ethiopian government is repressing its country's [Muslim minority](#), which could subsequently destabilise the entire Horn of Africa region, reports *Reuters*. Approximately one-third of the country's population is Muslim, while the rest of the country is predominately Christian. The Muslim community alleges the government is interfering in the affairs of the Ethiopia Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) and, as a result, has been holding regular protests in the capital Addis Ababa during the past year. The USCIRF reports that the government has continued to arrest peaceful protestors, 29 of whom were charged in October with "planning to commit terrorist acts". USCIRF Addis Ababa chairwoman Katrina Lantos Swett warned that the "USCIRF has found that repressing religious communities in the name of countering extremism leads to more extremism, greater instability, and possibly violence". She added, "Given Ethiopia's strategic importance in the Horn of Africa ... it is vital that the Ethiopian government end its religious freedom abuses and allow Muslims to practice peacefully their faith as they see fit. Otherwise the government's current policies and practices will lead to greater destabilization of an already volatile region".

Following a meeting in Addis Ababa, government representatives from Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan announced they had reached an agreement on [Nile Basin cooperation](#), reports the *Sudan Tribune*. The agreement will include sustainable management, use and development of the Nile River. Representatives also said the agreement indicates that the water resources should no longer be the source of conflict but a source of regional cooperation and mutual benefit. South Sudanese representatives also attended the meeting and the other members plan to approve South Sudan joining the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office.

Kenya

At least [42 police officers](#) were killed in northern Kenya, reports *BBC*. The officers were ambushed close to the town of Baragoi in Samburu County where they had been sent to retrieve stolen cattle. Local authorities reported that the attackers had used anti-personnel bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. The area is home to the Samburu and Turkana tribes which live in separate villages and regularly clash over grazing and water rights, as well as steal each other's cattle.

The Kenyan government announced plans on 05 November to [legalise the charcoal trade](#) to counter current illegal charcoal burning practices, informs *Capital FM*. The burning of charcoal is attributed to the destruction of much of the country's forests; however, by allowing privatisation of the industry, profits could be invested into reforestation programmes. Approximately eighty per cent of the country's residents use charcoal for their energy needs.

Source: [BBC](#)

Somalia

The United Nations Security Council extended the mandate of the [African Union Mission in Somalia](#) (AMISOM) for four months, reports *Reuters*. The Security Council has yet to make a decision on lifting the current arms embargo and a request from Somalia to allow the export of charcoal. The African Union (AU) has requested a reversal of the arms embargo, which was imposed on Somalia in 1992, in order to allow the country to rebuild its military and further battle al Shabaab. The restriction on charcoal was imposed earlier this year in an effort to restrict al Shabaab's funding. AMISOM currently has 17,600 peacekeepers, including soldiers from [Uganda](#), which recently announced its intention to remove its peacekeeping troops, after accusations were made public in a leaked UN report that the country is supporting M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Uganda had denied the claims but remains adamant that they will no longer support UN peacekeeping missions. Ugandan soldiers account for more than a third of the AMISOM peacekeepers battling al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab militants in Somalia. Analysts are concerned that the exit of Ugandan peacekeepers in Somalia could jeopardise the recent gains made in the country against al Shabaab, which have allowed for substantial improvements in the political and security situation within the country. The battle against al Shabaab continues, as the Puntland

President Abdirahman Mohamed Farole reports that the militants are now moving into the [northern region of Puntland](#), the Somali autonomous state, informs *Reuters*. The militants have moved north after advances made by AMISOM in the centre and south of the country. The President says their numbers are still limited but estimates there to be around 400 militants in the area. The mountainous terrains make it an ideal location for the militants to hideout and regroup; analysts fear that the group could still effectively carry out ambushes and suicide attacks despite the recent loss of territory.

The European Union's (EU) special envoy to Somalia Michele Cervone d'Urso visited Puntland and met with President Farole after the EU announced its largest ever [aid package](#) for the country for 2013, reports *Garowe Online*. The EU announced USD 202.7 million, which the new government plans to use to build the capacity of the judiciary, the rule of law and education. In addition, a portion of the funding will be directed towards improving food security conditions in Puntland.

A large car bomb exploded in front of Somalia's [federal parliament](#) buildings in Mogadishu on 07 November killing one police officer, reports *Garowe Online*. The car, packed with explosives, went off as members of parliament (MPs) were leaving the building to pray at a nearby mosque. None of the MPs were injured. AMISOM forces, in conjunction with Somali security forces were both tasked with security of Parliament, but it was breached despite the tight security. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

The leader of al Qaeda, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), released an audio message which was posted on several jihadist websites encouraging Muslims to back al Shabaab militants, informs *Africa Review*. There were also reports that al Shabaab had also posted several messages indicating its intent to increase attacks in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. While the militant group once controlled almost eighty per cent of south and central Somalia, the militants have been uprooted from their former strongholds, and are now operating within more rural areas of the country.

Somalia's new Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon Said submitted his [proposed cabinet](#) of ten ministers, reports *AFP*. Two female ministers are named in the proposal, including the country's first female Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fowsiyo Yusuf Haji Adan. The new cabinet must now gain approval of the Somali parliament. However, on 08 November, thirty MPs stated they [did not approve](#) of the new cabinet, which they believe contains too few people, reports *Garowe Online*.

Members of the [Somali media](#) met with President H.E. Hassan Sheik Mohamoud on 09 November to discuss the need for a free and fair press within the country, as well as the recent numerous murders of members of the media, reports *Raxanreeb*. During the meeting, the President announced the creation of a task force to investigate the murders and stated that "The era of impunity must stop immediately. We are determined to find the perpetrators of these crimes against our brave journalists. The Somali Government recognises the central role the media must play in ensuring transparency for the Somali people. Freedom of expression is a right enshrined in our constitution and we are determined to uphold and defend that right in the face of these heinous attacks." Somalia is now considered one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists with eighteen media workers murdered in the past ten months; to date no one has been prosecuted for any of the murders.

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Continued from page 1

June. The process has been challenged since the beginning: [the composition of the Constituent Assembly](#) has been criticised for having a heavily Islamic leaning membership. Furthermore, [only seven women](#) were selected to participate in the second 100-member assembly. There were several calls for the assembly to be [boycotted by liberals and minorities](#) because of the dominance in the assembly of representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood's political party. Moreover, at least twenty [liberal members](#) walked out of the assembly in March 2012, complaining that the Muslim Brotherhood's party, along with the ultraconservative Nour Party, resulted in an Islamist-dominated assembly they say does not adequately represent minority groups and political ideologies.

While the drafting of the new constitution should be an opportunity to [ensure the protection](#) and expansion of women's rights, in Egypt, this has not necessarily been the case and women's rights have been intensely debated. Azza Kamel, a prominent women's rights activist, feels that the Muslim male-dominated assembly is in a position to [enshrine discriminatory limitations](#) on women in the new constitution. However, not only are women almost entirely excluded from the constitution writing process, the assembly is stacked with Islamist figures who activists claim are attempting to impose their conservative religious values on all Egyptian society.

One of the issues has been a clause pertaining to gender equality. While a clause contained in the [previous constitution](#), ratified in 1971, was also deemed to limit the rights of women, lawyers and activists remain concerned that given the conservative Islamic tone of the current government, the new constitution could allow for further impingement on women's rights. Tahani al-Gebali, judge and vice president of the Supreme Constitutional Court stated, "Although this article has existed relatively unmodified since former President Anwar Sadat's 1971 Constitution, the recent Islamist takeover — especially in the constitutional committee — has [renewed fears](#) because they are not likely to favour women's rights".

Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a statement urging the Constituent Assembly to revise the draft constitution to make it [consistent with international law](#) and to ensure full respect for human rights, and ensure protection of the rights of women. While HRW agreed that the draft maintains many critical civil, political, social and economic rights, there are articles that are inconsistent with international humanitarian law and could pose a threat to human rights in Egypt. In particular, article 68 (formerly article 36), which states that equality between men and women, will be ensured as long as it does not contradict "the rulings of Islamic Sharia", and further states that a woman should "reconcile between her duties toward the family and her work in society".

Activists in the country have called the status of women in the current draft "[disappointing and shocking](#)", with Sharia law as the reference leaving women subject to the interpretation of Sharia by the politicians. Activists further warn there are many interpretations of the Islamic law that have been used against women, including battering women to "correct their behaviour". The director of the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR), Nehad Abu Komsan, makes clear that Sharia has been used to [reinforce negative social attitudes](#) towards women and limits freedom when women's rights are tied to vague provisions of Islamic law, subsequently allowing for radical and ultraconservative interpretations. "Sharia can be interpreted in many different ways," says Abu Komsan, "Saudi Arabia considers Sharia as a reference (in its constitution) and prohibits women from driving a car, while Pakistan considers it a reference and had a woman leading the country". Further criticism of the draft constitution is its omission of rights concerning [women's education, the workforce and the family](#). Komsan further stated, "As long as the law does not provide for the services that allow a woman to be economically independent, she will not be able, in practice, to have all those rights the constitution claims she has".

Mona Eltahawy, a prominent journalist and blogger, remains optimistic that women will eventually be [better off after the revolution](#). "If you [looked] at the parliament in Egypt and see that seventy per cent of it is Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi you can make the argument that we now have people in politics who do not believe in women's rights. But what it's done is put us on notice that we have to fight because sometimes you need that sharpened awareness of what you are butting heads against". As the [12 December deadline](#) for a final draft by the Constituent Assembly and the subsequent public referendum draws nearer, the panel met on 06 November to address some of the disputed articles, including Article 68. The assembly allegedly agreed to remove [Article 68](#), concerning gender equality and women's rights, which included that marriage and inheritance should be decided according to Sharia law. The ultraconservative factions within Egypt, such as [the Salafis](#), are mobilising to promote the segregation between men and women and are pushing hard to ensure Sharia law is [the basis of the constitution](#). Vivian Fouad, chancellor in the National Population Council, stressed the importance of a legal framework to ensure gender equality: "Women cannot depend on a president to [protect their rights](#). It should be established in a constitution".

