

## Egypt sentences 529 to death over police attack

By MAGGIE MICHAEL, Associated Press  
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CAIRO (AP) — An Egyptian court sentenced to death on Monday 529 people accused of an attack on a police station that left one policeman dead, in a mass trial that lasted only two sessions and raised an outcry from rights activists.

The verdicts against the men, said to be supporters of ousted President Mohammed Morsi, are subject to appeal and would likely be overturned, rights lawyers said.

But they said the swiftness and harshness of the rulings on such a large scale deepened concerns that Egypt's courts have been deeply politicized and that due process is being swept away amid the crackdown on Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood that followed his July overthrow.

Amnesty International said it was the largest single batch of simultaneous death sentences they had seen in recent years anywhere in the world.

In response, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the country's judiciary is "entirely independent and is not influenced in any way by the executive branch of government."

Egyptian authorities are holding a series of mass trials of alleged Morsi supporters, with anywhere from dozens to hundreds of defendants at a time. Monday's verdicts by a court in the city of Minya, south of Cairo, were the first such mass trial to issue death sentences.

The court held two sessions. In the first on Saturday, the judge angrily shouted down requests by defense lawyers for more time to review the prosecution's case for the hundreds of defendants. In Monday's session, security forces barred defense lawyers from entering the courtroom on orders from the judge, the provincial police chief said.

"We didn't have the chance to say a word or to look at more than 3,000 pages of investigation to see what evidence they are talking about," Khaled el-Koumi, a lawyer representing 10 of the defendants, told The Associated Press.

All but around 150 of the defendants in the case were tried in absentia. The judges acquitted 16 defendants.

A senior official involved in courtroom security said that 154 defendants were brought in to the court on Monday. He said that the minute the judge announced the verdict, defendants in the cage screamed "You butcher" to the judge. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

The 545 defendants in the case were charged with murder, attempted murder, joining an outlaw group aiming at toppling down the regime and stealing government weapons in connection with an attack on a police station in August in the town of Matay in Minya province. One police officer was killed in the attack. The violence was part of rioting around the country, sparked when security forces stormed two pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo, killing over 600 people, on Aug. 14.

After the verdict was announced, families of the defendants protested outside the court building in Minya, shouting "Down with military rule." Police arrested three people from the protest. Fears of a backlash by Morsi supporters prompted security officials to go on alert around Minya province.

Mohammed Zarie, a Cairo-based human rights lawyer who was not involved in the case, said the verdicts reflect how Egypt's judiciary is turning "from a tool for achieving justice to an instrument for taking revenge."

The judge appears to have made his decision to issue a swift verdict after tumult at the start of the session by from defense lawyers and the more than 100 accused held in the cage, according to descriptions of the session by lawyers and court officials.

During the first session on Saturday, defense lawyers asked the presiding judge, Said Youssef, to postpone the case to give them time to review the hundreds of documents in the case, but the request was declined, el-Koumi said. When the lawyers protested, Youssef shouted that they would not dictate what he should do and ordered court security to step in between him and the lawyers.

A security official in the courtroom said the defendants and the lawyers disrupted the proceedings by chanting against the judge. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

"The judge stood up, looked at us, put his hands on his belly and announced: Monday is the verdict," another defense lawyer, Yasser Zidan said.

On Monday, police and special forces beefed up security around the court ahead of the session, encircling the building and blocked its doors with a bench to prevent lawyers from entering, said Zidan, who was among the lawyers turned away.

Minya's provincial police chief Osama Metwali told AP that the judge ordered the measures because of "disruptions" during the previous session.

Among those tried in absentia were a 21-year-old Sayyaf Gamal and his father Gamal Mohammed, both members of the Muslim Brotherhood group and are now on the run. They told The Associated Press over the phone from their undisclosed location that the verdict aims at driving the group to become violent to justify an even heavier crackdown.

"They want to explode the situation and force people to carry arms," said Gamal, the son. "They want to turn (Egypt) to another Algeria or Syria but we will not this happen," the father said, referring to the civil wars of those two countries.

The two were arrested on Aug. 24 and released on bail on Dec. 11. The son said he was in Cairo during the alleged attack. The father said he witnessed the incident, in which protesters angry at the breakup of the camps in Cairo gathered around the police station. He said a number were killed and wounded in clashes.

He said that the deputy head of Matay police station, Mustafa al-Attar, was injured in the head and taken to hospital, where he died.

Egyptian private TV stations showed video purportedly of al-Attar being given medical treatment, surrounded by angry protesters. Some try to push their way through to him while other men hold them back. Some scream, "He is dying anyway." Later, a doctor at the hospital was arrested over accusations of involvement in killing of al-Attar, security officials said.

A senior Brotherhood figure, Ibrahim Moneir, denounced the verdicts, warning that abuses of justice will fuel a backlash against the military-backed government that replaced Morsi.

"Now the coup is hanging itself by these void measures," he said, speaking to the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera Mubashir Misr TV station.

On Tuesday, another mass trial against Morsi's supporters opens in a Minya court with 683 suspects facing similar charges. The defendants in that case include Brotherhood leader Mohammed Badie, who also faces multiple other trials, and senior members of the group from Minya province.

Egypt's military toppled Morsi in July after four days of massive demonstrations by his opponents demanding he step down for abusing power during his year in office. Since then, Morsi's Brotherhood and other Islamist supporters have staged near-daily demonstrations that usually descend into violent street confrontations with security forces.

The military-backed government has arrested some 16,000 people in the ensuing crackdown, including most of the Brotherhood leadership.

At the same time, militant bombings, suicide attacks and other assaults — mostly by an al-Qaida-inspired group — have increased, targeting police and military forces in retaliation for the crackdown. The authorities have blamed the Brotherhood for the violence, branding it a terrorist organization and confiscating its assets. The group has denied any links to the attacks and has denounced the violence.

With authorities casting the arrests of Brotherhood supporters as part of a fight against terrorism, however, some in the public strongly back the crackdown.

Amin Fatouh, a Cairo resident, praised Monday's death sentences. "Those who kill deserve death just as the Quran says," he told the AP. "These people have committed murder and they must be killed in return."

But the sweeping verdict also worried even some opponents of the Brotherhood. Beshoy Zakariya, a Christian resident of Cairo, said, "The number (of defendants) is very big, and for sure the verdict is not fair. Some might deserve the verdict and some not."

Rights groups denounced the verdict.

Human Rights Watch Executive Director for the Middle East Sarah Leah Whitson said the verdicts are the end result of a judicial process that gave defendants no access to their basic rights.

Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui meanwhile said it was "the largest single

batch of simultaneous death sentences we've seen in recent years, not just in Egypt but anywhere in the world."

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