

Egypt was a common destination for torture of detainees sent by U.S.

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Law professor says Egypt was a common destination for torture of detainees sent by U.S.

Amanda Bronstad of the National Law Journal interviews professor Marjorie Cohn.

*On Feb. 11, outgoing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned, leaving the country's government under military rule and its hopes for democracy uncertain. Also unclear is whether the country's history of human rights abuses and torture will continue in Egypt, according to Marjorie Cohn, editor and co-author of *The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration, and Abuse*. The book, published last month, is a collection of essays on torture in various countries, including Egypt.*

Cohn, who is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and past president of the National Lawyers Guild, talked to The National Law Journal about her new book's relevance in light of the recent events in Egypt. This Q&A has been edited for length and clarity.

NLJ: Why did you decide to publish this book?

MC: I had been researching and writing and speaking about the policy of torture and abuse that came to light during the Bush administration. So I collected a number of people from different disciplines to write chapters that would shed light on different aspects of this problem of torture and the U.S. involvement in it. Unfortunately, people don't get the full picture from the mass media about what the United States is doing — the policy of cruel treatment set during the Bush administration and the history of U.S. involvement in torture, which goes way back. The CIA wrote a torture manual. The School of the Americas in the United States trained many dictators from Latin America and military leaders in the art of torture, and the CIA pursued a program of research on psychological torture. It didn't start with the Bush administration. It was a continuation of a long policy in this country of not just engaging in torture ourselves but also supporting, training and financing repressive governments that torture and abuse their people.

NLJ: Your book talks about Egypt as an example of where this policy took place. What does it say?

MC: Egypt is discussed throughout the book, especially in Jane Mayer's chapter, a writer for The New Yorker. She talks about Egypt as being the most common destination for suspects that are sent by the U.S. for interrogation and ultimately torture. It's called "extraordinary rendition." And she describes the rendering of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi to Egypt, where he was tortured and made false confessions cited by Colin Powell when he appeared in the U.N. Security Council seeking approval for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The CIA knew it was a false

confession, and he later recanted his confession.

NLJ: What's the "extraordinary rendition" program?

MC: Extraordinary rendition is a program where, for example, the CIA sends detainees to other countries where they are then interrogated and in many cases tortured. It's called torture by proxy, sometimes, or outsourcing torture. Now, sometimes CIA agents actually come with them, and they're in the interrogation room. Most of the time, they're outside the interrogation room so that after the detainee is tortured, the CIA can come in and ask them questions.

NLJ: How would you describe the torture methods that were used in Egypt during the time of President Mubarak's reign?

MC: I can quote from the State Department's 2002 report on Egypt, where it notes detainees were stripped and blindfolded, suspended from a ceiling or door frame with just their feet touching the floor, beaten with fists, metal rods, doused with hot or cold water, flogged on the back, burned with cigarettes, subjected to electric shock, forced to strip and threatened with rape, by the Egyptian secret police. And in 2005, the U.N.'s Committee Against Torture found that Egypt resorted to consistent and widespread use of torture, and the risk of such treatment was particularly high in the case of detainees held for political and security reasons. The United States sends Egypt \$1.5 billion per year, most of which goes to the military. And yet all along the United States has known about these egregious human rights violations by the Egyptian government. We funded the whole government and the police who were committing the acts. Omar Suleiman, the vice president, was the linchpin for Egyptian torture when the CIA sent prisoners to Egypt in its extraordinary rendition program. And he actually committed some of the worst torture himself. He oversaw the torture by the secret police, and yet he's a very close friend of the U.S. government, including the Obama administration.

NLJ: What are your overall thoughts on what has happened in Egypt in the past few weeks?

MC: I think it's been an incredible revolution by the people of Egypt to throw off the yoke of tyranny they've suffered for the past 30 years with Mubarak. Since 2006, there has been a wave of strikes by workers against low wages and horrendous working conditions, and the economic and social conditions in Egypt have been horrendous for a long period of time. But it's still striking to see millions of people in the streets coming together, from all walks of life, to demand President Mubarak step down.

NLJ: What effect does the overthrow of Mubarak have on human rights abuses in Egypt going forward?

MC: This was in effect a military coup motivated by the popular protest by people in the streets. The military's now in charge. They have disbanded Parliament and the Constitution, but they have not lifted the state of emergency, and the state of emergency, which has been in effect for 30 years, has been the excuse for secret police to arrest people without any charges, detain them and torture them. Most of the torture is committed by the secret police. But The Guardian reported that the Egyptian military, since the protests started, secretly detained hundreds and possibly thousands of suspected government opponents since mass protests began, and at least some of these have been tortured. Keep in mind the military has been the backbone for this oppressive regime for 30 years, and they've been a

central pillar of this police state.

NLJ: What needs to happen to stop human rights violations there?

MC: The state of emergency has to be lifted, thousands of political prisoners have to be released, all use of torture has to be outlawed and Egyptians need to see the formation of a new democratic Constitution that guarantees human rights and free and fair elections as soon as possible.

NLJ: What's your opinion about the U.S. response to the upheaval in Egypt?

MC: The officials in the U.S. government have held their fingers up to the wind to see which way it's blowing, and that's the way they went. When they weren't sure Mubarak was gone, they were not calling for his ouster. But when it became clear that Mubarak was gone, they immediately did an about-face, and President Obama went on television and celebrated the great victory of the Egyptian people. I didn't hear anything from the president about making sure that torture didn't proceed, that people who were being arbitrarily held were released. And the U.S. is continuing to fund the government there, which is really a military government. It is the vast amount of money the U.S. government has sent to Egypt all these years that has enabled Mubarak to rule with a fist of terror. And the U.S. government continues to support other vicious dictators around the world, including several in the Middle East.

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