

Excerpt from Scott Long's 'Cairo, and our comprador gay movements'
By Scott Long

Full article: <https://paper-bird.net/2016/06/22/cairo-comprador-gay-movements/>

Let me describe what has been happening in Egypt for the last five years.

In 2011 — you know this — there was a revolution and Mubarak was overthrown. The military took power, in the form of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. In 2011-2012, it held first parliamentary and then presidential elections, which were multiparty, competitive, and generally free. And both were won by the Muslim Brotherhood.

For a year, then, from mid-2012 till July 2013, Egypt had a conservative government, but a democratically elected one: the only democratically elected government in Egypt's history. In fact, the one year of Mohammed Morsi's presidency was probably, in certain senses, the freest in Egypt's modern history. The relative freedoms to speak, to criticize, to demonstrate and to agitate came not because the government was liberal – it wasn't – but because it was weak. Still, those freedoms were tangible.

Egyptian queers were also enjoying a degree of freedom, an ability to occupy social spaces from which they were previously debarred. Back in the three years from 2001 to 2004, there had been a massive crackdown on men having sex with men, by the Mubarak government. Probably thousands were arrested and given sentences of up to 5 years. The circus of raids and show trials served up a convenient distraction from political and economic problems. But in 2004 it stopped, and for the next nine years there were very few arrests under Egypt's laws against homosexual conduct. Indeed, from 2008, police in Egypt focused more on repressing political dissent in the increasingly volatile public sphere, and less on day-to-day policing, including patrolling the frontiers of acceptable morality. And after the revolution, the police virtually disappeared from urban streets. They had been the most hated symbol of the old regime, and in the new conditions they were virtually afraid to show their faces.

With their retreat, LGBT people became increasingly visible in the downtown scene in Cairo. They occupied the decrepit city center's cheap cafes and bars; they used the Internet to make new kinds of virtual community.

In July 2013, a carefully plotted military coup overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government. The new junta, under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, quickly showed itself repressive in an unprecedented degree. The military's ruling principle was that the old Mubarak regime had failed, was overthrown, because it was too weak. It had allowed bloggers, journalists, human rights activists, and other perverts too long a leash. The new state wasn't going to make that mistake again.

In August 2013, Sisi massacred over a thousand demonstrators supporting the ousted Muslim Brotherhood. It was a message written in blood that the old rules didn't apply, that the leash was now a chokehold. The military took over all the interstices of daily life: the country was kept under rigid curfew for months. And the police returned. Egypt saw a concerted attempt to resuscitate intensive social control.

In October 2013, a few months after the military coup, came the first arrests of LGBT people. First police in a very working-class district of eastern Cairo [shut down a local gym](#) allegedly patronized by men seeking sex with other men. They arrested and tortured 14 people. Next came a [raid on a private party](#) in a Cairo suburb. Police loaded ten victims into their wagons. The cops leaked both these cases to the press; favorable headlines acclaimed the constabulary for cleansing the capital of its immoral unwanted. Someone in the Ministry of Interior decided that arresting "perverts" made good publicity for the police.

The arrests continued, applauded by an increasingly docile media. There were raids on homes, on private parties; people who looked differently or dressed differently could be seized on the street. Hundreds were arrested. Two incidents were particularly central in the storm of publicity.

First: at the very end of August 2014, a [video leaked on YouTube](#) and immediately went viral. Filmed by a cameraphone, it seemed to show two men staging a mock wedding on a boat on the Nile. The footage — I learned from men who were there — came from a floating party months before; no one knew how it had reached YouTube. There was speculation the police had somehow got their hands on it and leaked it themselves. Hundreds of thousands saw it on the web, even more when it reached TV. Police rounded up everyone they could find from the boat, and they got two years in prison. Meanwhile, though, the banned and exiled Muslim Brotherhood joined the universal indignation, tweeting from some of its accounts that Sisi's regime was now bringing gay marriage to Egypt.

Those attacks made queers a political, not just a police, issue. The dictator, after violently overthrowing a religious government, fears criticism from his right and from the Brotherhood more than any other kind. The matter of homosexuality became both opportunity and an obligation for Sisi; he needed to prove his aptitude as moral defender of the nation.

On December 7, 2014, police [raided an historic bathhouse](#) in central Cairo, allegedly a meeting place for men having sex with men. They arrested 26 men, stripped them, marched them naked in the cold night; at least one was raped by other prisoners in the Azbekeya jail that night, with the guards' collusion. A TV journalist, Mona Iraqi, presided over the raid; she filmed it and publicized it. This was Sisi's answer — meant to be a huge public show trial, proving the state's will to suppress "perversion."

It backfired. The government probably blackmailed Mona Iraqi into her repellent role in the raid: but for many Egyptians, including fellow reporters, she became a symbol of the "informer journalist," selling her independence and soul to support the state's agenda. (Since the trial

ended, she has tried bizarrely to recuperate her reputation as a friend of queers, who emphatically don't want her friendship. The "Love Wins" tweet I showed earlier was hers.) I was privileged to work with a few activists who fought to mobilize intellectual opinion, and the Egyptian media, against the raid. The outrage actually induced the government to back down. In an almost unheard-of event in Generalissimo Sisi's Egypt, the men were acquitted. But their lives were ruined. One later tried [to commit suicide](#) by burning himself to death. And the arrests still go on.

Police use the Internet to [entrap](#) people: undercover agents infest apps like Grindr, pretending to be gay; or the cops enlist gay people as informers, blackmailed to help. Increasingly they target foreigners as well as Egyptians — sometimes Europeans, sometimes already-persecuted refugees: jailing them or deporting them.

At least 250-people in Egypt are now serving prison sentences of between 2 and 10 years for homosexual conduct; probably many more. ***Egypt now imprisons more people for their gender identity and sexual orientation than any other country in the world.***

What happens to queers in Egypt can't be separated from the general draconian repression. Journalists are carted to prison; so are activists, students, or people who simply happen to be living [in the wrong neighborhood](#). People just disappear: into concentration camps, or — if they are abducted by the death squads that haunt the cities — their bodies turn up in ditches. Protests are punishable by three years in prison: or you can just be shot. NGOs face harassment and closure, including the very few that provide legal help to arrested LGBT people. And those downtown cafes I talked about? In late 2014 the government started harassing gathering spots in central Cairo, forcing them to shutter, because "undesirable people" — revolutionaries, atheists, perverts — gathered there. The spaces where ordinary solidarity can flourish are being strangled to death.