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Mike Pence, Free My Family Imprisoned in Egypt

By Aayah Hossam

The new year is now upon us. Unfortunately, my mother and father weren't with me and my family to welcome in the new year, and we may not see them in 2018 without help from the White House.

My parents, Ola and Hosam Khalaf, are two of the estimated 60,000 political prisoners in Egypt. They were arrested on June 30, without a warrant or an explanation. They have each spent more than 160 days in solitary confinement, in 5-foot by 6-foot cells on a concrete floor, without running water, a window or ventilation. They have also been denied all visits by family and by legal counsel at their prisons. My mother is only allowed to use the bathroom for 5 minutes a day. We only know they are alive when, every 45 days, they are brought before a judge to renew their detention orders, and they are placed in a glass cage. Only recently were they allowed a few minutes of supervised discussion with their lawyer.

Why are they being held? Egypt has claimed, through some state media, that they have been supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt classifies as a terrorist group. But the state has not shown or given my parents any official charges.

My parents have nothing to do with that: My father owns a construction business and supported a rival political party, which remains legal in Egypt today, and my mom is a secretary.

Importantly, she and my father are also U.S. legal permanent residents, who lived in the U.S. for years and both graduated from the University of Texas at Austin. Eight of their children, grandchildren and siblings are American citizens.

I cannot begin to describe how hard this has been for my family, and cannot even imagine what my parents are going through every day. I desperately need the help of the U.S. government to secure the release of my parents and the 20 other Americans reportedly held illegally in Egypt.

Vice President Mike Pence will visit Egypt this weekend. Among other things, he will be seeking to end the persecution of religious minorities—but also the release of political prisoners.

In December, my parent's arbitrary detainment was highlighted as a special interest case by the House's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in its hearing on Egypt's human rights violations. Additionally, over a dozen elected representatives have raised concerns with Egyptian government officials, and over 2,000 Americans have signed an online petition, launched by the University of Texas Amnesty International Chapter and addressed to the Egyptian Ambassador Yasser Reda in Washington, D.C., calling for my parent's immediate release.

I now urge Pence to demand the immediate and unconditional release of my parents and other Americans detained in Egypt.

This won't be the first time the administration has done so. Last April, after a visit by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, President Donald Trump was able to secure the release of one American citizen, Aya Hijazi. Plus, the administration has shown a willingness to stand up to Egypt on human rights: In September, they cancelled or suspended nearly \$300 million dollars in U.S. military and economic aid to Egypt, specifically noting concern over human rights abuses.

Trump set the terms of negotiation—end human rights abuses or say goodbye to U.S. aid—in April 2017 and again in September. Now, his administration can do it once more during this critical vice presidential trip. Until Sisi starts releasing prisoners, like my parents, Trump and Pence must stand strong. Egypt must respect human rights and fulfill its obligation to those detained unlawfully. That's the real art of the deal.

While in Egypt, Mr. Vice President, please help bring my parents home to help us celebrate another new year together.

Aayah Hossam lives in Seattle, Washington with her husband and two daughters. She is the Free Ola and Hosam campaign spokesperson.