

Representatives of authoritarian states hostile to fundamental freedoms should not head UNESCO

The signatory human rights organizations urge UNESCO to reject the candidacy of Moushira Khattab, a nominee for its Director- General post to be selected through election this coming Monday October 9th at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Khattab, an Egyptian diplomat, is one of four Arab nominees (out of nine total) for a post charged with supporting cultural rights and the freedom of expression throughout the world. Regrettably, Khattab's complicity in the Egyptian state's hostility towards UNESCO's core values renders her woefully unfit for a position responsible for spreading these same values. During her tenure as a state representative, Egypt has dramatically escalated its assault on the freedom of expression and information, jailing dozens of journalists and media personnel, and blocking at least 424 websites so far in 2017. These websites were blocked on security directives bypassing judicial order, stripping them of even the slightest veneer of legality.

Moushira Khattab remained silent, and therefore complicit, in the closure of the Karama Libraries founded by prominent human rights defender Gamal Eid using funds he received from an international human rights award. Although Khattab had visited and expressed her admiration for the network of libraries established in working-class areas, when the libraries were shuttered by a security directive devoid of judicial basis, she repeated the falsehood that the closure was pursuant to a judicial order. Her silence has extended to attacks on other libraries and cultural institutions throughout the country, including the Al-Balad Bookstore, the Townhouse Gallery, and Rawabet Theater. This raises serious doubts regarding her competency to lead one of the most important international organizations defending the freedom of thought and expression.

The signatory organizations had hoped that UNESCO would nominate an Egyptian candidate worthy of such an important post, who is capable of working with civil society to promote education, culture and freedom of expression. Egypt stands at a critical juncture where it must choose what type of society it will become: an open society that upholds fundamental rights or freedoms, or a closed society that breeds extremism and violence. Leading UNESCO requires boldness, not silence, in defending the freedom of expression and cultural rights. The position of Director-General should not be disgraced by rewarding it to a nominee who is complicit in state attacks on UNESCO's values.

- The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
- The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information
- El Nadim Center For Management & Rehabilitation of victims of violence
- Andalus Institute for Tolerance and anti-Violence Studies
- Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression
- Nazra for Feminist Studies