

Call on Egypt to release journalist who criticized torture

Arrest of TV journalist and blogger is latest blow to free speech.

CAIRO – The Egyptian government should immediately release and drop politically motivated charges against a television journalist and prominent blogger arrested on Saturday night, Human Rights Watch says.

Around midnight on April 14, security forces at the Cairo airport detained `Abd al-Monim Mahmud, a 27-year-old journalist for the London-based satellite channel Al-Hiwar and prominent blogger affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as he attempted to travel to Sudan to do reporting for an Al-Hiwar segment on human rights in the Arab world.

The next day, a prosecutor charged Mahmud with “membership in a banned organization,” with “being an administrator of a banned organization,” and with funding an armed group. According to Islam Lutfi, one of Mahmud’s lawyers present at his interrogation, the State Security bureau’s preliminary investigation (mahdar al-tahamiyyat) also cited Mahmud’s public criticisms of the government’s human rights record and specifically its use of torture. The prosecutor ordered Mahmud detained for 15 days, after which time the prosecutor must review the order.

Change focus, government told

“Once again, the Egyptian government is prosecuting a journalist because he has reported on human rights abuses in the country,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should focus its energies on ending the abuses, not silencing those who expose them.”

In addition to his journalistic work, Mahmud runs the Web log Ana Ikhwan (“I am a Brother”) in Arabic and English, helps operate the Muslim Brotherhood’s English-language website, and has helped families of Muslim Brotherhood detainees facing military tribunals create blogs to campaign for their release.

He has frequently spoken to journalists and human rights organizations about human rights abuses in Egypt and had recently criticized Egypt’s human rights record at international conferences in Doha and Cairo. He recently wrote blog posts criticizing the Egyptian government’s imprisonment of Alexandrian blogger `Abd al-Karim Nabil Sulaiman, who was sentenced on February 22 to four years in prison for “incitement to hate Muslims” and “insulting the president.”

Libel cases should be settled differently

Mahmud’s arrest is the latest in a string of threats to freedom of expression in Egypt this year, Human Rights Watch said. On April 5, prosecutors called in for questioning bloggers `Ala’ Ahmad Seif al-Islam and Manal Hassan, and human rights lawyer Gamal Eid in connection with a criminal libel suit filed by Judge `Abd al-Fattah Murad of the Alexandria Appeals

Court. The three were released the same day.

Human Rights Watch said that libel cases should be settled before a civil rather than criminal court. The same judge who is the plaintiff in the libel suit has also filed a suit asking the government to censor more than 20 webpages, including those from political blogs and human rights organizations' websites.

"Criminal penalties for defamation are a disproportionate response that has a chilling effect on free expression in Egypt," said Whitson.

Laptop taken

On March 12, the Alexandria Appeals Court upheld the four-year prison sentence against blogger `Abd al-Karim Nabil Sulaiman. On March 10, secular activist and blogger Muhammad al-Sharqawi returned home to find that his laptop, which he said contained an unreleased video depicting police abuse, had been stolen. Cash and other valuables in the apartment were untouched.

And on January 13, security officers detained Al Jazeera journalist Huwaida Taha Mitwalli as she tried to board a plane to Doha. The next day, a prosecutor charged her with "practicing activities that harm the national interest of the country," and "possessing and giving false pictures about the internal situation in Egypt that could undermine the dignity of the country."

"If there is evidence that Mahmud has committed any crime beyond exercising his rights to peaceful expression and association, the government should produce it and try him before an independent court," Whitson said. "If not, it should drop the charges and release him immediately."

Egypt made pledge to respect freedom of expression

Human Rights Watch said the charges against Mahmud underscore the need to reform Egypt's laws governing freedom of expression, assembly and association in order to bring them in line with international legal standards. Prosecutors charged Mahmud with membership in a banned organization," under article 86(bis) of the Penal Code, which makes it an offense for any person to belong to, or possess and distribute publications of any group that calls for suspension of the constitution or laws or is considered to be "impairing the national unity or social peace."

As a state party to key international and regional human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Egypt has pledged to protect the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

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