

Egyptian journalists on trial over criticism of tax law

NEW YORK: The Committee to Protect Journalists has called on the Egyptian Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros-Ghali, to drop charges against Wael al-Abrashy, the editor-in-chief of the weekly *Sawt al-Umma*, and Samar al-Dawi, a reporter for the weekly.

In January, al-Abrashy mounted an editorial campaign to oppose a new and controversial property tax law, which would require property owners to submit to finance ministry evaluations of their property to determine their taxes. Al-Abrashy challenged the law's constitutionality in an opinion piece, and said it creates a financial burden for the average Egyptian. In one of al-Dawi's articles, she quoted a legal expert who said the law is under review by the constitutional court and that it "will inevitably be revoked." The campaign consisted of numerous other critical articles and opinion pieces by journalists, politicians, and economists.

Charged under Article 177

According to media reports, a Cairo appeals court decided on June 14 that the two journalists would stand trial in a Cairo criminal court on July 18. They are both charged under Article 177 of the Egyptian penal code for "inciting the public to disobey the law." Al-Abrashy told CPJ that this is the first time Article 177 is being used in a press case. According to CPJ research and news reports, the article has historically been used in prosecuting armed or militant groups.

"We urge the Minister of Finance to drop the criminal charges against Wael al-Abrashy and Samar al-Dawi," said CPJ Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator Mohamed Abdel Dayem. "The provision under which our colleagues are being charged and the fact that they are to be tried in a criminal court strongly suggests that the government is intent on punishing critical journalists for their work."

Editors express solidarity

During a meeting on June 14, 18 local editors from independent and opposition newspapers expressed their solidarity with al-Abrashy and al-Dawi, issuing a statement calling on the president to fulfill his longstanding promises, made in 2004 and repeated numerous times since, to end prison terms for journalists in publishing cases.

Al-Abrashy was sentenced to a year in prison in 2007 along with three other independent editors for "publishing false information likely to disturb public order." An appeals court struck down the jail terms against the editors but upheld £20,000 (US\$3,540) fines against each of them.

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