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Blogger jailed for four years

On 22 February, 22-year-old Egyptian blogger Kareem Amer, right, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment for criticising Egyptian President Mubarak and insulting Islam. The blogger, who writes about issues such as secularism and women's rights, has been held in solitary confinement since November. Amer's blog appears to be blocked. (23-FEB-07)



John Hendel reports for Index on Censorship

Police arrested Kareem on 6 November on charges of inciting hatred of Islam, defaming the president and spreading rumours likely to disturb the peace. His trial underwent repeated delays and he had faced potentially as many as eleven years in prison for his writing. Blog postings also caused his arrest and detention for 12 days in October 2005.

Free expression under attack

'The state of freedom of expression in Egypt is getting worse one day after the other,' said Dalia Ziada, a Cairo-based human rights activist and translator who helped secure Kareem a lawyer for the trial. She called Kareem's case a 'severe violation to freedom of expression in Egypt.' Egypt has 'cracked down on Internet freedom' in 2006, according to the Reporters without Borders annual report released in February. It jailed at least seven cyber-dissidents and the report mentioned Kareem explicitly.

The world reacts

Protestors around the world demonstrated at Egyptian embassies on 15 February during what they called 'Free Kareem Day'. Many in London waved signs with phrases like 'Shame on Egypt' and 'Blogging is Not a Crime'. The group's website describes demonstrations in London, Bucharest, Rome, Berlin, Ottawa, Paris, Washington DC, Chicago, and New York. Other demonstrations have occurred in Stockholm and Bahrain and US Congressmen and Italian MPs have written letters protesting Kareem's detention. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters without Borders have condemned the arrest. And fellow bloggers have addressed his case around the world, condemning the arrest and appealing for his release and for freedom of expression and opinion.

The grassroots opposition to Kareem's detention arose through an informal network of Kareem's associates. Tom Palmer, a Senior Fellow and director of the educational division at the Washington DC-based think tank the Cato Institute, met Kareem in August and had talked with him days before his arrest on 6 November. Contact ended with the arrest—Kareem has no access to the Internet and all connection has been mediated through his lawyers, who have had limited contact with Kareem, Palmer said. Palmer called on former Cato interns and connections to help organise the worldwide protests on 15 February.

Constantino Diaz-Duran and Chris Kilmer organised the rally in New York on three days, marking the beginning of the series of protests. Diaz-Duran became involved in Kareem's case a few weeks after the arrest; he began publishing op-eds on Columbia University's student paper, the Columbia Daily Spectator, to 'rile up my fellow students', in his words.

Kareem's father told the Arabic newspaper Al-Masree Al-Yawm (*The Egyptian Today*) that if his son did not repent within three days, he should be killed, according to an 18 February article. Ziada called Kameer's family extremist and remembered how his father stopped Kareem's sister going to school and forced her to wear the all-covering niqāb. Kareem himself was expelled from Al-Azhar university Dalia for criticising conservative professors. Ziada also said the household lacked a television since the father deemed it 'the source of evil'.

Kareem's lawyers are preparing an appeal for 24 February, but expect little, according to the Free Kareem website.

On 1 February, a group of about ten 'extremist' lawyers accused Kareem of being a disbeliever who has insulted Islam, according to Dalia Ziada.

Not many people know about Kareem's case in Egypt, Ziada said, but most of those who do stand against him. Hundreds of young Egyptians have sent her insulting e-mails for defending Kareem. She compared Cairo to an egg with a very thin peel, ready to break if brushed.

'Cairo now is burning from inside on all levels,' Ziada said.

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