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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA DETENTION

Egypt's opposition activists in the dock

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By Amnesty International's delegation in Egypt

Arriving at court in Cairo's Fifth Settlement district court on 13 May, we saw supporters of political detainees and members of the riot police.

Opposition activists, human rights lawyers, and friends and supporters had gathered in front of the court to show their solidarity with [Ahmed Douma, an activist facing trial for “insulting the President”](#). They had also gathered in support of six others whose cases were up for appeal. They had been convicted of engaging in violent behaviour following protests in front of the same court on 30 April. 

The presence of Sayed Ibrahim Abdel Latif, whose son Mohamed was shot and killed during anti-government protests on 28 January 2011, was particularly touching. He told Amnesty International that he could not believe that those he thinks are responsible for killing his son and other protesters had walked free from court after being acquitted, while “revolutionaries” are behind bars. He predicted that the protests would continue until the goals of the “25 January Revolution” of freedom, justice and social dignity are achieved.

To the great relief of those present in the courtroom, Amr Abdel Zaher, Omar Imad Eddin Ali, Mostada Al Said Mostafa, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamed, Mohamed Farahat Al Said, and Abdallah Ahmed Ibrahim were acquitted of all charges of violence related to the protests outside the court. The news was met with ululations, tears of joys, and screams of “God is Great” mixed in with “Down with the Supreme Guide”, in reference to Mohamed Badii, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The six had been convicted by a lower court on 2 May, and sentenced to five and a half years imprisonment and heavy fines for violent behaviour, including destroying government property and attacking officials, in proceedings that did not meet international standards for fair trials. In fact, their lawyers were not aware of the hearing date, which took place two days after their arrest, and had no chance to study the case files or prepare their defence.

The six were arrested in the vicinity of the Fifth Settlement court, when protests turned violent. One of those arrested was a young journalist, Omar Imad Eddin Ali, who was covering the events. According to his friend, Aya Magdi, who was herself beaten by members of the riot police who used sticks on her back and arms, he was taking pictures when detained. Others arrested included a worker delivering a food order and two students waiting to take a bus to their hometown of Suez.

The atmosphere following Ahmed Douma's trial was much less festive, as the judge postponed the ruling until 3 June. The proceedings – attended by a large group of human rights lawyers, supporters and the media – were marred from the beginning by members of the riot police, who beat a number of people with batons as they attempted to rush into the courtroom. This all happened in front of the eyes of our delegates. The scenes in front of the courtroom were chaotic, with people pushing each other as they tried to get in. The riot police failed to control the situation and resorted to its usual method of using excessive force.

Prisoner of conscience Ahmed Douma was detained on 30 April in Tanta, in the Gharbiya Governorate, where he went to face questioning in relation to charges of “insulting the President”. The charges are based on a telephone call with a television programme on 25 February, during which he described President Mohamed Morsi as a “killer” for his alleged failure to address the killings of opposition protesters during his rule. In court, he maintained that he held President Morsi, as the highest authority in the state, politically responsible for human rights violations committed during his rule.

Ahmed Douma's lawyers requested his acquittal, presenting a number of procedural and substantive arguments. They also called on the court to respect freedom of expression and the right of individuals to peacefully criticize their rulers, highlighting the example of Ahmed Orabi. Considered a national hero for standing up to British colonialism at the end of the 19th century, he was not imprisoned despite criticizing the Egyptian authorities of the time.

For years, Amnesty International has been calling for amendments to legislation that criminalizes activities that amount to nothing more than the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression. During the rule of former President Hosni Mubarak, vague and broad provisions in the penal and press codes were used to punish and deter dissent.

It is a shame that a government that came to power precisely because Egyptians exercised their right to freedom of expression and assembly is using the same tactics to silence its critics. To break with the past, the Egyptian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Ahmed Douma and take steps to repeal all legislation stifling freedom of expression.

Read more:

[Opposition activists in the 'defendants' cage' amid ongoing crackdown](#) (Blog, 9 May 2013)

[Egypt: Activist detained for "insulting the President"](#) (Public statement, 3 May 2013)

[More face charges in Egypt's escalating free speech and dissent crackdown](#) (News story, 3 April 2013)

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

EGYPT

DETENTION

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