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Egypt: Trial of blogger expands realm of repression

Amnesty International today called for the immediate and unconditional release of Karim Amer, the first Egyptian blogger to be tried for writing blogs criticizing Egypt's al-Azhar religious authorities, President Husni Mubarak and Islam.

Karim Amer, a former al-Azhar University student and blogger, is facing up to 10 years in prison for his writings in a trial that resumes today. Charges against him include "spreading information disruptive of public order and damaging to the country's reputation", "incitement to hate Islam" and "defaming the President of the Republic".

"Karim Amer's trial appears intended as a warning by the authorities to other bloggers who dare criticize the government or use their blogs to spread information considered harmful to Egypt's reputation," said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. "This is particularly worrying as bloggers have increasingly been posting information about human rights abuses in Egypt, including torture and police violence against peaceful protesters."

The trial opened on 18 January 2007 before Maharram Bek Court in Alexandria. Karim Amer was charged under Articles 102, 176 and 179 of Egypt's Penal Code. Amnesty International has been urging the Egyptian authorities to review or abolish this and other legislation that, in violation of international standards, stipulates prison sentences for the mere exercise of the rights of freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion.

"Amnesty International considers Karim Amer to be a prisoner of conscience who is being prosecuted on account of the peaceful expression of his views about Islam and the al-Azhar religious authorities. We are calling for his immediate and unconditional release."

Background

Karim Amer was first detained by the Egyptian authorities for 12 days in October 2005 because of his writings on his blog (karam903.blogspot.com) about Islam and the sectarian riots which took place in the same month in Alexandria's Maharram Bek district. These riots followed reports that the video of a play believed to be anti-Islam was being screened in a Coptic church in the district.

After he was charged and released, disciplinary measures were taken against him and he was dismissed from al-Azhar University in March 2006. The university's disciplinary board found him guilty of

blaspheming Islam.

He was summoned to appear before the office of the Public Prosecutor in Maharram Bek district of the city of Alexandria on 7 November 2006 following a complaint made against him by al-Azhar University. The Public Prosecutor ordered his detention for four days on 7 November, which was later extended for a further 15 days, to allow further time for investigation. He has remained in detention since then following a series of extensions. While in detention, he was kept in solitary confinement and in incommunicado detention and was only allowed visits by his relatives last week.

Public Document

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