

URGENT ACTION

UNJUSTLY JAILED JOURNALIST DENIED HEALTHCARE

Tawfik Ghanem, a 68-year-old Egyptian journalist, has been arbitrarily detained since 21 May 2021 without trial, pending investigations by the Supreme State Security Prosecution into charges of “spreading false news” and “misusing social media”, among others. Authorities in Badr 1 prison, where he is held, continue to deny him access to adequate healthcare, including transfer to hospital and medication, for his numerous health conditions including diabetes, a bone disease and a skin condition. He should be released immediately and unconditionally as he is held solely in connection to his legitimate media work.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Public Prosecutor Mohamed Shawky Ayyad

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Dear Counsellor,

Tawfik Ghanem has been arbitrarily detained since 21 May 2021 solely because of his legitimate media work, as the former regional director of Anadolu Agency, a state-run Turkish news agency. Following his arrest, Egyptian authorities subjected Tawfik Ghanem to enforced disappearance for five days during which he was interrogated without a lawyer present about his previous work at Anadolu Agency. Subsequently, he was taken for questioning before a Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) prosecutor in Cairo, who ordered his detention pending investigations in SSSP Case No. 238 of 2021 on charges of “spreading false news,” “misusing social media,” and terrorism-related offences. Since then, authorities renewed his pretrial detention without allowing him to meaningfully challenge the lawfulness of his detention. His pretrial detention has exceeded the maximum limit of two years permissible under Egyptian law.

Since his arrest, authorities have denied him his rights to consult a lawyer of his choosing in private and to adequate defence. Since January 2022, his pretrial detention renewal sessions have been conducted online, with his lawyer present in a courtroom with the judge and Tawfik Ghanem joining via video link from prison, in the presence of prison guards. Even when he was brought to court for his detention renewal hearings before January 2022, he was unable to consult his lawyer in private as he either remained held in an overcrowded waiting area with other prisoners or placed in a glass cage inside the courtroom.

Tawfik Ghanem is held in Badr 1 prison, some 70km northeast of Cairo, and denied access to adequate healthcare. His family said that since his arrest he has lost about 20kg, and that he suffers from several age-related conditions, including diabetes and an enlarged prostate. Before his arrest, he was diagnosed with Osteochondritis Dissecans, a bone disease that affects the joints and requires regular physical therapy, unavailable in prison. He is also suffering from a skin disease and irritation. Despite this, prison authorities have occasionally banned his family from bringing him the medication he requires and other necessities, including medical soap. For his treatment, he is forced to rely mostly on advice from doctors imprisoned with him. He has not been transferred to hospital inside or outside prison despite his family's multiple requests to do so – even at their own expense – to ensure appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

I urge you to ensure that Tawfik Ghanem is immediately and unconditionally released and all charges against him dropped as he is detained solely for his media work. Pending his release, he must be granted regular access to his family, lawyers and adequate healthcare, including in outside hospitals if necessary, and held in conditions that comply with international standards for the treatment of prisoners.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Following his first questioning by the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) in May 2021, Tawfik Ghanem was transferred to Tora Investigation prison, where he remained until December 2021. According to his relatives, prison authorities there denied him a bed and he was forced to sleep on two blankets on the floor despite his bone disease. His prison conditions deteriorated further when he was transferred to Abou Zaabal prison in December 2021, where he remained detained for two years. For some 12 months following his transfer, authorities banned his access to books and newspapers, and severely restricted family visits. While the situation improved during his second year there, for the duration of his detention at Abu Zaabal, he had no direct access to sunlight and could only exercise in an indoor area.

Since 1 January 2024, he has been held in Badr 1 prison in a cell with eight other people for 23 hours a day as he is only allowed out of the cell for an hour of exercise daily. The cell does not have a fan, which makes it unbearably hot during the summer months. During public holidays, the cell remains closed 24 hours a day. His family is permitted to visit him once a month. According to his relatives, the prison administration occasionally withholds essential items like books, newspapers, pens and hygiene products from him and other prisoners held for political reasons. Relatives are also not allowed to bring their detained loved ones personal items such as clothing.

Amnesty International learned from human rights organizations and other informed sources that at least dozens of prisoners in Badr 1 prison have been on hunger strike since early June in protest at their cruel and inhuman detention conditions. The hunger strike appears to have been triggered by a sharp rise in temperatures, reaching over 40°C, amid the prison authorities' refusal to allow prisoners to have fans and daily power cuts introduced by the government nationwide in response to the energy crisis. Detainees are also protesting the lack of access to adequate healthcare, and what they and Egyptian human rights activists describe as humiliating body searches imposed by prison officials when prisoners leave their cells, including to attend pretrial detention renewal sessions or to go to the prison clinic. Other commonly reported complaints include the ill-treatment of families during prison visits, including forcing them to wait in the sun for hours; the reduction in the time allotted to prisoners for exercising outside the cell; and restrictions on family visits. Some of those on hunger strike are also protesting their lengthy pretrial detention, in some cases exceeding the maximum limit of two years permissible under Egyptian law. According to human rights groups, in response to the hunger strike, Badr 1 prison officials introduced further punitive measures including transferring some 50 prisoners to distant prisons, located in al-Minya governorate (about 280 km south of Cairo) and Al-Wadi Al-Jadid governorate (about 620 km southwest of Cairo) prisons. According to activists, prison authorities imposed punitive measures on the remaining prisoners in Badr 1 prison involved in or supportive of the hunger strike, including deliberately cutting off their access to electricity and water, in violation of the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. Amnesty International understands that Tawfik Ghanem is not on hunger strike due to his diabetes.

Since 2016, the Egyptian authorities have consolidated their grip on the media landscape and intensified their crackdown on journalists daring to deviate from the official narrative. Since then, the authorities have subjected dozens of journalists and other media workers to arbitrary arrest and detention, prosecutions on trumped-up terrorism-related charges and dismissals simply for expressing critical views. Security forces have raided the few remaining independent online media platforms in Egypt and blocked hundreds of websites. The adoption of draconian media and cyber legislation in 2018 further granted the authorities overly broad powers to regulate media content, restrict journalists' freedom of expression and impose prison terms for criticism online. At the time of writing, at least 14 journalists remained behind bars after being convicted or pending investigations into charges of "spreading false news", belonging to a "terrorist" group or "misuse of social media". Over 600 news, human rights and other websites continued to be blocked. In 2023, the authorities blocked the website of the NGO Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the news sites of Soula 4 and Masr 360. Staff at Mada Masr, an independent media platform, continue to face politically motivated prosecutions and investigations, including in relation to its publication in October 2023 of an investigative report on the Rafah border crossing. Journalists were among the 820 people added to the government's "list of terrorists" throughout 2023 without due process, depriving them of civic and political rights.

Throughout his career, Tawfik Ghanem has headed a number of media organizations, including Media International, which ran the Islam Online website for ten years. Most recently, he served as regional director of the Anadolu Agency in Cairo until his retirement in 2015.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic and English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 9 January 2025.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Tawfik Ghanem (he/him).