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Egypt: New concerns about freedom of expression

Amnesty International is concerned by the arrest and detention of blogger and former al-Azhar University student Abdel Karim Sulaiman Amer apparently because of his critical writings about Islam and Egypt's al-Azhar religious authorities, and the recent imprisonment of Tal'at Sadat, a member of parliament, for "spreading false rumours and insulting the armed forces". These cases represent a further erosion of freedom of expression in Egypt.

Abdel Karim Sulaiman Amer was summoned to appear before the office of the Public Prosecutor in Maharram Bek district of the city of Alexandria on 7 November following a complaint reportedly made against him by al-Azhar University. He was charged with an array of offences, including "spreading information disruptive of public order", "incitement to hate Muslims" and "defaming the President of the Republic". The Public Prosecutor ordered his detention for four days on 7 November, which was later reportedly extended for a further 15 days, to allow further time for investigation.

Abdel Karim Sulaiman Amer was dismissed from al-Azhar University in March 2006 after the university's disciplinary board found him guilty of blaspheming Islam. The disciplinary measures were taken against him after he was detained by the Egyptian authorities for 12 days in October 2005 because of his writings about Islam and the sectarian riots which took place in the same month in Alexandria's Maharram Bek district following reports that a play believed to be anti-Islam was being screened in a Coptic church in the district.

Tal'at Sadat, nephew of the assassinated former Egyptian President Mohamed Anwar Sadat, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment with labour and fined on 31 October after being convicted of defaming the armed forces. On 5 October, the Military Prosecutor General requested that Tal'at Sadat be stripped of his parliamentary immunity to be investigated for defaming the armed forces and for spreading false information. Several days earlier, Tal'at Sadat gave a series of media interviews on the anniversary of the former president's assassination, and alleged that senior army officers had been implicated in the killing, which was carried out by Islamist soldiers on 6 October 1981. In these interviews he suggested that Egyptian President Husni Mubarak – then vice-president – was also involved. Although a civilian, he was tried and convicted by a military court.

Amnesty International has consistently urged the Egyptian authorities to put an end to the trial of civilians before military courts, from which there is no higher judicial appeal, which violates some of the most fundamental requirements of international law, such as the right to be tried before an independent and impartial court, and the right to appeal to a higher court.

Amnesty International considers Tal'at Sadat to be a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and is calling for his immediate and unconditional

release. The organization is awaiting further details of the charges against Abdel Karim Sulaiman Amer but is concerned that he may also 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.

Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian authorities to review or abolish legislation that, in violation of international standards, stipulates prison sentences for acts which constitute nothing more than the exercise of the rights of freedom of thought, conscience and religion.