

Egypt antiwar protesters face sedition trial

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The Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak brought formal charges earlier this month against five activists who were involved in mass protests last March against the US drive to war in Iraq. The five—Ashraf Ibrahim, Nassir Faruq al-Bihiri, Yahya Fikri Amin Zahra, Mustafa Muhammad al-Basiuni and Remon Edward Gindi Morgan—were charged in an Emergency State Security Court.

Ashraf Ibrahim, a 35-year-old engineer, was arrested by state security forces last April. Before being formally charged, he had spent 111 days in detention, the last 10 of them on hunger strike. The other four have yet to be arrested and are reportedly seeking legal advice on whether to turn themselves in and face trial.

All five are charged with plotting to form an “underground communist organization that aims to overthrow the existing ruling regime.” Ibrahim, who is named as the leader of the alleged organization, is further accused of “undermining Egypt’s status and prestige” by speaking to international human rights organizations about his persecution. The charges were brought under a section of Egyptian law that outlaws “impairing the national unity or social peace.”

Under the draconian emergency laws that have been in effect in Egypt since the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat, all five of the accused could be condemned to 15 years in prison. The state security court judges are appointed by the president and may include military officers. Its decisions are not subject to appeal. Human rights groups in Egypt have protested the government’s repeated use of these courts—supposedly reserved for charges of terrorism—to suppress any form of political dissent.

According to press reports, Egyptian state prosecutors told both Ibrahim and his lawyers that he had become the subject of an intensive state investigation after members of the State Security Investigations (SSI), Egypt’s political police, raided his home and

confiscated his computer. They discovered that he had downloaded socialist literature, information from the Al Jazeera web site and material from human rights organizations. They also confiscated a video camera he had used to record the antiwar demonstrations of March 20 and 21, which brought tens of thousands into the streets of Cairo.

The Mubarak regime, fearful that popular hostility to US aggression against Iraq could spill over into a challenge to its own rule in Egypt, unleashed brutal repression against the antiwar protests, using water cannon, dogs and baton charges to attack the demonstrators. Afterwards, at least 800 were detained, many of them subjected to beatings and torture.

The Egyptian authorities have presented no evidence that Ibrahim was involved in or even planned any actions involving violence. Instead, they have revealed that they found folders on his computer that included material from Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. They also seized from his apartment an article published in the British newsweekly, the *Economist*, dealing with corruption at the highest levels of the Egyptian government. The Mubarak regime had banned that issue of the magazine.

Ibrahim was known to be active in the committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People and a group called Egyptians against the War and played a role in organizing the antiwar demonstrations.

His prolonged detention without charges was apparently aimed at forcing him to divulge the identities of others involved in the March protests. Ibrahim’s wife, Warda, told the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram* that security officials called him repeatedly for interrogations, asking him to testify against 20 to 30 other activists. “He refused to talk, and I think that’s why he’s still in prison,” she said.

In a July 21 letter smuggled out of Turah Prison, Ibrahim announced his hunger strike, writing: “I am

prepared to die to defend freedom of thought and expression, and to defend my daughter's right to one of the most basic human rights: the right to a stable family life, the right to see her father, who she thinks has been 'abroad' for the past 100 days."

Egyptian authorities responded to the hunger strike initially by throwing him into a poorly ventilated and vermin-infested punishment cell. After formal charges were brought against Ibrahim, he ended the strike, but human rights groups have expressed continuing concern over the state of his health.

The case marks the first time in 20 years that the Egyptian government has organized a state trial of defendants charged with communist sedition. Clearly, the Mubarak regime was shocked by the size and intensity of the antiwar protests of last March. Above all, it was concerned that the movement was led not by the Islamist groups that it had ruthlessly repressed in the 1990s, but rather by left-wing elements opposed to the regime.

The charges against Ibrahim and his four codefendants have provoked heated protests in Egypt itself. A coalition of 21 Egyptian political and human rights organizations issued a joint statement denouncing the case as political persecution aimed at "terrorizing ... political activists and groups in Egypt and particularly opponents of the US war and occupation in Iraq.

"This escalation is part of the government's efforts to impede civic activity in Egypt and demonstrates the government's intention to use the Emergency Law in the terrorizing of political and rights activists," the statement read.

Over 300 people signed a petition demanding that prosecutors arrest them as well "for the same reasons Ibrahim was being detained for," *Al-Ahram* reported. Human rights groups organized a protest August 2 outside the prosecutor-general's office in Cairo.

Messages demanding the dropping of all charges against the five accused and the immediate release of Ashraf Ibrahim should be sent to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg.



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