

Egyptian military persecutes filmmaker who witnessed crackdown

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9 October 2013

John Greyson and Tarek Loubani—Canadians detained by Egypt’s military regime under brutal conditions for two months because they aided wounded anti-government protesters and bore witness to state atrocities—were released from prison early Sunday morning. However, Egyptian authorities are refusing to allow the two to leave the country, saying that they are still being “investigated” on “terrorism-related” charges.

Greyson and Loubani were detained on August 16 and held without charge along with 600 others who had participated in protests that day against the July 3 military coup that overthrew the elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi.

Canada’s Conservative government, which openly opposed the February 2011 revolution that overthrew the US-backed dictator Mubarak and quietly welcomed this summer’s military coup, had for weeks made only tepid calls for Greyson and Loubani’s release. But a protest campaign organized by their families and supported by many in Canada’s artistic community—Greyson is a filmmaker and both he and Loubani are outspoken opponents of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians—forced Conservative Foreign Minister John Baird to publicly state last week that there would be serious consequences for Canada’s relations with Egypt if the two were not promptly released.

John Greyson is a documentary filmmaker. In 2009 he helped to organize a protest against the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) for its adoption of Tel Aviv, Israel, as its “spotlight city.” He and the protest co-organizers exposed TIFF’s “City to City” program as a pro-Israel propaganda campaign that was being used to spin public opinion in favour of Israel in the aftermath of its brutal assault on the Palestinian city

of Gaza.

Tarek Loubani is a surgeon from London, Ontario of Palestinian origin.

He and Greyson were arrested at a police checkpoint in Cairo and sent to the Tora Prison, where torture of political opponents of the military regime is routine.

The pair had originally landed in Egypt on August 15 and planned to drive to the Palestinian city of Gaza, where Greyson intended to film Loubani’s volunteer work at a local hospital.

Because the Gaza border crossing was closed, the two decided on the evening of the 16th to investigate the mass protests against the military coup that were taking place at the nearby Ramses Square. The protests were called by the Muslim Brotherhood and were to be violently attacked by security forces.

In a statement dictated to their lawyer from the prison cell where they were then being held, the pair shed light on the protest and its violent suppression, providing a vivid first-hand account of the brutality of the Washington-backed military regime:

“The protest was just starting— peaceful chanting, the faint odour of tear gas, a helicopter lazily circling overhead—when suddenly [we heard] calls of ‘doctor.’ A young man carried by others from God knows where, bleeding from a bullet wound. Tarek snapped into doctor mode... and started to work doing emergency response, trying to save lives, while John did video documentation, shooting a record of the carnage that was unfolding.

“The wounded and dying never stopped coming. Between us, we saw over 50 Egyptians die: students, workers, professionals, professors, all shapes, all ages, unarmed. We later learned the body count for the day was 102.

“We left in the evening when it was safe, trying to get

back to our hotel on the Nile. We stopped for ice cream. We couldn't find a way through the police cordon, though, and finally asked for help at a checkpoint.

“That is when we were arrested, searched, caged, questioned, interrogated, videotaped with a ‘Syrian terrorist,’ slapped, beaten, ridiculed, hot-boxed, refused phone calls, stripped, shaved bald, accused of being foreign mercenaries. Was it our Canadian passports, the footage of Tarek performing CPR or our ice cream wrappers that set them off? They screamed ‘Canadian’ as they kicked and hit us. John had a precisely etched boot-print bruise on his back for a week.”

Along with the over 600 others who were arrested during the August 16 protests, Greyson and Loubani were accused by the military regime, without a shred of evidence, of a list of capital offenses including terrorism and murder.

Their original detention of 45 days was extended until mid-November by the prosecutor's office, despite the lack of formal charges against them. In response to these anti-democratic maneuvers and their brutal treatment at the hands of the police and prison authorities, Greyson and Loubani went on a two-week hunger strike in mid-September.

Details of their imprisonment were scarce. Their belongings were confiscated upon arrest, including Greyson's camera equipment and film footage. It is not yet known whether these have been returned, or if Greyson's footage, with potentially important evidence of military atrocities, has been destroyed. They shared a small concrete cell with six others, sleeping on the floor and sharing “a single tap of Nile water.” It has been alleged by Greyson's sister that he was forced to affix his thumbprint and signature to a list of allegations leveled against him by the prosecutor's office, despite his inability to read the document, which was written in Arabic.

The military dictatorship imposed a strict nighttime curfew on August 14, using it as a pretext to conduct mass arrests of protesters such as that which took place on the 16th. It has also stoked rabid xenophobia, accusing foreigners of instigating the anti-coup protests. Late last month, a teacher from France was arrested in Cairo and sent to a downtown jail, where he was beaten to death by other inmates.

The brutal treatment meted out to Greyson and

Loubani by Egypt's US- and Canadian-backed military regime is clearly aimed at intimidating foreign journalists, film-makers and others from documenting and exposing the ongoing counterrevolution in Egypt. The military, aided by the liberal Tamarod coalition, has outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and brutally suppressed all opposition to its dictatorial rule, killing and wounding thousands of protesting MB supporters and other civilians. It has established a police state to suppress working class opposition to bleak and worsening social conditions—conditions which in the days and weeks prior to the July 3 coup had led millions to take to the streets in protest against the Morsi government.

Canada's Conservative government supported the July 3 military coup and supports the brutal repression that necessarily followed from it, because, like the Egyptian bourgeoisie, it is terrified of the revolutionary movement and aspirations of the Egyptian working class. Hence its silence on the repression in Egypt, including the killing of Toronto resident Amr Kassem by a military regime sniper in Alexandria this past August, and its indifference to the jailing and torture of Grayson and Loubani.



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