

Egypt jails Al Jazeera journalists after show trial

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Egyptian courts sentenced three *Al Jazeera* journalists to long prison sentences yesterday on trumped-up charges of conspiring with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to broadcast false news to discredit the US-backed military junta in Cairo.

Al Jazeera East Africa correspondent Peter Greste and Cairo bureau chief Mohamed Fahmy were both sentenced to seven years in a maximum security prison. News producer Baher Mohamed, who had previously worked for Japan's *Asahi Shimbun*, was sentenced to ten years, with the extra three years imposed supposedly for possession of ammunition—a spent bullet casing he had found on the ground during a protest. The three, together with *Al Jazeera* itself, have all consistently denied the charges.

The trial made a mockery of legal procedure. Prosecutors provided no evidence to support their claims, leading defendants' families to hope for an acquittal. Asked to show the false news reports they were charging the journalists with having produced, prosecutors showed unrelated footage from the journalists' laptops, including images of Greste's family vacation, horses grazing in a pasture in Luxor, Egypt, and a news conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

At another stage in the trial, prosecution witnesses admitted they could not recall footage shown to them by prosecutors, and one suggested that prosecutors had tampered with the evidence, adding more footage after he first viewed it.

The show trial is also an indictment of Egypt's backers, and particularly the US, which has supported all the crimes of the military regime since it overthrew MB President Mohamed Mursi in a coup last July.

The verdict came a day after a visit by US Secretary of State John Kerry and two days after the Egyptian courts announced a new mass death sentence against

183 MB supporters. Kerry pledged to release a further \$575 million in US military aid to Egypt and said that delivery of Apache attack helicopters to use against Islamist militants in the Sinai Peninsula would proceed "very, very soon." Kerry even said he had spoken "specifically about *Al Jazeera* journalists" with Egypt's new president and military dictator, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi—who proceeded to jail all of them.

Egyptian prosecutors and media had dubbed the journalists the "Marriott Cell," for operating without accreditation out of two suites at the Marriott hotel in Zamalek. This came after *Al Jazeera* faced repeated arrests and had equipment confiscated by Egyptian authorities.

A total of twenty defendants were on trial, including eleven in absentia, on charges of "spreading false news," portraying Egypt as being in a state of "civil war," and aiding the banned MB. The sixteen Egyptian defendants were all accused of joining the MB—a charge Fahmy refuted, pointing out that he was a "liberal" who drinks alcohol and had participated in demonstrations against the MB shortly after the coup.

Three other foreign journalists were among those tried in absentia: Britons Sue Turton and Dominic Kane, who previously worked for *Al Jazeera* in Cairo, and Dutch journalist Rena Netjes. Netjes had been allowed to leave Egypt after discussions between the Dutch embassy and the Egyptian foreign ministry. All those tried in absentia received 10-year prison sentences.

Two of the accused Egyptians, including Anas Beltagy—the son of Mohamed Beltagy, the general secretary of the MB's political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party—were acquitted of all charges.

In a statement, *Al Jazeera* -English managing director Al Anstey said the verdicts defied "logic, sense, and

any semblance of justice.”

“Today three colleagues and friends were sentenced, and will continue to be kept behind bars for doing a brilliant job of being great journalists,” Anstey wrote. “Peter, Mohamed, and Baher and six of our other colleagues were sentenced despite the fact that not a shred of evidence was found to support the extraordinary and false charges against them. At no point during the long, drawn-out trial did the absurd allegations stand up to scrutiny. There is only one sensible outcome now—for the verdict to be overturned, and justice to be recognized by Egypt.”

The British and Dutch governments both announced they were summoning the Egyptian ambassadors in their countries to discuss the ruling, while Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said her government was “deeply dismayed at the sentence that was imposed [and] appalled by the severity of it.”

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said he had had a conversation with al-Sisi, stressing the innocence of the journalists and adding that “in the long run, a free and vigorous media are good for democracy, good for security, and good for stability.”

Kerry, on tour in Iraq, said he had called Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry to register “serious displeasure” over a “chilling and draconian verdict.”

The attempt by Kerry and Washington’s imperialist allies to pose as concerned but powerless onlookers of the junta’s attacks on democratic rights is cynical and absurd. Washington is handing over billions of dollars to the army—headed by al-Sisi, a graduate of the US Army War College—while claiming that it has no leverage over Cairo except for impotent expressions of “displeasure” at its reactionary policies.

In fact, the jailing of *Al Jazeera* journalists is of a piece with the military government’s broader campaign to terrorize the Egyptian people and crush any force that might set off a renewed revolutionary struggle of the working class. In this campaign, Cairo has enjoyed the unwavering support of the imperialist powers—who fear the social anger in the Egyptian working class and are determined to prevent the outbreak of revolutionary struggles against al-Sisi like those that toppled the US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The imperialist powers have supported al-Sisi as his government slaughtered nearly 2,000 people in bloody crackdowns in the streets after the July 3 coup last year,

jailed 16,000 political prisoners, and in recent months handed out a series of mass death sentences to destroy the MB—the country’s main right-wing bourgeois opposition party—as a political force.

It is this political support from Washington and its allies that allowed the al-Sisi regime to proceed with its show trial against the *Al Jazeera* journalists.



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