

Australian government's phony defence of journalist jailed in Egypt

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After refusing for months to lift a finger to defend Australian journalist Peter Greste, who has been imprisoned by Egypt's dictatorship since December 29, the Australian government has in recent days postured as championing his release.

However, while claiming to be dismayed by Greste's fate, Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his ministers have underscored their support for the US-backed military junta headed by ex-general Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

Abbott phoned President Sisi last weekend, on the eve of Monday's court proceedings, in which Greste and two fellow Al Jazeera journalists—Cairo bureau chief Mohamed Fahmy and news producer Baher Mohamed—were sentenced to between seven and ten years' imprisonment. They were convicted on fabricated charges of conspiring with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to discredit the Cairo regime.

After his phone call, Abbott told the media that he was confident that Sisi understood Australia's position on the Greste case. "I discussed a number of subjects with the president of Egypt, including the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East," Abbott said.

"I congratulated him on the work that the new government of Egypt had done to crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood," Abbott disclosed, adding: "I think that the new President of Egypt will do whatever he reasonably can to ensure that we have peace and security in Egypt and more broadly in the Middle East. He is obviously concerned about the militant and radical tendencies."

It was a chillingly explicit endorsement of a regime that has killed nearly 2,000 people in crackdowns since its July 3 coup last year, "disappeared" hundreds of others, and jailed at least 16,000 political prisoners. In

recent months, the junta's courts have handed down a series of mass death sentences. In two court sessions alone, lasting for a total of 100 minutes, 529 prisoners were sentenced to death, without being allowed to call a single witness in their defence.

This repression not only seeks to destroy the MB—a right-wing bourgeois opposition party. It is a wider drive to terrorise the Egyptian masses and prevent any renewed revolutionary struggles by the working class, like those that toppled the decades-long US-backed dictatorship of Sisi's predecessor Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

As Abbott's comments indicate, Sisi has the backing of the US and the other imperialist powers, which fear the ongoing social unrest of the Egyptian working class and are also counting on Sisi's regime to help counter their debacle in Iraq.

Greste is a veteran foreign correspondent. From 1991 to 1995 he was based in London, Bosnia and South Africa, working at various times for Reuters, CNN, WTN and the BBC. Since 2005, he has worked for Al Jazeera in Africa.

Greste and other Al Jazeera journalists have no doubt been singled out by Sisi's regime and its US sponsors partly because Al Jazeera is financed by Qatar's ruling al-Thani family. Qatar has backed the Muslim Brotherhood, as well other Islamists in the region, most recently the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that has swept through northwestern Iraq.

But the show trial of Greste and his two colleagues, along with 17 other defendants, including 11 in absentia, on such charges as "spreading false news," is part of the wider pattern of political repression. More than 65 journalists have also been detained since the coup, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Once the sentences were handed down, Abbott declared that his government would not engage in “megaphone diplomacy” in a bid to secure Greste’s release. “What we want to do is to talk calmly, patiently and reasonably to the Egyptian government,” he said. “We want what’s best for the long-term interest of Egypt, as well as what’s best for Peter Greste and his colleagues.”

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the government would formally request Sisi to intervene in the Greste case. This diversion was shot down within hours, however, when Sisi declared on Tuesday morning: “We will not interfere in judicial rulings. We must respect judicial rulings and not criticise them even if others do not understand this.”

Sisi could only make such remarks confident of the continuing support of the US and its allies, including Australia. In fact, Abbott made his government’s position plain on March 29, when he made his first statement on Greste’s jailing. Facing criticism—including by Greste himself—of his three months of silence since Greste’s detention in December, Abbott sought to head off the growing public concern over the journalist’s plight. While claiming to have made representations on Greste’s behalf, he said he had “a lot of sympathy with the Egyptian government” and “absolutely” accepted that “the Egyptian justice system has to be allowed to run its course.”

Sisi’s refusal to intervene also came just hours after the White House issued a token statement of displeasure over the journalists’ sentences, and two days after US Secretary of State John Kerry held talks with Sisi and pledged to release a further \$575 million in US military aid to Egypt.

Washington’s backing for Sisi was equally reflected in the response of Australia’s Labor opposition. Labor leader Bill Shorten and his deputy, Labor’s foreign affairs spokesperson Tanya Plibersek, refused to criticise the Abbott government’s posture, instead declaring that they were “united” with it.

On the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” program, Plibersek was asked whether Kerry’s release of military aid to Cairo was “premature,” given that the regime had “thumbed its nose at democracy and press freedom.” Plibersek replied: “Well I think it’s an indication that the United

States is hoping to have a close relationship with the new Egyptian government. And it is important that we keep the channels of communication open.”

Within the Australian political establishment, there is bipartisan commitment to the interests of the US, which includes participating in all Washington’s military and political interventions in the Middle East, as well as the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia to confront China. Journalists like Greste are simply regarded as collateral damage in these imperialist machinations.

The defence of Greste, all the imprisoned journalists—and the thousands of other detainees of the Sisi regime—is bound up with the defence of the democratic and social rights of the working class in Egypt and internationally, and thus the political struggle against US imperialism and its accomplices, including in Canberra.



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