Egyptian junta hands down three-year jail terms to Al Jazeera journalists

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In a blatant attempt to terrorize the media and the population of Egypt, the US-backed junta of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi sentenced Al Jazeera journalists to three-year jail terms on trumped-up charges of aiding deposed President Mohamed Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Sisi toppled Mursi in a bloody July 2013 coup, shooting thousands of unarmed people in the streets of Egypt.

The journalists—Canadian Mohamed Fahmy, Egyptian producer Baher Mohammed, and Australian Peter Greste, who was deported to Australia in February and tried in absentia—were charged with operating without a press license and broadcasting "false" material harmful to Egypt.

The three had been sentenced to seven to 10 years in jail last year, but an appeals court ordered a retrial in January, admitting that the verdict was not backed by evidence. In fact, the June 2014 proceedings were a show trial without a shred of credibility. Prosecutors presented irrelevant pictures of the journalists' family vacations, and witnesses alleged on the stand that prosecutors had tampered with evidence.

The response of the courts to the discrediting of the show trial, however, was simply to lower the sentences to three years. This is a signal that the junta will tolerate no criticism in Egypt and, to the extent that it can influence events outside its borders, internationally.

Greste and the lawyers and families of the detained journalists denounced the ruling. Speaking to reporters in Sydney, Greste branded the ruling as "unjust" and "unethical." He said, "We will do everything we can to fight the verdict to clear our names. We are not terrorists. We did not collude with any organization. We did not broadcast any false news."

"In the absence of any evidence of wrongdoing, the only conclusion that we can come to is that this verdict was politically motivated," Greste added. "President Sisi now has an opportunity to undo that injustice, to correct that injustice. … It is now up to President Sisi to do what he said he would do from the outset, and that is pardon us if we were ever convicted."

Fahmy's lawyer Amal Clooney said, "The verdict today sends a very dangerous message in Egypt. It sends a message that journalists can be locked up for simply doing their job, for telling the truth and reporting the news."

Clooney said she would push for her client, a Canadian-Egyptian dual national who recently gave up Egyptian citizenship, to be deported to Canada. "We are now going to be holding a series of meetings with government officials where we will be asking for Mr. Fahmy's immediate deportation back to Canada. ... His colleague Peter Greste was sent back to Australia; there is no reason why the same thing shouldn't happen in Mr. Fahmy's case."

With its persecution of the three journalists, the regime in Cairo aims to demonstrate, not only to journalists but to the entire population, that any expression of opposition to the junta carries the risk of massive prison time, or more. Afraid that it could ultimately share the fate of the US-backed dictator, Hosni Mubarak, who was toppled by mass protests of the working class in 2011, the junta is seeking to hold on to power by outlawing all expressions of political dissent.

Just two weeks ago, the junta passed a draconian "anti-terrorism" law allowing police to arbitrarily detain and use force against people suspected of "terrorist" activity. Its broad and vague definition of terrorism includes "force, violence, threats or fear" aimed at "harming national unity," "harm to the national economy," or "obstructing the work of public

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institutions." This gives the courts the legal framework for suppressing as "terrorist" any protest, strike, or critical report exposing the crimes of Sisi's regime.

The Egyptian army's key weapon in its attempt to muzzle the press and terrorize public opinion is the support and complicity of the imperialist powers. Their pro forma statements on the Al Jazeera ruling—criticizing the Egyptian courts, while stressing the need to protect and stabilize the bloodstained junta in Cairo—reek of hypocrisy and bad faith.

British Ambassador to Egypt John Casson stressed that he supports the "new Egypt" being built by the Sisi junta. He warned, however, that the regime's stability could not be built on "a shaky foundation which deprives people of their rights and undermines freedom of the press and freedom of expression."

The Sisi junta responded by summoning Casson to a meeting to protest his statements, accusing him of "unacceptable interference" with the Egyptian judiciary.

US State Department spokesman John Kirby issued a statement stating: "We urge the government of Egypt to take all available measures to redress this verdict, which undermines the freedom of expression necessary for stability and development."

While Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop said she was "dismayed" by the verdict, Canadian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Lynne Yelich called "on the Egyptian government to use all tools at its disposal to resolve Mr. Fahmy's case and allow his immediate return to Canada." Yelich warned that the court ruling in the Al Jazeera case "undermines confidence in the rule of law in Egypt."

These tepid invocations of democracy and the rule of law are entirely hypocritical. The imperialist powers of North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific all are backing Sisi's efforts to suppress the aspirations for social equality and freedom from imperialist domination that drove millions of Egyptian workers into revolutionary struggle against Mubarak four years ago. They were terrified by this event, which encouraged mass youth protests from Madison, Wisconsin in the United States to Spain and Greece in Europe.

The imperialist powers support Sisi's "new Egypt," as the British ambassador called it, because they hope the junta will succeed in blocking all opposition from the Egyptian working class, and they are themselves engaged in massive attacks on democratic rights at home.

The clearest indication of this was the extraordinary decision by the German government in June to honor an arrest warrant issued by the Sisi junta against Al Jazeera journalist Ahmed Mansour, even though the international police agency Interpol had already rejected the warrant as baseless.

This gesture of support for the Sisi junta was only the most provocative of a series of measures taken by the major imperialist powers.

After briefly and half-heartedly threatening to suspend aid to the junta after the coup, the United States government still spends over $1 billion every year to arm the Egyptian army with a panoply of high-tech weapons. French President François Hollande has sold billions of euros worth of jet fighters to the Sisi junta, and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair took a position as an adviser to Sisi.

The author also recommends:

The arrest of Ahmed Mansour
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