

Harper government making pro forma complaints over jailing of Egyptian-Canadian journalist

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The high-profile trial of Egyptian-Canadian journalist Mohamed Fahmy by an Egyptian kangaroo court has been a source of nervousness and embarrassment for Canada's Conservative government. Having staunchly supported the return of military rule in Egypt, including General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's July 2013 coup, the Conservatives stand completely exposed by this travesty of justice.

Fahmy, the former Cairo bureau chief for Al Jazeera, was first arrested in 2013 along with two colleagues on fraudulent charges of aiding deposed president Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood. In 2014, they were sentenced to prison terms of seven to ten years, but an appeals court ordered a retrial in recognition of the phony nature of the prosecution's evidence and allegations of witness tampering.

For the retrial, all three journalists were slapped with trumped-up charges of operating without a press license and broadcasting "false" material harmful to Egypt. Fahmy and Egyptian producer Baher Mohammed have now been condemned to three years in jail, while Peter Grete, who was deported to his native Australia last March, was convicted in absentia.

The US-backed military dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the "Butcher of Cairo", has persisted in its frame-up of the three journalists to broadcast to the world that any expression of opposition to the ruling military junta, whether from the Egyptian people or foreign journalists, will be met ruthlessly, with incarceration or worse.

In 2013, the military massacred hundreds of protesters during a coup that deposed the democratically elected Morsi and brought to power al-Sisi and a host of generals who had played key roles in the former military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. Since then, the al-Sisi dictatorship has handed down mass death sentences to thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Morsi.

Fahmy's lawyer, Amal Clooney, has beseeched al-Sisi to grant her client a presidential pardon and deport him to Canada. She claims that Canada's Conservative government has filed an official petition with the Egyptian authorities requesting the same.

If Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives have made such an appeal, they have remained tight-lipped about it. Harper's public lobbying on the topic has been virtually nonexistent, in marked contrast to his frequent tirades against Russian President Vladimir Putin or Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the targets of US-led imperialist intrigues backed by Ottawa. Harper's most public statement on Fahmy's detention was a terse sentence released through his Twitter account.

Government staffers insist that Canada is engaged in "high-level" talks with the al-Sisi dictatorship for Fahmy's pardon and release. However, the government's muted efforts, little better than outright indifference, have been dwarfed by a publicity campaign mounted by Fahmy's relatives and supporters. They are demanding that Harper call al-Sisi directly and obtain the imprisoned journalist's freedom.

The Conservatives have a long record of indifference towards Canadians imprisoned by the Egyptian dictatorship. When filmmaker John Greyson and surgeon Tarek Loubani were detained by al-Sisi's soldiers for treating wounded members of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2013 anti-coup demonstrations, the Conservatives all but abandoned them until a significant public advocacy campaign forced John Baird, the Foreign Minister at the time, to personally negotiate their release. The murder of Toronto resident Amr Kassem by an Egyptian military sniper during the same demonstrations brooked nothing more than a cursory protest from Canada's government.

During Baird's recent tour of the Middle East, which included meetings with top officials of the al-Sisi dictatorship, he refused to intervene on Fahmy's behalf, even rejecting a meeting request from the journalist's lawyer.

The disgust felt by millions of people in Canada and internationally for the Conservative government's handling of the Fahmy case is not lost on Harper and company. With the federal elections just weeks away, Fahmy's kangaroo-court reconviction constitutes an ill-timed embarrassment for a ruling party that routinely invokes the "human rights" mantra used by successive Canadian governments to justify a series of bloody military interventions overseas since the end of the Cold War.

The Conservative government's kid-glove treatment of the al-Sisi dictatorship and its half-hearted advocacy on Fahmy's behalf were underscored by recent statements made by Defence Minister Jason Kenney. Responding to opposition criticism, Kenney replied, "sometimes, a degree of forceful discretion is required in the management of complex consular cases."

In other words, the Conservatives wish to tread lightly when it comes to a military dictatorship that they back to the hilt and with which the Canadian ruling class maintains strong political and economic ties.

So great was the Harper government's support for dictatorship and hostility to the revolutionary strivings of the Egyptian working class, that it was even more unwilling than the Obama administration to call for Mubarak's resignation in 2011. During the three weeks of mass protests that culminated in Mubarak's surrender that February, the Conservatives declared security and order—i.e., the maintenance of Egypt as a linchpin of a US-led, Israeli-policed Middle East—should be the overriding concern.

They then embraced al-Sisi's bloody 2013 coup, mouthing only the most cursory pro forma reservations over the overthrow of Egypt's elected government. Baird subsequently made two state visits to Cairo without once denouncing the regime for murdering hundreds of civilians and suppressing democratic rights.

This is in keeping with the Conservatives' unstinting support for extreme right-wing regimes and brutal despots across the region. They have repeatedly boasted of their close ties to the Zionist government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which last year launched a brutal war against the population of Gaza, killing approximately 2,250 Palestinians, including almost 1,500 civilians. Their list of regional allies also includes the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, who have savagely suppressed democratic rights in their own countries while arming and funding Islamist terrorist organizations such as al-Nusra and ISIS.

While the NDP and Liberals have urged the government to more vigorously press for Fahmy's release, they have no substantive differences with the Conservatives' support for the al-Sisi dictatorship. For them, Fahmy's persecution merely provides an opportunity to score some cheap political points in advance of the October elections, while papering over their own records of supporting or (in the case of the Liberals) launching imperialist wars and attacks on democratic rights both abroad and at home.

This was brought home with striking candour by NDP leader Thomas Mulcair. He told the Egyptian ambassador on Sept. 1 that his party would look favourably upon Fahmy's swift release as a building block to a "strong" relationship between Canada and Egypt under an NDP government.

In a similar vein, Liberal foreign affairs critic Marc Garneau told the Canadian Press that Harper should contact al-Sisi and

"make it very clear that the relationship between Canada and Egypt, which has been a good one, is in jeopardy if Mr. Fahmy has to go back to jail."

Naturally, none of the opposition parties cared to come clean about their own role in the Middle East, for it would reveal them to have repeatedly backed Israeli aggression and imperialist intervention.

While they opposed the expansion of Canada's bombing campaign in Iraq-Syria, which forms a part of the US-led war against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, the opposition parties did so on purely tactical grounds. Both the NDP and Greens argued that bombing ISIS positions could lend aid to al-Assad, who is ultimately the target of a US-led regime-change operation, while the Liberals advocated for greater deployments of Canadian Special Forces on the ground.

All three parties backed the NATO bombing campaign against Libya in 2011, which killed thousands of innocent civilians and left Libya in chaos. While initially presented as a "humanitarian intervention," the NATO intervention quickly and predictably morphed into a regime-change war that saw NATO employ Islamists to overthrow and murder Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

As for Canada's sidling up to the brutal regime in Cairo, the opposition intimately understands the importance of al-Sisi's dictatorship to the Canadian ruling class.

Egypt is a key client state of Canada's principal military-strategic partner, the US, in what is the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Canada has become a major arms supplier to the region over the past several years, including a \$15 billion deal to sell armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia. Between 2011 and 2012, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, arms sales to Egypt rose by 83 percent, helping raise Canada's military exports to the Middle East and North Africa to C\$704 million in 2012. Put another way, Canada increased its export of weapons to despotic regimes in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, even as these governments ramped up the violent suppression of domestic political dissent.



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