

The Correspondent: The frameup and incarceration of Australian journalist Peter Greste

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The Correspondent, the latest film by director Kriv Stenders, dramatises the 2013 frame-up and jailing in Egypt of Australian journalist Peter Greste on bogus “terrorism” charges. The script, written by Peter Duncan, is based on Greste’s book *The First Casualty* (2017) which recounts his 400-day incarceration, beginning in Cairo’s infamous Tora Prison and ends with his eventual release and deportation to Australia.

During the 1990s, Greste worked variously for Reuters, CNN, WTN and the BBC, including in Bosnia, Serbia, South Africa, Afghanistan and Mexico. He returned to Afghanistan in 2001 to cover the US invasion and then, based in Kenya between 2004 and 2011, reported on East Africa, including Somalia and Sudan.

Greste best-known story during those years was an award-winning report from Somalia entitled “Land of Anarchy” for BBC’s “Panorama” program in June 2011. He became Al Jazeera’s African correspondent later that year.

Kriv Stenders, who has been directing features, television dramas and documentaries for more than two decades, accurately portrays the horrific conditions in Egypt’s prisons and the Kafkaesque legal process confronting Greste and the two other Al Jazeera journalists.

Greste and his colleagues, Mohamed Fadel Fahmy and Baher Mohamed, were arrested on December 29, 2013, by the military dictatorship of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, falsely accusing them of colluding with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The arrests occurred four days after President Sisi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist organisation.” The military regime, which seized power in a coup d’état in early July that year, banned the Muslim Brotherhood in September.

Greste and two journalists were charged with being members of and supporting a terrorist organisation; producing false information to destabilise Egypt and defame the government; possessing broadcasting equipment and broadcasting without a licence; and working as journalists without a permit.

The three men were thrown into solitary confinement for two weeks in Tora Prison, moved to other Cairo jails, and eventually brought before a kangaroo court. The trial resulted in a seven-year prison sentence for Greste and Fahmy, and a ten-

year sentence for Mohamed.

Greste, who holds dual Australian-Latvian citizenship and is now a professor of journalism at Macquarie University, was deported to Australia in February 2015, after an international campaign by journalists and human rights organisations, and interventions by the Latvian and Australian governments.

Fahmy and Mohamed were pardoned later that year but Greste, who was convicted in absentia, remains a convicted terrorist under Egyptian law, unable to return to the country without risking re-arrest.

Richard Roxburgh delivers an effective and relatively nuanced performance as Greste, appearing in nearly every scene of the two-hour film. Together with Julian Maroun, as Fahmy, and Rahel Romahn, as Mohamed, the film dramatises the complex relationship between the three journalists and the psychological impact of their isolation, especially as their limited legal backing evaporates.

The moment when the lawyer hired by Al Jazeera withdraws under government pressure, leaving the three journalists at the mercy of Egypt’s corrupted legal system, is one of the film’s intense moments. Nicholas Cassim as Greste’s brother Andrew, together with John Bell and Anna Volska as their parents, are shown waging a dogged fight for his release.

The film includes a key flashback to 2005—one of the few scenes in the film that occur outside the Egyptian prison system—when Greste, who was in Mogadishu, Somalia, witnessed the assassination of his BBC producer Kate Peyton (Yael Stone). Her death nags at Greste during his imprisonment. He worries whether he could have done more to prevent it.

The Correspondent exposes the ludicrous character of the allegations and the military courts. Its central message—journalism is not a crime—is clear with its end titles acknowledging that over 1,700 journalists have been killed since 2001 and that 779 journalists were incarcerated in 45 countries in 2023.

Stenders film, however, is narrowly focussed and weakened by scant details about the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary developments in Egypt which preceded Greste’s

incarceration. No substantive details are provided about the Arab Spring—the multi-million strong revolutionary movement of workers, students and youth that erupted in January 2011 and overthrew President Hosni Mubarak’s hated repressive regime.

Elected in June 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi government were, however, completely incapable of resolving the social crisis that precipitated the revolutionary upsurge and inevitably came into sharp conflict with masses of working people.

In a pre-emptive move to decapitate this movement, Sisi, Egypt’s minister for defence, overthrew the regime in June 2013 and imposed military rule. Two months later and confronted with widespread demonstrations opposing Morsi’s removal, the regime unleashed violent attacks on mass protests at al-Nahda Square and Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque.

According to estimates, some 2,600 people were killed and thousands injured by security forces at the mosque with brutal attacks at al-Nahda Square and other locations across the country. More than 20,000 people accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, including scores of journalists, were arrested and incarcerated between August and December.

The Correspondent references Sisi’s military coup and its banning of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is followed by a few seconds of simulated news footage of Greste reporting from the streets of Cairo, a few days after his arrival. The film then cuts to the following morning and his arrest at Marriot Hotel.

A film is not, of course, required to provide a detailed historical and political account. Nevertheless, a greater understanding of the tumultuous events into which Greste was suddenly thrust as a journalist would have enhanced the film. After all, the Egyptian Revolution, which overthrew longstanding US-backed strongman Mubarak, captured the imagination of people around the world.

There is also another significant omission, especially given that the film is broadly focussed on the dangers facing journalists as they carry out their jobs. No mention is made of the persecution of Australian journalist and WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Julian Assange.

There is a connection between WikiLeaks and the events in Egypt. The tens of thousands of secret cables that it had released revealing political corruption and imperialist war crimes had helped spark the huge protests that brought down the Tunisian government and spurred on mass demonstrations against the Mubarak regime in Egypt.

When Greste was jailed in Cairo, Assange had already spent over a year in the Ecuador Embassy in London, something that would have been the subject of numerous discussions amongst journalists, students and workers incarcerated in Cairo’s prisons. The absence of any reference to Assange was not simply a mistake or an oversight.

In April 2019, British police seized Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy, incarcerating him in Belmarsh Prison for

the next five years. Instead of denouncing this attack, Greste denounced Assange in a scurrilous op-ed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, declaring, “Julian Assange is not a journalist, and WikiLeaks is not a news organisation.”

Greste made these comments as a spokesman for the Alliance for Journalists’ Freedom (AJF), a pro-establishment media agency he established after he was released and deported from Egypt. The AJF is backed by Google, which is one of its “founding partners” and has a representative on its advisory board.

Greste has insisted that journalism “comes with responsibility,” and that all journalists are obliged to “seek out what is genuinely in the public interest.” In other words, journalists should adhere to the framework and concerns of the corporate media, and *ipso facto* the governments and intelligence agencies they work with.

For his part, Greste has stressed that his journalism in Egypt deliberately set out not to rock the boat for the newly installed US-backed dictator Sisi. In his book *The First Casualty*, Greste comments on reportage from other war zones and his determination not to alienate the Sisi regime, describing his reports from Cairo as “vanilla journalism... predictable and flaccidly uncontroversial.”

That the film provokes discussion about the escalating attacks on journalists—with targeted assassinations of Palestinian reporters and photographers in Gaza and the West Bank now an everyday occurrence—is to its credit. But if this discussion is to be an honest one, then it cannot ignore what happened to Assange and his courageous fight for freedom of speech and the exposure of imperialist crimes.



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