



Egypt: Press freedom deteriorates and independent journalist faces prosecution in the state security courts

For immediate release – 27 September 2007

ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship condemn the recent spate of prosecutions of independent media professionals in Egypt and call upon the Egyptian government to urgently improve protection of freedom of the press.

Within the space of a fortnight in September 2007, five editors and two journalists from independent newspapers have been prosecuted in respect of offences which raise serious concern about the state of press freedom in Egypt. We draw particular attention to the case of Mr Ibrahim Issa, editor-in-chief of Al-Dustour newspaper, whose appeal is scheduled for 1 October 2007. In addition to our concern about the intimidation that such prosecutions raise for independent media, we note that Mr Issa's case is being conducted through the state security courts, despite Mr Issa's status as a civilian and journalist. We understand that Mr Issa's defence counsel has not had access to his file, which raises serious doubt as to whether Mr Issa has been afforded his right to a fair trial.

"The case against M. Issa is not unique and is part of a series of repeated government-led attacks, including through the abuse of legal procedures, to silence dissent, take revenge on critical voices, and further undermine freedom of expression in Egypt." says Dr. Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

Previously, on 13 September and 24 September 2007, Egyptian courts convicted a number of journalists and editors in respect of print articles critical of the Egyptian government.

On 13 September, four editors of independent newspapers, including Mr Issa, were convicted of violating Article 188 of the Penal Code which prohibits the publication, with "malicious intent", of "false news, statements or rumours that are likely to disturb public order". Each of the editors was sentenced to the maximum penalty of one year in prison and a fine of 20,000 Egyptian Pounds (US\$3,500). The court additionally ordered each of the editors to pay 10,000 Egyptian Pounds (US\$1,750) to remain at liberty while they appeal their convictions and sentences.

On 24 September, the editor and two journalists from the al-Wafd newspapers were also convicted of an offence in respect of undermining respect of the judicial system in respect of statements attributed to the Justice Minister. In the newspaper articles in question, a quote was attributed to the Justice Minister from a statement made during a parliamentary committee which was critical of the judiciary. The al-Wafd newspaper afforded the Justice Minister a right of reply by publishing a statement by the Ministry spokesperson denying the statement. Regardless of this, proceedings were initiated against the editor and two journalists. They were sentenced to two years in prison and fined 2,201 Egyptian Pounds (US\$ 397). The editor and two journalists have all appealed the conviction and sentence and have paid 5,000 Egyptian Pounds (US\$893) to remain at liberty pending the hearing of the appeal.

ARTICLE 19 and Index on Censorship are alarmed by the deterioration of the protection of the right to freedom of expression in Egypt and by the repeated attempts of the Egyptian authorities to maintain tight control on information, ideas and opinion. We are concerned with the frequent use of the criminal law in Egypt to suppress legitimate criticisms of government policies and public figures.

We condemn the recent spate of prosecutions of independent media professionals in Egypt and call upon the Egyptian government to urgently improve protection of freedom of the press. Furthermore, we also call for a reform of the Egyptian Penal Code, in line with Egypt's international obligations. Egypt has signed the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* as well as the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, both of which are legally binding treaties that guarantee the right to freedom of expression as well as the right to a fair trial.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information: please contact Hoda Rouhana, MENA Programme Officer, ARTICLE 19, hoda@article19.org, +44 207278 9292; or Jo Glanville, Editor, Index on Censorship, jo@indexoncensorship.org, +447713020971.