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What New Labour did for free speech

Index 2/07: Index on Censorship takes a critical look at the health of free speech in the UK on New Labour's tenth anniversary in power. New restrictions on what you can say and where you can say it mean we have to mind our language more than we used to.

Has the UK become a less tolerant society? How much has been sacrificed in the name of national security?

Leading commentators examine the defining influences of the decade on free speech in the UK and assess how far New Labour has delivered on its promises to introduce more open government.

WITH

Alistair Beaton, Martin Bright, A L Kennedy, Conor Gearty, AC Grayling, David Leigh, Anthony Lester, Martin Rowson, Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, Oliver Kamm, Nasar Meer, Julian Petley and Peter Wright

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Egypt

Egyptian blogger sentenced to four years imprisonment

'Kareem Amer' found guilty of 'insulting Islam'. By John Hendel



Kareem Amer

On 22 February a court in Alexandria jailed blogger Abdul Kareem Nabil Suleiman for four years for 'inciting hatred of Islam' and insulting President Hosni Mubarak. Known online as 'Kareem Amer', he had been in detention since November. John Hendel reports.

A 22-year-old Egyptian blogger named **Abdul Kareem Suleiman Amer** assumed the handle 'Kareem Amer' on his blog a long time ago but now people from around the world know him by this name.

His blog writings, in favour of secularism and women's rights, led to his expulsion from al-Azhar university in early 2006 and solitary confinement in prison since November. This morning an Alexandria court sentenced Kareem to four years in prison for criticising Egyptian President Mubarak and insulting Islam

Police arrested Kareem on 6 November on charges of inciting hatred of Islam, defaming the president and spreading rumours likely to disturb the peace. His trial underwent repeated delays and he had faced potentially as many as eleven years in prison for the blog writings. Blog postings also caused his arrest and detention for 12 days in October 2005.

'The state of freedom of expression in Egypt is getting worse one day after the other,' said Dalia Ziada, a Cairo-based human rights activist and translator who helped secure Kareem a lawyer for the trial. She called Kareem's case a 'severe violation to freedom of expression in Egypt.'

Protestors around the world shouted down Egyptian embassies on 15 February during what they called 'Free Kareem Day'. The group's website describes demonstrations in London, Bucharest, Rome, Berlin, Ottawa, Paris, Washington DC, Chicago, and New York.

Other demonstrations have occurred in Stockholm and Bahrain and US Congressmen and Italian MPs have written letters protesting Kareem's detention. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters without Borders have condemned the arrest.

The grassroots opposition to Kareem's detention arose through an informal network of Kareem's associates. Tom Palmer, a Senior Fellow and director of the educational division at the Washington DC-based think tank the Cato Institute, met Kareem in August and had talked with him days before his arrest on 6 November.

Contact ended with the arrest - Kareem has no access to the Internet and all contact has been mediated through his lawyers, who had limited time with Kareem. Palmer called on former Cato interns and connections to help organise the worldwide protests on 15 February.

Kareem's lawyers are preparing an appeal for 24 February, but expect little, according to the Free Kareem website.

Not many people know about Kareem's case in Egypt, Ziada said, but most of those who do stand against him. Hundreds of young Egyptians have sent her insulting e-mails for defending Kareem. She compared Cairo to an egg with a very thin shell, ready to break if brushed. 'Cairo now is burning from inside on all levels,' Ziada said.

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Links

[Kareem Amer campaign website.](#)