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Protesters around the world give voice to the silenced

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A 22-year-old Egyptian blogger assumed the name '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, caused his expulsion from his university and solitary confinement in prison since November. Currently he awaits a verdict scheduled for 22 February, which could potentially leave him imprisoned for eleven years. This marks a trend of repressing Internet freedom of expression in Egypt this past year. *John Hendel reports for Index on Censorship*

The world reacts

Cries of 'Free Kareem' filled the air every fifteen minutes at the Egyptian embassy in London on the afternoon of 15 February. Egyptian officials took notice as the gathering increased in size. When protesters waved their many signs, displaying phrases like 'Shame on Egypt' and 'Blogging is Not a Crime', the officials closed the drapes. When the protesters chanted, the officials shut any open window.

About a dozen people gathered at the corner near the Egyptian embassy to protest the arrest and detention of 22-year-old Egyptian blogger Kareem Amer. They passed out fliers and attracted the attention of various people walking through the area.

'We decided we want this to be entirely peaceful but also respectful and dignified,' said Andrew Perraut, the organiser of the London protest. Perraut is a 22-year-old political theory graduate student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Tom Palmer of the Washington DC-based Cato Institute, a political think tank, had asked him to plan the protest.

The London protest marked one of nine protests scheduled to occur in major cities around the world as part of what protesters call 'Free Kareem Day'. The group's website describes demonstrations in London, Bucharest, Rome, Berlin, Ottawa, Paris, Washington DC, Chicago, and New York.

From blogs to bars

The force behind this maelstrom is a 22-year-old Egyptian man named Abdul Kareem Suleiman Amer, more commonly known by the pseudonym he used on his blog: Kareem Amer. Kareem's blogging habit led to problems more than once, beginning with an arrest over his displeasure with Alexandria riots in 2005 and his expulsion from Al-Azhar University early in 2006 for criticising conservative professors. This habit placed him behind bars in solitary confinement on 6 November, where he has been ever since.

'I gave him the usual advice of an older person—remember that you can fight another day, be careful with what you do, etc., etc.,' said his friend Tom Palmer, a Senior Fellow and director of the educational division at the Cato Institute in Washington DC. 'He's a rather outspoken and brave young man.'

The government arrested Kareem on 'charges of inciting hatred of Islam, defaming the president and spreading rumours likely to disturb the peace' according to Reporters without Borders. The blog entries had simply promoted secularism and gender equality. The first hearing took place on 25 January in an Alexandria court, where the trial was adjourned until 1 February so a computer expert could determine where the blog's host website was hosted.

On 1 February, a group of about ten 'extremist' lawyers accused Kareem of being a disbeliever who has insulted Islam, according to a human rights activist in Cairo named Dalia Ziada. The conflict caused another delay and the next hearing will not be until 22 February. Kareem currently faces up to 11 years in prison.

Grassroots organisation works to keep Kareem's voice alive

The arrest, however, has not gone unnoticed and a grassroots organisation emerged almost immediately following Kareem's imprisonment. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters without Borders condemned the arrest. Two US Congressmen, Republican Trent Franks and Democrat Barney Frank, sent a joint letter pleading on Kareem's behalf in January, as did three Italian MPs shortly after. A regularly updated website for the Free Kareem Coalition was set up. There were also small demonstrations in Bahrain and Washington DC.

A dozen New Yorkers gathered around the Egyptian Consulate in Manhattan on 31 January, wrapped in big jackets to protect themselves from the winter cold in the middle of the workday. They lifted colourful signs, marked with phrases such as 'Release Kareem Amer!' and 'Drop the charges'.

After seeing the New Yorkers, consulate officials shut the drapes, though continually peeked out to find the protesters still standing. Other than a catered food truck entering the consulate, nothing happened with the Egyptian officials, though the people passing by took notice, especially taxi drivers. Many, honking in support as they waited for the traffic light to turn green, were of Middle Eastern descent and took the group's fliers.

'What has my government done now?' an Egyptian taxi driver called out before receiving a flier and honking in solidarity.

Organised in just three days by Constantino Diaz-Duran and Chris Kilmer, this rally marked the beginning of the

series of protests set to culminate on 15 February. Diaz-Duran became involved in Kareem's case a few weeks after the arrest; he began publishing op-eds on Columbia University's student paper, the Columbia Daily Spectator, to 'rile up my fellow students', in his words. He is a currently a 27-year-old student majoring in American Studies at Columbia University with hopes to enter law school.

'I left my home country, Guatemala, at the age of 21 to escape threats and seek asylum in America. I was a junior in college at the time, studying economics, and working as an editorial writer for one of the country's major newspapers,' Diaz-Duran said. 'Needless to say, a story about a 22-year-old student being persecuted for his writings hit close to home. I am older now, and safe, but I simply could not sit idly in New York while Kareem is suffering in a jail cell in Alexandria.'

In 2001, Diaz-Duran helped start a movement called 'Fridays of Mourning' ('Viernes de Luto'), which mobilised thousands of Guatemalans to wear black on 17 consecutive Fridays as a sign of protest against rampant government corruption and a proposed tax increase, though he had to leave the country after the second week. Diaz-Duran remarked that Kareem's 'plight far exceeds anything I ever went through'.

Many individuals connected to the global day of protest became involved due to the Cato Institute's Tom Palmer. Perraut and Diaz-Duran, for instance, had both interned at the Cato Institute. Palmer had various other associates in Portugal, Rome, and Canada, who worked to contact the government and organise protests.

'Word has spread through websites, e-mails, text messages, and phone calls.' Palmer said. 'There's no official organization behind this, just networks of friends and people who have contacted each other through e-mail.'

Palmer had spoken with Kareem online shortly before the arrest occurred while at a conference in Tbilisi, Georgia.

'I logged on and he said hi and told me that he had been ordered to go to the prosecutor's office the next day and he was worried,' Palmer recalled. 'I asked if he had told anyone and he said no. I said he had to tell people before he went. I immediately sent off text messages to others I knew and they started to contact others via e-mail and text messages.'

All eyes on Egypt

This led to what some protest leaders have called a full time job working on behalf of Kareem Amer. Before 15 February Perraut received 20 to 25 e-mails a day from protest leaders, not to mention e-mails to others involved such as Cairo-based human rights activist Dalia Ziada, who first acquired a lawyer for Kareem.

Egypt has 'cracked down on Internet freedom' in 2006, according to the Reporters without Borders annual report released in February. It jailed at least seven cyber-dissidents and the report mentioned Kareem explicitly.

'I honestly don't think they expected the world to know about this,' Diaz-Duran said about Egypt. 'They probably thought that they could get away with it, and thought that they would scare him into taking down his blog and recanting his writings. They didn't realize what a brave man Kareem is. They probably see their mistake now, and are trying to find a way to correct it without losing too much face.'

Facing 11 years in prison, Kareem will hear his verdict on 22 February.

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