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Egypt: Hundreds of life sentences handed down in mass trial 'farcical'

Amnesty International has condemned as farcical the life sentence handed down today against prominent activist Ahmed Douma in Egypt, as well as against hundreds of others, following an unfair trial.

The Cairo Criminal Court today sentenced Ahmed Douma to a life term of a 25 years after convicting him of taking part in violence during protests in December 2011, also fining him 17 million Egyptian pounds (US\$2.2 million).

The Public Prosecution had charged the activist with attacking government buildings and security forces and setting fire to the Egyptian Scientific Institute during the mass demonstrations against army rule.

The court also handed down 25-year sentences against 229 others and 10-year sentences against 39 minors on the same charges, state media and human rights lawyers reported.

An Amnesty International delegate who observed several sessions of the trial documented a number of violations of the right to fair trial.

Defence lawyers for Ahmed Douma withdrew from the case in November after the court refused to grant them access to key evidence and the presiding judge accused the defendants of burning state property and attacking the security forces.

The judge also referred members of Ahmed Douma's defence counsel to the Public Prosecution on accusations of contempt of court after they protested his decisions.

Witnesses for the Public Prosecution had been unable to remember many of the details of the incidents they were asked to testify about, Amnesty International's trial observer reported. Prosecutors failed to establish individual responsibility for the violence.

In December, the presiding judge jailed Ahmed Douma for three years and fined him 10,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$1,310) after holding him in contempt of court. The activist had asked the judge about a Facebook account in his name.

The judge today threatened to hand down a further three-year sentence against Ahmed Douma after the activist sarcastically applauded the verdict, video footage of the court hearing shows.

Anyone sentenced solely for exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly should be immediately released, Amnesty International said.

Others should be granted a fair re-trial before a civilian court, without the possibility of the death penalty. Those who were under 18 at the time of the alleged offence must be tried in conformity with the rules of juvenile justice.

Amnesty International has also called for Ahmed Douma's conviction and sentence for contempt of court to be quashed, stating that he had been exercising his right to free expression and that he should not be imprisoned for raising concerns about the lack of fairness of his trial.

Background

In recent months, the Public Prosecution has indicted hundreds of people on charges of violence during protests. They include supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsi, leftists and others.

In many cases documented by Amnesty International, the Public Prosecution has failed to establish the individual criminal responsibility of the defendants and has relied exclusively on reports and witnesses from the security forces.

The same presiding judge who handed down a life sentence against Ahmed Douma today yesterday handed down 183 death sentences in a separate mass trial. In June 2014, the judge also jailed three Al Jazeera journalists on charges of "broadcasting false news" and aiding the banned Muslim Brotherhood movement.

In December 2011, the army and security forces used excessive force to disperse protests against army rule around the Cabinet Offices in central Cairo, leading to the deaths of at least 17 people. Investigations by Egypt's Public Prosecution failed to hold any members of the security forces responsible for the deadly crackdown. The body instead ordered the trial of hundreds of protesters.

Ahmed Douma is already serving a separate three-year sentence, handed down in December 2013, for taking part in an "unauthorized demonstration" in November 2013. He became one of the first activists to be jailed under Egypt's Protest Law.

He was jailed with activists Ahmed Maher and Mohamed Adel, leaders of the "6 April Youth Movement" that helped mobilize the mass protests that toppled Hosni Mubarak from power in February 2011. Egypt's highest court of law upheld the verdict against the men last month.

Ahmed Douma's health severely deteriorated while he was on hunger-strike last year in protest at his imprisonment, his family announced.

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