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When will you set Kareem Amer free?

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On Tuesday, another earthquake struck the Egyptian blogosphere when a court again postponed the decision of the appeal, filed in September, on behalf of Kareem Amer until the December 22. Kareem Amer, 25, is an Egyptian blogger and former student of Al-Azhar University. He is now serving four years in prison, since November 2006, for allegedly insulting Islam and President Hosni Mubarak.

In 2005, Kareem wrote an article criticizing Al-Azhar scholars' pledge to Mubarak to be the "prince of believers." He argued that such a pledge will make Mubarak a sacred figure and would deprive the Egyptian people from their right to hold the president of the state accountable. Kareem simply wrote this on his own personal blog. As a result, he was expelled from university, interrogated and sentenced to four years!

I cannot help my tears every time I remember what he said to one of his defendants who visited him recently in prison about how his long stay in prison made him "forget how life is outside of prison." He has been there for three years now. Every year, the President pardons criminals and murderers on national holidays. Every year, we wait for Kareem to be pardoned in one of those occasions. But this never happens. Why? Because Kareem, the descent young man whose only crime was talking his mind, is more dangerous than reported criminals from the point of view of our prestigious government. The criminals own weapons, but Kareem owns ideas. He is more dangerous, indeed.

I can still remember the first time I met with Kareem as if it were yesterday. We met in Giza in August 2006, during a conference by the HAMSA Initiative and Cato Institute on Liberalism and Civil Struggle. This conference was a life changing experience for me, not only because of the curriculum but also because of the outstanding group of young activists from all over the region I met. One of those outstanding activists with great potential and determination was Kareem Amer. I was astonished by his support for women's rights despite his background as a student of Al-Azhar and a son of an extremist family. I tried to approach him, although he was afraid of talking to me as he had mentioned in one of his blogposts posted immediately after

the conference. He thought that because I am a practicing Muslim, wearing hijab and doing prayer, I will reject talking to him because he is a "boy!" But, by the end of the conference, this ice melted and we became good friends!

A lot of people accused me of being a hypocrite for defending him and supporting him when he got arrested. They asked how a devout Muslim defends an atheist who insulted Islam on his blog! But, let's rethink of this argument again. I did so because I support his right to freedom of expression and because I know well what he has been through with his extremist father and school teachers. Kareem's father, during the hearings of the case, called upon the judge to sentence his son, Kareem, to death! Kareem used to attack the concept of Islam that was given to him through those Salifists, but not the moderate Islam we are proud to embrace!

On the right sidebar of my blog and many others, I have a special section for the political prisoners and other activists I support. Since 2006, I have been removing tens who got released and substituting them with others who have been arrested. The only one whose name and picture is still there since 2006, is Kareem Amer. I wonder why such a young man should suffer in such a horrible way for what he wrote. Why the Egyptian government, which claims support to freedom of expression and human rights, forces a young man to spend the best years of his life in prison.

Yet, I wonder, when the heartless government sets this young man free, will the cruel society accept him, forgive him, and give him back his right to life with open mind and free soul?

BM

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