

Release Egyptian poet detained for 'critical' song

United Nations human rights experts have urged Egyptian authorities to release a poet and songwriter arrested for writing a song critical of government policies.



Galal El Behairy, Egyptian poet.

Galal El Behairy was arrested earlier this year by National Security Police and disappeared for a week before appearing to face charges of terrorist affiliation, disseminating false news, abusing social-media networks, blasphemy, contempt of religion, and insulting the military.

El Bahairy wrote the lyrics to the song *Balaha*, performed by Ramy Essam, and released on 26 February 2018. The music video was posted on social media, drawing over 3.7 million views.

In March, El Behairy was arrested by National Security Police before being charged. In May, he attended his first trial in the Military Court. The Court's sentence has been delayed three times since 16 May, and is now expected on 31 July. He remains detained in Tora Prison in Cairo.

"We are alarmed at the arrest and alleged ill-treatment of El Behairy which appears to be related solely to the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of artistic expression and creativity," said the UN experts.

“ We stand by Egyptian artist Galal El-Behairy as he awaits his court sentence today. No artist should fear making their voice heard. Join us with [@AtRiskArtists](#) in the fight for [#FreeExpression](#). Sign the petition to [#FreeGalal](#): <https://t.co/dWfpQsNHBZ> [@free_galal](#) pic.twitter.com/xARrtTvNRh— PEN America (@PENAmerican) July 28, 2018 ”

The statement was issued by UN experts: Karima Bennouna, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Seong Phil Hong, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and Bernard Duhaime, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

Freedom of speech

El Behairy's detention takes place against a backdrop of restrictions to freedom of artistic and other forms of expression and to the right to take part in cultural life in the country. "We have received allegations that it is increasingly common for artists, activists and journalists to be arrested and detained on charges such as 'publishing false news.

"We are very worried at the reported criminalisation of the legitimate exercise of artistic expression through the imposition of a range of dubious charges.

"We urge the relevant authorities to investigate the alleged ill-treatment of El Behairy, and to acquit him of all charges related to the creative expression of his political views. We recall that all individuals have the right to participate in varied information exchanges, to contribute to artistic expression, and to take part in cultural life and in the development of their society, including through political debate and expression of opinion and dissent, without fear of sanction or reprisals," the UN experts said in a statement.

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