

Egypt Editor given six-month Sentence for Mubarak Rumours

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CAIRO - Outspoken Egyptian editor Ibrahim Eissa was sentenced to six months in jail on Wednesday for writing rumours about President Hosni Mubarak's health, a justice official told AFP.

Eissa, editor-in-chief of Al-Dustur daily, was charged with spreading "false information ... damaging the public interest and national stability" and had faced up to three years in prison. He can appeal the sentence.

He had been due to be tried before a state security court where he would have enjoyed no right of appeal, but eventually the trial took place in an ordinary court after what the journalists' union called regime backpedalling.

"This verdict is against all international human rights conventions," Eissa told AFP after judge Sherif Kamel Mustapha handed down the sentence in a Cairo court.

He said the verdict showed the regime's hostility to the press and "affirms the holiness of President Mubarak and the rejection of any criticism of him or his policies. I don't know if this is a judicial decision or a political one.

"The regime is trying to defend itself because it knows it has plunged the country into successive crises and, if my imprisonment will make bread reach the people who are queuing for it, then I am ready to go to prison," he said.

He was referring to rampant inflation that has seen the price of many food staples, including bread, skyrocket in recent months.

The charge against Eissa stemmed from accusations that his reports on Mubarak's health last August led investors to pull their money out of Egypt.

Human Rights Watch on Tuesday condemned the ruling and the laws that permit such cases to be brought.

"These laws that allow for the imprisonment of people for expressing peaceful views should be repealed," the New York-based group's Middle East spokesman Gasser Abdel-Razek told AFP.

"Eissa was tried not for committing a crime but rather for discussing issues that are definitely in the interest of the public and his sentencing is politically motivated.

"The legal framework in which reporters and writers are working is restrictive and a violation under Egypt's own constitution and under international human rights law," Abdel-Razek said.

Eissa was accused of harming Egypt's economy after the rumours allegedly caused foreign investors to withdraw investments worth more than 350 million dollars from the stock exchange.

Speculation about Mubarak was widely reported on in Egypt's independent press and included reports of his hospitalisation, travel abroad for treatment and even death.

At least seven journalists were sentenced in September alone to up to two years in prison on charges ranging from misquoting the justice minister to spreading rumours about 79-year-old Mubarak.

The crackdown prompted 23 papers in October to suspend publication for one day in protest.

Last month, an Al-Jazeera journalist who had been sentenced to six months over a film that highlighted torture in Egyptian police had her sentence reduced to a fine.

Several cases brought against Eissa by individuals linked to the ruling National Democratic Party were dismissed by the court, but Wednesday's ruling was based on a case brought by the state security services.

Egyptian law allows citizens to lodge complaints which can then lead to criminal convictions.

The harsh treatment of the Egyptian media led the United States last year to voice "deep concern" at the convictions, a criticism rejected by Egypt as "unacceptable interference" by its ally.