



Academic Freedom in Egypt: Free Patrick Zaki!

10.02.2020 The European Students' Union (ESU), in solidarity with Unione degli Universitari (UDU), calls for the immediate release of Patrick George Zaki, an Egyptian human rights activist and researcher, arrested at Cairo airport on Friday 7th February 2020 upon his visit back home while enrolled in a postgraduate degree in gender studies at the Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italy. The local association EIPR (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights), with which Patrick collaborated, stated that, according to Patrick's lawyers who met with him at the Public Prosecutor's Office in Mansoura on Saturday, Patrick was beaten, subjected to electric shocks, threatened, and questioned about various issues related to his work and activism¹. Patrick is one of thousands of students and human rights defenders to be arrested under Egypt's dictatorship².

According to EIPR, Patrick was presented with a police report falsely claiming that he was arrested at a checkpoint in his hometown under a warrant issued in September 2019, of which he was unaware of. Obscure and vicious accusations ranging from incitement to protest without a permit and running a social media account intended on harming national security, to promoting terrorist acts prompted the Public Prosecutor's Office to detain Patrick on remand for 15 days pending further investigation.

ESU echoes the serious concerns expressed by Riccardo Noury, Amnesty International's spokesperson in Italy over the risk of the researcher's prolonged detention and torture³. This heinous tactic is common under authoritarian regimes to trample on human rights and democratic principles by silencing people and citizens of the State who express beliefs uncomfortable for the regime, while the media and the world tend to forget them over time.

While welcoming the firm reactions of the Italian government and the academic authorities of the Bologna University, ESU and UDU call for more strict and decisive interventions with the Egyptian government which have yet to answer to the [killing of Giulio Regeni](#). Regeni, an Italian PhD student disappeared on 25 January 2016, four months after he arrived in Cairo to complete his doctoral research on labour unions. His corpse, showing signs of prolonged and brutal torture, was found on an outlying Cairo desert road nine days later. In 2018, Italy's public prosecutor listed five members of Egypt's police and national security agency as suspects in his disappearance.

We urge all stakeholders within the international academic community to encourage political advocacy efforts and public campaigns to support student and academic rights, especially in countries which lack democratic freedoms and which use violence to suppress dissent. Attacks on students like Patrick Zaki do not only have a devastating impact on the individual's access to education, but also on a society's overall development in the long-term by creating a culture of fear and oppression. States have an obligation to protect higher education and the human rights and academic freedom of students, faculty and staff. There is an urgent need for increased awareness and responses to attacks on higher education. We urge for greater support and protection of student activists, documentation of attacks, as well as prosecution of those responsible for the violations.

¹ <https://eipr.org/en/press/2020/02/egyptian-human-rights-defender-disappeared-and-tortured-eipr-gender-rights-0>

² Nagy, M., Atta, W. and Abdelhamid, A. (2017) Besieged Universities: A Report on the Rights and Freedoms of Students in Egyptian Universities from the Academic Years 2013-2014 to 2015-2016. Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) & Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE).

³ https://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/08/news/studente_bologna_egitto-248059909/?refresh_ce