

UN human rights experts urge Egypt to release jailed poet who penned hit protest song

Galal El Behairy has been held in detention since February after penning a song critical of Egypt's policies, prompting United Nations human rights experts on Thursday to urge the government to release him immediately.

The song 'Balaha', performed by Ramy Essam, went online on 26 February, with the music video quickly going viral and drawing over 3.7 million social media views.

Just five days later, Mr. El Behairy was arrested by National Security Police and detained for a week at an undisclosed location, before being charged with affiliating with terrorists, "disseminating false news, abusing social-media networks, blasphemy, contempt of religion and insulting the military" according to a statement released by six rights experts.

At the time of that first court appearance he showed signs of torture and beating. His first trial in Military Court began on 6 May, and after being delayed three times, sentencing is due to take place this coming Saturday. He remains in Tora Prison, in the capital Cairo.

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

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

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' – *UN rights experts*

The poet's detention takes place against a backdrop of restrictions to artistic and other forms of expression as well as to the right to participate in the country's cultural life.

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In a separate case on similar charges, still under investigation by the High State-Security, Mr. El Behairy can be further detained for up to two years without trial.

“We urge the relevant authorities to investigate the alleged ill-treatment of Mr. El Behairy, and to acquit him of all charges related to the creative expression of his political views,” stated the rights experts.

“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,” they concluded.

The rights experts are Karima Bennoune, [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](#).