

TRIED BUT NOT TESTED...

Memoires of an Imprisoned Student

Saif al-Islam Eid

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MENA PRISON FORUM

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EDUCATION BEHIND BARS

In Egypt, as in many other MENA countries, the number of “political prisoners” can only be guessed: the figures could vary from one or two thousand to tens of thousands. Whatever the number may be—though this is not a minor point—the most important issue is that these prisoners are not being designated as “political prisoners” and are instead labelled as common criminals or, even though such a label seems grotesque, they are sometimes added to the catchall category of “terrorists.” Looking at this situation from afar, a first reaction might be distress at the idea that in this part of the world people are still imprisoned for political activity or issues related to mere opinion. Looking more closely, an observer might express his or her indignation at the large yet obscured number of people who are victims of such horrific policies. Even just a brief examination of the conditions of incarceration and the ill-treatment that people in these prisons are subject to would cause any moral individual to surely express outrage.

Even if we accept that conditions in Egyptian prisons are a source of serious horror, we need to be aware of the fact that the conditions are only one part of prison as a human experience: as the prison experience is one that each prisoner lives in their own unique way. And we should note that these differences are present not only when the incarcerated person is in prison, but also importantly, afterwards, assuming that the prison experience does have an afterwards. These various experiences differ even between inmates who share the same

cell, and it is from the availability of these unique experiences and their details that prison literature exists.

This brings us to this very testimony. On January 24, 2014, Saif al-Islam Eid, who was in his first year in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at the University of Bani Sweif, was arrested at a checkpoint while heading to the north of Egypt to spend the holidays with his family. He was accused of plotting against the public order, and over a year later, on February 9, 2015, he was declared innocent of all charges and was set free.

So far, one might say, there is nothing unusual in Eid's story, and Eid himself understands very well that hundreds of individuals, including university students, have been arrested and taken to prison, and that not all of them had the good fortune to have their case come to trial relatively quickly. Additionally, Eid's experience with prison is not limited to that period in his life: his father also served a prison sentence as a political prisoner.

Against this background, Eid recounts in these pages his almost unbelievable travails in prison, due mainly to his determination to be allowed—as he should have been—to take his exams. Eid was first incarcerated in the prison of Ab'adiyya, located in Damanhour, in the north of Egypt, not far from where he was arrested. There he insisted on his right to sit for his exams. Because of his determination, he was punished by the prison authorities and tricked into being transferred to the prison at Fayyoun, south of Cairo, where he waited to no avail for an examination committee to come and allow him to take his exams.

This essentially is the plot of *Tried But Not Tested... Memoires of an Imprisoned Student!* Although the story Eid tells cannot compete with countless narratives about physical torture—although he hints several times at having himself undergone physical ill-treatment—he cleverly skips these details, focusing almost exclusively on his own individual predicament of not being able to take his exams, and consequently missing a year of university.

Eid stresses that his case is not unique and that students represent a special category within the demographics of Egyptian inmates. He exposes in detail what he considers to be an unwritten government policy behind the massive number of students being arrested and incarcerated who continue to represent the spearhead of Egyptian political activism.

This second publication in the MENA Prison Forum Logs series draws its strength from its not only interesting but also important content, as the text is a subjective account of the single-minded determination of one student to learn and to pass his exams. Clearly, it stands as a statement against injustice, but it also demonstrates that individual resistance, even in the name of passing exams, is a form of self-defense.

Happily, Saif al-Islam Eid graduated from university in Egypt in June 2018, and afterwards chose to leave the country and move to Doha. There he obtained a Masters in Political Science and International Affairs in 2019, and he is currently continuing his research on Islamic political movements and political transition processes in the MENA region. This text was drafted in May 2019, when, according to Eid, he felt "strong enough to revisit this episode of his life."