

Martin Ennals Award | And the winner is...

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... Mohamed Zaree from Egypt. Zaree's brave and dedicated work to promote and protect human rights was honoured with his recognition as the Laureate at the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in Geneva tonight.



Lawyer Mohamed Zaree is Egypt Country Director with the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS). He currently faces criminal charges and a travel ban in association with his work to promote and protect the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and to uphold the rule of law. Due to the arbitrary travel ban, he was unable to attend the Award ceremony in person and was instead represented by his wife and two children. However, he made a quick appearance on screen to thank the jury and to remind the audience of the importance to keep fighting for human rights and a space for civil society in Egypt.

'This Award recognises Zaree's outstanding work, undertaken at great personal risk and cost, to promote human rights and justice for all in Egypt,' said ISHR Director and Martin Ennals jury member Phil Lynch.

'The jury was impressed by Zaree's courage and his collaborative approach to defending human rights. Through this Award, the jury members express their solidarity with all human rights defenders under attack in Egypt and condemn the government's repression of civil society and dissent in the country,' Lynch said.

Situation in Egypt

Pressure on human rights defenders has increased dramatically in Egypt in recent years. Legal and extrajudicial threats, harassment and intimidation have become common tools to stifle civil society. In the last weeks and months alone, Egyptian authorities have enacted a [harsh NGO law restricting and criminalising human rights monitoring and advocacy](#), arbitrarily [detained human rights lawyer Ibrahim Metwally for cooperating with the UN](#), and [arrested and failed to prevent attacks against LGBTI persons across the country](#).

Yet, even in this extremely challenging environment, Zaree has kept up his work to advocate for human rights, strengthen civil society and engage with the media and the UN. He leads CIHRS' research, human rights education, and national advocacy initiatives in Egypt and helps shape the media debate on human rights issues. During this critical period for civil society, he also leads the Forum of Independent Egyptian Human Rights NGOs, a network aiming to unify human rights groups in advocacy. Zaree's initiatives and highly collaborative approach have helped NGOs to develop common approaches to human rights issues in Egypt.

Zaree has been banned from traveling since May 2016 due to charges in the Foreign Funding Case (no. 173/2011) - charges brought under draconian legislation which restricts NGO independence and criminalises NGO access to funds from foreign sources. If found guilty, he could potentially be imprisoned for life. Additionally, Zaree was charged with two felonies in May 2017. He was only released from detention under an exorbitant bail. The charges can be seen as severe reprisals - at the hands of the Egyptian government - for Zaree's work on the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and his broader advocacy work.

Nevertheless, Zaree continues to engage the authorities in dialogue wherever possible, arguing that respect for human rights will increase stability in Egypt.

Strong competition

The work that all three finalists for the Martin Ennals Award carry out in the field of human rights is of vital importance, with the jury also honouring the work of the FreeThe5KH advocates in Cambodia, and trans activist Karla Avelar in El Salvador.

Avelar, a former ISHR trainee, fights for the human rights of LGBTI persons, HIV affected persons, migrants, persons deprived of liberty in situations of vulnerability and victims of discrimination due to their sexual

orientation or gender identity in El Salvador. Pooja Patel, who leads ISHR's work on women's rights and LGBTI rights, recognised the outstanding and [courageous work of Karla Avelar](#) as a finalist. 'Karla's award nomination speaks to the particular situation and protection needs of trans persons, the rise in attacks against defenders by non-state actors - including gangs and organised crime - in Latin America, and the impunity that prevails in the overwhelming majority of cases in the region', Patel said.

About the Award

The Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, which is sometimes called the 'Nobel Prize for human rights', was created in 1993. It is named after former Amnesty International secretary general Martin Ennals and annually honours individuals '[who demonstrate exceptional courage in defending and promoting human rights around the world](#)'. The aim of the award is to provide protection through international recognition.

The Laureate and award winners are selected by a jury comprised of representatives of ten of the world's leading human rights organisations.

Photo & Video: Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders

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