

Journalists Austin Mackell and Aliya Alwi on their Egyptian ordeal



By [Theresa Mallinson](#)

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On 11 February Australian freelance journalist Austin Mackell and Egyptian translator and fixer Aliya Alwi were arrested in the industrial city of Mahalla. They spent 56 hours in jail before lawyers secured their release, and the investigation against them is ongoing. Theresa Mallinson caught up with the pair in Cairo to find out more about their ordeal and how being in limbo is affecting their work and lives.

Australian freelance journalist Austin Mackell has worked with Egyptian translator and fixer Aliya Alwi since mid-2011. On 11 February this year, Mackell and Alwi (together with a US student, Dereck Ludovici, and their taxi driver Zakaria Ahmad) drove to the industrial city of Mahalla to meet with labour unionist Kamal Elfayoumi on the anniversary of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's ousting from power. But mere minutes after they met up with Elfayoumi, a mob started shouting at the journalists, accusing them of being spies and traitors. When Ahmed attempted to calm the crowd, a policeman took his driver's licence, and their car was escorted to the police station for their own "protection".

Although they were moved many times to different prisons, Mackell, Alwi, and their companions wouldn't be released from custody for the next 56 hours. Alwi says they began to think they were in trouble when "they told us there were witnesses against us, a couple of hours into our custody with the police. They told us there was three witnesses that testified that we were inciting people, but at that point they didn't even clarify that there were charges, so we just thought it was an FYI," says Alwi. "Later on when they formally charged us in the DA's office, it was inescapable." For Mackell, "It was just an escalation, a constant escalation. Every step was an escalation on the last step, it's hard to say when you realise; we knew it was bad, and it just got worse."

Mackell and Alwi weren't physically harmed during their time in custody - although Ahmed (who has not been charged) was beaten up. "I know that I was concerned for the Egyptians I was with, especially Aliya, but... you have to understand Egypt in the international context, even in the minutiae like this," says Mackell. "The power structure that gives these guys authority is actually an international power structure, and I outrank them in that. It's perverse, even though they're the ones trying to uphold it, and I'm the one trying to report on people agitating against it, there's still definitely that element of special treatment for Westerners going on."

Read the [full story](#) on [freeafricanmedia.com](#).

ABOUT THERESA MALLINSON

Theresa Mallinson has lived and worked as an itinerant writer, subeditor and sometimes teacher, plying her trade in such exotic destinations as Vaduz, Dubai, and Cape Town. But that's all changed since she became a journalist at the Daily Maverick (www.thedailymaverick.co.za) and managing editor at Free African Media. For now, she's very happy to be living in Jozi. Follow her on Twitter at [@tcmallinson](#) and contact her on theresa.mallinson@gmail.com.

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