

Truth for Giulio Regeni!: Tragedy, Complex Complicity and the Pursuit of Effective Transnational Advocacy



MSc student **Cazadira Fediva Tamzil** reflects on the *'Truth for Giulio Regeni!' Transnational Activism & Human Rights Violations in Egypt'* LSE Department of Government event, which took place on Thursday 2 March 2017. [Listen to the podcast recording.](#)

On Thursday 2 March 2017 the **LSE Department of Government Collective Action Forum** hosted a ground-breaking event entitled *'Truth for Giulio Regeni! Transnational Activism and Human Rights Violations in Egypt'*. This particular event brought together renowned academics and activists to exchange thoughts on the tragedy involving Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge University student from Italy who was brutally tortured and murdered in 2016 in the midst of his PhD fieldwork in Egypt. This event at LSE coincided with the one year-anniversary of Giulio's death, and the audience was especially honoured to have his family joining in the conversation via Skype. Moderated by Dr. Ayça Çubukçu from the LSE Department of Sociology, the event unearthed the complexity and complicity of a multiplicity of parties in the tragedy, and how we can formulate an effective advocacy for truth and justice.

Giulio Regeni's case is complex, to say the least, as it transcends geographical boundaries and implicates a multiplicity of state/non-state actors whose political and economic interests are at stake. For Sherif Azer, an Egyptian human rights activist, Giulio's death occurred against the backdrop of political turmoil in Egypt, a country increasingly marred with severe crackdowns on human rights activists. Azer also noted how xenophobic sentiments in Egypt are on the rise – prompting many Egyptians to be suspicious of the existence of 'Western spies'. At the time, Giulio was conducting research on Egyptian independent trade unions. It was likely that his murder was linked to a wrongful perception of him being a foreign agent tasked with overthrowing the Egyptian administration through citizen mobilisation. The Egyptian government never acknowledged its complicity, yet many also deplore the UK and Italian governments' lack of efforts to pressure Egypt. Politics notwithstanding, Professor John Chalcraft of the LSE Department of Government suggests how there might also be economic interests at play, i.e. one of Italy's biggest oil companies operating in Egypt.



The complicity of academic institutions especially became a contentious topic. Azer expressed his concern about how UK universities are increasingly barring their students (himself included) from conducting fieldwork in Egypt, especially on sensitive issues such as human rights and social activism. For him, UK universities should not be supportive of a 'research black out' on Egypt, not least because Giulio was a student at Cambridge University. Chalcraft underlined, on the other hand, that UK universities have a duty of care towards their students and faculty members, but agreed that universities cannot be complicit with repression, or be seen to be.

Debates aside, an audience member pointed out the saddest thing of all: how any moves to ban research, however necessary, are likely against what Giulio would have wanted. He would have wanted truth and justice, and it is ironic how his death now stands as a further impediment to the two things.

The Giulio Regeni case is an arena of dangerous high politics and moral dilemmas, yet Chalcraft and the two Amnesty International campaigners on the panel, Liesbeth Ten Ham and Shane Enright, provided some insights on how we can move forward by way of transnational advocacy. To start, Chalcraft introduced the notion of 'dynamic interaction analysis'. Although due to time constraints he did not explore this in great depth, his argument was that activists need to understand the time sequence of events surrounding human rights incidents, the interactions between key collective actors – and interpret the overall consequences. Chalcraft then asked: Which actors should be targeted? What message should be conveyed and in what way?

In response, Ten Ham and Enright underscored the key features of Amnesty International's Giulio campaign. Amnesty understands how they could be perceived as privileging White Western interests should they campaign only for Giulio when there are also others in Egypt who are subjected to the same fate. Thus, the Giulio campaign is framed in 'particular' as a pursuit of 'truth for Giulio ...' and more universally as a fight for 'justice for disappeared people in Egypt'. In other words, Giulio is the human face, the symbol to a bigger fight for truth and justice. As much as targeting multiple actors may be perceived as ideal, Enright cautions against the risk of counter-productivity. In this case, for example, Amnesty refrained from pressuring the UK government to act as it might interfere with Italy's efforts to lobby and pressure Egypt. Now Amnesty is collaborating with Giulio's friends and a network of student activists in Italy and the UK to spread the word, and pressure key actors to acknowledge their complicity and undertake some reparative measures.

In the end, Enright cautioned how human rights advocacy networks are constrained by the contexts in which they operate, and thus a pinch of pragmatism is absolutely necessary. Yet, one cannot help but think: How much pragmatism is justified? Will their 'quick short-term wins' jeopardise their long-term goal?

The most heart-warming yet gut-wrenching part of the night was when we were connected to Paola and Claudio Regeni from Italy through Skype, the parents of Giulio Regeni. These were the two people who suffered most from Giulio's tragic death, and we were ever so humbled to hear their side of the story. Every day, they continue to mourn the loss of their dear son Giulio, yet they also continue to be grateful for all the love, support and generosity they have received. Grief-stricken they may be, but they still cannot help but be proud that Giulio has now become a symbol of truth, justice and freedom. By fighting for Giulio, the Regenis believe that they are also fighting for the dignity of victims of enforced disappearances in Egypt and beyond.

Paola and Claudio asserted the importance of coercive diplomacy in pressuring Egyptian authorities to uncover the truth and bring perpetrators of Giulio's murder to justice. They have asked and will continue to ask Italy, UK, the European Parliament and other countries to join hands in cutting off diplomatic relations with Cairo until the issue is resolved.

Now, what about you? Will you extend your hands too for the pursuit of truth, justice and freedom?





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*Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the **LSE Department of Government**, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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