

PHOTOJOURNALIST FILES LAWSUIT AGAINST CITY OF ATLANTA FOR ARREST WHILE FILMING BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTEST

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**Call: Gerry Weber, Law Offices of Gerry Weber, LLC, (404) 932-5845
Leigh Finlayson, Law Office of L. Burton Finlayson, LLC, (404) 872-0560
Clare R. Norins, UGA School of Law First Amendment Clinic, (706) 542-1419**

Media: <https://youtu.be/lqos9n15kA>



Attorneys filed a civil rights lawsuit in federal court on behalf of photojournalist Sharif Hassan against the City of Atlanta and its officers alleging violations of Mr. Hassan's constitutional rights when he was arrested while filming Black Lives Matter protests. Efforts to resolve the case short of litigation fell on deaf ears.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, sparking public outrage and protests all across the country, including in Atlanta, where thousands marched through the streets demanding

police accountability for Mr. Floyd's murder in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. In response to the protests, on May 29, 2020, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms issued an executive order instituting a blanket curfew beginning at 9:00 PM. The order contained no explicit exception for members of the media engaged in newsgathering.

On the evening of June 1, 2020, Mr. Hassan was photographing Black Lives Matter protests in Atlanta for his employment when he witnessed an individual being arrested. Moments after Mr. Hassan began photographing this public arrest, without interfering in any way, APD officers stopped his filming and arrested him. The officers ignored his statements that he was a working journalist there to cover the protests. Mr. Hassan was charged with a curfew violation and detained at the Atlanta City Detention Center (ACDC) until the following day, while other members of the media who had been in Mr. Hassan's immediate vicinity when he was arrested were permitted to continue their newsgathering work.

At ACDC, officers separated Mr. Hassan, who is Muslim and Arab-American, from the group of protest-related arrestees with whom he was transported. He was the only one among the group who was forced to change out of his street clothes and into a jail jumpsuit, as well as spend the night in handcuffs, which prevented him from praying and sleeping. After Mr. Hassan was finally released, two of his memory cards containing photographs of the protests were never returned to him. The City of Atlanta continued to prosecute Mr. Hassan for more than six months, until the charge against him was dropped in January 2021 after his counsel filed a motion asserting his free speech and press rights.

Mr. Hassan's arrest on the night of June 1, 2020 and treatment at ACDC highlights the City of Atlanta's disdain for his constitutional rights.

"Targeting and arresting reporters, who are documenting police actions at a protest, should strike fear in any citizen concerned about police accountability," said Gerry Weber, counsel for Mr. Hassan. "Reporters are the eyes and ears for the citizenry, and photojournalists in particular showed us that the Black Lives Matter protests brought voice to injustice and that many citizens were arrested while peacefully protesting."

Tiffany Roberts, Community Engagement and Movement Building Counsel with the Southern Center for Human Rights, added, "Through mass arrests of those exercising their First Amendment rights, the City of Atlanta has continually violated its citizens' constitutional rights. Mr. Hassan's arrest and treatment are one particularly severe manifestation of the ongoing crisis of criminalizing protest and protesters in Atlanta."

The lawsuit seeks monetary damages and declaratory and injunctive relief. Copies of the complaint are available upon request.

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