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EGYPT | Atheist Sentenced to Three Years Imprisonment for Blasphemy, Contempt of Religion

An Egyptian court sentenced the atheist, activist, blogger Alber Saber Ayyad, who comes from a Coptic background, to three years imprisonment for blasphemy and contempt of religion.

According to Ahmed Ezzat, Saber's defense lawyer, Saber was meant to be released after representatives paid bail amounting to 1,000 Egyptian pounds (approximately \$125) but was ordered to return to prison despite the judge's seeming willingness to release him.

Saber was initially detained following allegations he had posted the film 'Innocence of Muslims' on his Facebook page. However, these charges were dropped due to lack of evidence, and he was subsequently charged with "defamation of Islam and Christianity, insulting the divine and satirizing religious rituals and sanctities and the prophets."

Saber, who has denied all charges, was initially arrested on Sept. 13, after a mob gathered at his apartment in el-Marg district threatening to burn it down along with a nearby church, following the rumor that he had posted the film 'Innocence of Muslims' on his Facebook page. The police arrested him when responding to a distress call from his apartment.

Saber began his first hunger strike on Sept. 15 when police raided his house and confiscated books, CDs, and his laptop, despite having neither a search warrant nor permission from residents to enter. He has been assaulted by inmates while in prison, allegedly at the instigation of a guard. His defense team has encountered numerous difficulties since the start of the legal process, such as requests for case documents being blocked. He will reportedly start another hunger strike later this week.

A Facebook page dedicated to Saber quotes him as saying, "The charge of religious disdain is nothing but a stealthy means to repress freedom of opinion and expression, therefore I was not surprised when the verdict came with imprisoning me for three years and a bail of 1000 Egyptian pounds, thinking that they are able to imprison thoughts."

There are concerns that sentences of this nature will increase if the draft constitution, which among other things, forbids insults to religion and religious figures, is implemented. Despite ongoing mass protests, President Morsi is pressing ahead with plans for a referendum on the constitution on Dec. 15 and 22, and voting is already underway in the Egyptian diaspora.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, “We are very concerned at the lack of due process in Alber Saber Ayyad’s case and at the nature of the charges against him, which were formulated after the initial case was found to be baseless. He is effectively being punished for professing atheism, thus his sentence violates both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, which allows for the right not to believe. CSW is urging the Egyptian government to uphold the rule of law, to respect the rights of its citizens with regard to religion, belief and non-belief, and to reconsider the draft constitution, which does not contain adequate protections for freedom of expression or for social or religious minorities.”