



2.17.16 EGYPT | Coptic Students Charged with Contempt of Religion

Four Coptic students from Bani Mazar in the Minya province of Upper Egypt were charged with contempt of religion and are awaiting trial scheduled for Feb. 25.

According to the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, Mueller Atef Edward, Amjad Hanna, Alber Ashraf Hanna and Clinton Majidi Yousif were filmed on an amateur video depicting a mock beheading. The film was recorded in early 2015 by their teacher, Mr. Gad Yousif Younan, who appeared at the end of the video.

The boys and their teacher were arrested in April 2015, following a period of increased sectarian tension in their local community of Nassiriya, which is located approximately 155 miles south of Cairo.

Younan was sentenced to three years in prison for "Insulting Islam," while the boys were bailed for 10,000 Egyptian Pounds (approximately \$1,252) and are currently awaiting trial.

According to the boys' lawyer, the 32-second video hasn't been seen by the court, which has instead relied on police reports, which he describes as "biased," and which do not accurately describe the details of the video. The lawyer also commented that the court is not only responding to details contained in the police reports but also to speculation among the local community that the boys were imitating Muslim prayer rites.

Cases involving charges of "contempt of religion," "insulting Islam" and "blasphemy" are on the increase in Egypt. CSW recently reported on the cases of researcher and TV presenter Islam al-Beheiry and secular writer Fatima Naaot, both of whom were convicted of "contempt of religion" in recent months.

These charges are articulated in Article 98 of the Egyptian Penal Code, which is vaguely worded and open to broad interpretation. It states that "exploiting religion in spreading, either by words, in writing, or in any other means, extreme ideas for the purposes of inciting strife,

ridiculing or insulting [the Abrahamic faiths] or a sect following it, or damaging national unity," is punishable by prison sentences of between six months and five years, and fines of 500-1,000 Egyptian Pounds (approximately \$60-120).

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "It is concerning that these four boys are facing trial and their teacher has been jailed when the evidence against them has not been viewed in a court of law despite its ready availability. The video was made in the aftermath of the 2015 murder of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya by Daesh, thus the video may have been an ill-judged attempt to join others who were releasing videos mocking the terrorist organization. Moreover, while these boys may have perhaps shown a degree of naivety in making this video, their case is also the latest in a concerning increase in blasphemy and contempt of religion charges. CSW urges the Egyptian authorities to guarantee due process for the boys and their teacher, in particular by ensuring that the video is admitted as evidence and viewed by the court. We also continue to urge the Egyptian authorities to amend Article 98 of the penal code, using the Rabat Plan of Action as a guideline."