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EGYPT | Coptic Teenagers Receive Maximum Sentences for Blasphemy-Related Charges

Three teenage Coptic students were sentenced to five years in jail, while a fourth was sentenced to an indefinite detention period in a juvenile detention facility after being convicted on charges of blasphemy, insulting Islam, and fomenting sectarian strife on Feb. 25.

The five-year sentences handed down to the teenagers are the maximum penalty for these charges. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a request by their lawyer for the video to be screened in court was refused once again. The teenage students are currently out on bail, and their lawyer plans to launch an appeal against the sentences.

Mueller Atef Edward, Amjad Hanna, Alber Ashraf Hanna and Clinton Majidi Yousif, from Bani Mazar in the Minya province of Upper Egypt, were charged after a mobile phone video recorded in early 2015 by their teacher, Gad Yousif Younan, depicting them conducting a mock beheading, became public after the teacher lost his phone memory card. Gad Yousif Younan was sentenced to three years in prison for “Insulting Islam.”

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. Their lawyer raised concerns that charges were brought against them without the court having viewed the 32-second video and on the basis of biased police reports and speculation among the local community that the boys were mocking Muslim prayer rites.

Indictments involving charges of “contempt of religion,” “insulting Islam” and “blasphemy” are on the increase in Egypt. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (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 \$58 to \$116.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are deeply shocked that these teenagers have been given the maximum sentence under the law. While the video was undoubtedly ill-advised, these charges were excessive and should never have been brought. Moreover, the manner in which this trial was conducted, and the court’s failure to view primary evidence prior to passing judgement despite its ready availability, violates due process. CSW urges the Egyptian authorities to grant clemency to these boys and their teacher and to stem the worrying rise of blasphemy and contempt of religion charges by amending Article 98 of the penal code, using the Rabat Plan of Action as a guideline.”