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'Egyptian convert's arrest linked to leaving Islam'

WWM (09.12.2014) - The first Egyptian citizen to attempt to change his legal religious identity from Muslim to Christian, Mohammed Hegazy, has been in jail for a year now, awaiting a verdict on separate misdemeanor charges, due on Dec. 28.

Hegazy faces a five-year prison sentence if an appeal court upholds his conviction last June, when he was ruled guilty of "illegally filming anti-Christian demonstrations" in Upper Egypt's Minya governate.

But his lawyer, Karam Ghobrial, told World Watch Monitor that he is "optimistic" that the appeal court judge will overturn the conviction, simply because no evidence was produced to prove the allegations against his client.

Ghobrial contends that the real reason Hegazy was arrested and then kept in custody on minor charges is because he is publicly known for the case he tried to open in 2007 to legalize his conversion to Christianity.

In a Nov. 23 appeal hearing before Judge Ahmed Abdel Aziz el-Ghool of the Minya Misdemeanor Court, Ghobrial declared that there was no proof that his client had broken any law, nor had the Christian convert even been arrested legally.

"My defense was based on the absence of a 'flagrante delicto' [a legal term for being caught in the very act of committing a crime]," Ghobrial said.

Hegazy was arrested on Dec. 4, 2013, charged with filming Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations in the Minya governate of Upper Egypt without permission. Identified by the arresting officer as "a converted person" [from Islam to Christianity], Hegazy was also accused of "spreading false news and rumors."

"He was not filming or taking pictures or doing anything wrong at the time the policeman arrived and arrested him," Ghobrial said. "By law, taking pictures is not a crime in itself," the attorney said. He stressed that Samia Naguib, who was with Hegazy at the time he

was arrested, testified during the trial that although she had also been taking pictures alongside Hegazy before the policeman arrived, the officer who arrested Hegazy did not arrest her.

Although the prosecution claimed Hegazy was circulating false statements that disturbed public security, Ghobrial stressed that no evidence had been produced to back up this accusation.

In addition, he said, the police officer's failure to obtain the required arrest warrant from either a court or the district attorney made Hegazy's arrest illegal. "He simply went to the Syndicate of Agriculture site after he received a phone call reporting that Hegazy was there," Ghobrial said, and arrested him without any legal authorization.

To the lawyer's relief, Tora Prison officials in Cairo cooperated with his client's transfer to Minya to attend his initial appeal hearing on Nov. 16, when without warning the judge failed to appear, and again when the hearing was postponed on Nov. 23.

After Ghobrial submitted his defense before the court, Judge el-Ghool stated that he would announce his verdict at a final hearing on Dec. 28. Both Hegazy and his lawyer must be present at that hearing, with the judge's reasons for his judgment to be issued in writing a few days later.

Detained 'arbitrarily' in death cell

Several days after the Nov. 23 hearing, Ghobrial learned that Hegazy had not yet been transferred from Minya back to Tora Prison. Instead, on Dec. 1 he had been "arbitrarily detained" in a solitary "execution" cell reserved for death penalty prisoners.

"[He was] detained inside the execution chamber in violation of the law, because he is in custody under investigation," Ghobrial told Mideast Christian News on Dec. 2. According to the lawyer, it was a 'malicious' attempt to 'take revenge' against his client for his religious beliefs.

After one night in the death penalty cell, Hegazy declared he would start a hunger strike if he was not removed. He was transferred back to Tora Prison the next day.

Although the lawyer said he and his client remain optimistic that the appeal court judge in Minya will acquit him on Dec. 28, the convert still expects to be returned to Tora Prison to face separate charges for "insulting Islam" from a now obsolete case filed against him in 2009. Initially filed by two Muslim lawyers, the case was revived in July by the Supreme State Security Prosecution in Cairo's El-Tagamu El-Khames district as a pretext to remand Hegazy in custody, after the Minya court released him until his conviction appeal was completed.

Now 31-years-old, Hegazy converted to Christianity as a teenager, when he took the Christian name Bishoy Armiya Boulos. After his marriage to another convert from Islam, he applied for legal Christian identity in August 2007. He has since sent his wife and children to claim asylum in Europe.

'Kidnapping,' forced conversion and collective punishment haunt Egypt's Copts

WWM (24.11.2014) - It's been two months since Coptic Christians in an Upper Egypt village endured a traumatic sequence of events ending in heavy police abuse. The victims still have not received any justice from the state security authorities who broke the law and violated its citizen's human rights.

On Sept. 16, in Deir Gabal al-Teir village, Egyptian security forces ambushed several Coptic homes in the middle of the night. They proceeded to steal and destroy the families' belongings before dragging dozens of residents out of their beds, binding their hands behind their backs and beating them with batons. The police then proceeded to drag them to the police station by a single rope.

The security forces collectively punished the villagers in response to a demonstration initiated by a group of Copts the previous day. They were protesting outside the station to pressure the police to investigate the disappearance that initially occurred nearly two weeks earlier, of 39-year-old Coptic woman Iman Morqos Saroufim.

Her family initially filed a police report on Sept. 3, believing that she was kidnapped by Muslim Sami Ahmed Abd al-Rahman. They said they were unable to help, declaring that they believed Saroufim ran away willingly, and that since leaving she had also converted to Islam.

After two weeks of her friends and families' unsuccessful negotiations with security and executive leaders of the province, hundreds from her Coptic community organized a demonstration outside the station. The protest turned violent, leaving a police vehicle and a civil defense vehicle with broken windshields during the scuffle between the Copts and police.

The police used tear gas to disperse the protestors, and then proceeded to raid their village late that night.

On Sept. 26, Saroufim unexpectedly returned to her family and told the media that she had "escaped."

Speaking with Mideast Christian News (MCN), she said that a Muslim man abducted her. "He tried to force me to go with him to Al-Azhar to convert to Islam, but I refused. He took another veiled woman to Al-Azhar, pretending she was me, to change my religion. He managed to change my religion using my photo."

Despite the collective punishment, no police were charged for the attack.

"The police brutality in this situation is similar to attacks under the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's time. It's the same old thing," a Cairo pastor told World Watch Monitor.

In a meeting between Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim and a Coptic delegation from the Minya governorate on Sept. 23, Ibrahim promised to compensate the owners of the homes for any damages.

Editor Youssef Sidhom of [Watani International](#) said he was not satisfied with this type of response, "A non-biased investigation is needed into the brutal police response to the wrathful protest of the Coptic villagers against police failure—rather, inaction—to find the missing woman and bring her home."

"The way the police handled the events cannot be merely brushed over. It implies that we accept the police going back to their previous savagery and horror practices," Sidhom said.

Moktar Younan, a Copt from Deir Gabal al-Teir, told MCN On Oct. 5, "The residents of the village are waiting decision of the government on compensating them for the damage occurred to them, due to the attack committed against them after the disappearance of Saroufim."

Soon after Saroufim's return, the Samalout Coptic Orthodox diocese said that she returned to her family out of her own free will. The church asked the community and media to stop talking about the case, stating, "We hope that everyone stops talking about this matter and leaves it to the legitimate channels of the state."

Collective punishment with impunity

The Egyptian police's use of this form of collective punishment with impunity against entire communities is common practice.

"If some demonstrators attacked police personnel and hurled stones at them, then it is a transgression that needs to be addressed in accordance to the law. But in no way does it justify the use of collective punishment on the village, use of excessive violence, and engaging in degrading practices," said Ishak Ibrahim, an officer for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, [EIPR](#).

On Oct. 2, EIPR urged the public prosecutor to launch an investigation into allegations against the police, and into allegations made by Saroufim against the Interior Ministry.

"The unfortunate events that took place in Deir Gabal al-Teir revealed the roots of the main problem, which is the absence of a clear policy and specific laws to guarantee the freedom of faith, regardless of what it is, and the freedom of citizens to change their religion whenever they want," said EIPR in its press release.

"It is the state's responsibility to resolve sectarian disputes following the principle of the rule of law, without engaging in collective punishment, customary law, or other methods that do not indicate respect for the citizenship rights of religious minorities," EIPR said.

Kidnapping of Copts is 'big business'

In terms of the long-recurring issue of kidnapped Christian women, Ebram Louis believes that demonstrations are the only method to force police to take any action to return these women.

Louis, the founder of the Association for the Victims of Abductions and Enforced Disappearances told MCN on Oct. 17 that the position of Egyptian police is biased against Christians whose daughters have been kidnapped by Muslims.

Police are notorious for not acting, he said, even if the girl has been missing for 24 hours and the family has been threatened for ransom, "because they are afraid of the militant groups."

"They did not even follow up phone calls, identify identities of the callers or arrest perpetrators. The police have not helped the families of the kidnapped girls at all. Moreover, some police officers told the families not to search for their kidnapped daughters, as they converted to the right religion," Louis said.

Without any protection it is especially easy for kidnappers to target members of rich Egyptian families, to extort their families for ransom. "Copts are still suffering from the incidents of kidnapping for ransom," EIPR's Ibrahim emphasized to MCN in an Oct. 18 report.

Jailed Egyptian convert awaits appeal hearing

WWM (12.11.2014) - A jailed Egyptian Muslim convert to Christianity is scheduled Sunday, Nov. 16 to appeal his conviction on a misdemeanor — if he can get to the courtroom.

But according to his lawyer, prison and security police officials have not confirmed they will permit Mohammed Hegazy to travel from Cairo's Tora Prison to the court hearing in Upper Egypt's Minya governate.

"If my client is not present in the court in person," Ghobrial told World Watch Monitor, Hegazy's conviction — and the accompanying five-year prison sentence -- will be confirmed by default.

Hegazy had been arrested for filming sectarian demonstrations without permission in Minya in December last year. After he spent six months in detention, a local court convicted Hegazy on June 18 of the misdemeanor charges and sentenced him to five years in prison and a 500 LE (US\$70) fine.

"The investigation in Minya against Hegazy produced nothing," lawyer Karam Ghobrial told World Watch Monitor. "There is no proof," he said, of the district attorney's accusation that Hegazy was involved in "activity that could damage the public interests of the state," or that he had circulated "rumors and false statements" that disturbed public security.

But noting that the judge had waved the Quran at the defendant three times during the June court hearing, the lawyer said it was clear that he saw the case "from a religious point of view."

"The stigma of his conversion was the motive for his arrest," Ghobrial said.

Under Egyptian legal procedures, Hegazy should have been ordered to pay bail once the verdict was announced, and then be released pending his appeal hearing. He had already served the maximum six-month detention allowed for misdemeanor suspects, after which only those found guilty of adultery or theft can be kept in custody.

Despite the Minya court's July 20 order to release Hegazy, State Security Investigation officials in Cairo intervened, transferring him the next day to Tora Prison to face separate charges of "insulting Islam" filed against him five years ago. No trial date has been set regarding these charges of alleged blasphemy for having left Islam.

Ghobrial said he is hopeful the judge presiding over the Nov. 16 hearing will follow Egyptian procedural laws and overturn Hegazy's conviction from lack of evidence, as well as the incorrect handling of his initial arrest. When it comes to misdemeanors, he said, "the police are not allowed to arrest someone without written permission from either a penal court or the district attorney." No such warrant was obtained to authorize Hegazy's arrest.

In the arrest report, police officer Amr Hassan identified Hegazy as "a converted person" who had reportedly come to Minya "to cover the sectarian strife and the persecution of Christians."

Hegazy's lawyer has been denied prison access to Hegazy several times. During his last visit at the end of October, the jailed Christian, who took the name Bishoy Armiya Boulos after his baptism, told Ghobrial that he is still being tortured and beaten by guards and police officials at the Tora Prison.

Prison authorities have ignored Hegazy's written requests to be allowed to have a Bible to read, and to be served Christian communion by a clergyman, as permitted on a weekly basis for Coptic Christian prisoners.

Given the sensitivity of any case involving a Muslim who has converted to Christianity, the lawyer said, "No human rights groups in Egypt have been seriously following Hegazy's current cases."

Redefining 'absolute' religion freedom

Seven years ago, Mohammed Hegazy was the first Egyptian citizen to attempt a legal change of his religious identity from Muslim to Christian. In Egypt, government-issued identity cards include a required notation of the person's religion. Changing the notation to "Islam" is a simple administrative procedure; asking the government to approve a Muslim's request to change to a different religion is unprecedented. Hegazy took his request to court.

Then 24 years old and married to another convert from Islam, Hegazy told the international press that his motive was simple: he and his newly pregnant wife Zeinab wanted the right to practice their Christian faith openly, and to bring up their children as Christians.

When the news went public in Egypt in August 2007, Hegazy was targeted by furious Muslim clerics, lawyers and journalists, demanding his execution as an apostate from Islam. For months afterwards, his name hit the headlines repeatedly, and his court case filed with the Interior Ministry came under heated public debate on television.

The couple was forced into hiding, and within a few months, mobs attacked and vandalized their home, throwing out their belongings onto the street and setting them afire.

When Hegazy's case came to a Cairo court in January 2008, brawls broke out in the courtroom. Some 20 lawyers attacked his attorney, shouting that Hegazy's conversion was evidence of widespread attempts to "Christianize" Muslim Egypt. The hearing was so controversial that Hegazy himself did not attend in person.

The fierce opposition did not surprise him. Several times after his conversion as a teenager, when he began to read the Bible and other Christian literature, he had been arrested and beaten by police in Port Said, and in 2002 the authorities sent him to a camp for 10 weeks of re indoctrination into Islam.

Although several Western embassies offered Hegazy asylum, he declined, refusing to leave Egypt for his own safety. However, he has since sent his wife and children abroad to live in Europe.

Despite the guarantee of "absolute" religious freedom for its citizens in Article 64 of the 2014 Constitution, Egypt's laws based on "the principles of Islamic Sharia" fall short of international standards.

Although Egypt has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which defines changing one's religion or convincing others to do likewise as a basic right, Muslim citizens are denied this legal option. Non-Muslims, by contrast, can easily convert to Islam with the full cooperation of police and judicial authorities.

Egypt campaigns against atheism

Al-Monitor (20.07.2014) - The Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowment), in partnership with the Ministry of Sports and Youth in Egypt, has begun a national campaign to fight the presumed spread of atheism among youth.

The Egyptian government begins a new program to combat the rise of atheism; however, activists question whether this increase is even real.

Thus, those state departments decided to break into the world of atheists without having the slightest information that would allow them to control this phenomenon in any possible way.

Both Sheikh Ahmad Turk, director of mosques at the Ministry of Awqaf and in charge of the campaign against atheism, and Nuamat Sati, who is in charge of the campaign at the Ministry of Youth, told Al-Monitor that the spread of the phenomenon of atheism, specifically among youth, is what pushed the ministries to undertake this campaign today.

When asked about the availability of statistics showing the increasing spread of this phenomenon, Sati said, "There are no statistics, which means that the size of the phenomenon was never known nor is it known today, so there is no absolute evidence of its spread."

Pastor Abdul Massih Bassit, who is concerned about atheism, told Al-Monitor: "There are no statistics and each part of society randomly estimates the size of the phenomenon. Atheists estimate their own number on their Facebook pages at between 2 [million] and 4 million Egyptians, while certain pastors say that their number is not more than 1,000-2,000."

Sati said, "Both the ministries of awqaf and youth have based their estimations on a TV show in which atheists have a significant representation, in addition to Facebook and Twitter accounts where the number of followers have largely increased, which means that they are now publicly announcing their atheism." Yet, her statement is not necessarily accurate evidence of the spread of atheism, but it could simply mean that atheists are more courageous or outspoken today.

Turk told Al-Monitor, "The extremists and takfiri religious speeches made by the Muslim Brotherhood and other similar movements may have pushed the youth to be repulsed by religion."

Bassit said, "The politicians and most of the January 25 Revolution figures pushed the youth to atheism. After they were depicted as the noblest men in Egypt, some of them turned out to be takfirists exactly like the Brotherhood, and some turned out to be spies who work for other countries."

Sati said that she does not directly connect the spread of atheism with the January 25 Revolution. Yet, she linked it to the use of social media networks and the Internet after the revolution, which allowed the youth to connect with new cultures they were not yet ready to deal with. "This is in addition to the fact that the January 25 Revolution broke the fear barrier for youth, which led atheists to publicly announce themselves on television and social media networks," she said.

"The campaign has two goals," Sati told Al-Monitor, "The first is to spread awareness concerning the dangers of atheism and how it creates a threat to society, as well as the controversial issues that might push the youth to atheism. The second is to treat this phenomenon by having a dialogue with atheists and giving them a chance to reconsider their decisions and go back to their religion."

She did not present any numbers that would allow the measurement of the success or the failure of this campaign, such as the number of individuals that the campaign was expected to reach or the number of atheists that were expected to return to their religion after the campaign.

"We have agreed on the headlines of the campaign," Turk told Al-Monitor. "We reached the phase of preparing the plan based on several measures, including dialogues instead of seminars that are more of initiations."

He said, "We will count on youth, who we will train to have a dialogue with the atheist youth, since the influence youth can have on each other is stronger. Clergy, psychologists and social experts will train the youth and try to find answers to questions raised by youth which might push them to atheism. The youth of the campaign will be trained to answer these questions in order to have dialogues with the atheist youth which would lead them back to their religion."

Sati told Al-Monitor, "The campaign will use technology, the Internet and social media networks to reach atheists and answer all the questions which pushed them to atheism. We are also going to create a website for the "Think Again" campaign, which aims at spreading awareness concerning phenomena such as addiction, takfiri thinking, extremism and atheism."

"The time frame of the campaign is not specified; it could go for a year," Sati said. "To measure its success or failure, the campaign is going to base its information on the website, Facebook page and all the positive or negative outcomes it could have."

Egypt's attempts to control atheism are only normal in light of the current constitution, which states that Islam is the country's religion.

However, the country's campaign against atheism failed before even beginning. It was undertaken based on inaccurate evidence, such as atheists' appearances on a TV talk show and on Facebook pages, which are not necessarily a sign of the spread of atheism in Egypt.

It's noteworthy to mention that during Al-Monitor's interview with Bassit, he said, "The information concerning atheists in Egypt is minimal."

When asked why, he answered, "The main reason behind this is their fear of being oppressed by the government and society. This stops some individuals from announcing their atheism, despite the presence of larger and more courageous groups, which are the minority."

The majority of atheists, as well as some Baha'is and Shiites, choose to stay silent and not give their opinion concerning religious matters, which makes them one of the most ambiguous groups for the government. This is what hinders the state ministries' control over their spread.

Christian jailed for contempt of religion

By Haggag Salama

AP (24.06.2014) - A court convicted an Egyptian Christian to six years imprisonment for blasphemy and contempt of religion on Tuesday.

The Luxor court issued its verdict against Kerolos Ghattas, 30, after his arrest earlier this month for posting pictures deemed insulting to Islam on his Facebook page.

Ghattas' arrest sparked fears of sectarian conflict in his village, where unidentified assailants have hurled molotov cocktails at shops owned by Christians. Local authorities beefed up security in the village on Tuesday.

The verdict can be appealed. Egypt has witnessed a rise in the number of cases of Coptic Christians - estimated as 10 percent of the population - over the past three years.

On Monday, another Christian journalist - a convert - was sentenced to six years in prison over his coverage of recent sectarian strife.

Egypt's Christians have complained of discrimination by the nation's Muslim majority.

They have heavily invested in the anti-Islamist movement in the hope of gaining equal rights with their Muslim compatriots, and have overwhelmingly backed President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, the former army chief who overthrew the Islamist president last July.

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Commitment to Egypt's new Constitution questioned after 'blasphemy' charge

Christian on trial for 'liking' Facebook page run by converts from Islam.

Morning Star News (10.06.2014) / <http://morningstarnews.org/2014/06/commitment-to-egypts-new-constitution-questioned-after-blasphemy-charge/> – Charges of "blasphemy"

against a Christian in Egypt for “liking” a Facebook page run by converts from Islam call into question the government’s commitment to a new constitution guaranteeing freedom of belief and thought, rights activists said.

Kerlos Shouky Attallah, of Al-Mahamid village near Luxor, is accused of violating Article 98F of the Egyptian Penal Code for “liking” an Arabic-language Facebook page administered by an anonymous group of Christian converts known as the Knights of the Cross. According to Attallah’s attorney, Mohamed Ahmed Abd-Alaal, the 29-year-old Christian did not make any comments on the site, share any of the postings or upload anything to it.

Safwat Samaan, chairman of Nation Without Borders, a human rights and development group headquartered in Luxor, said the accusation against Attallah was ludicrous.

“It’s unbelievable. He is being accused just for ‘liking’ a page on Facebook,” said Samaan. The Knights of the Cross Facebook page was designed to provide Arabic-speaking converts from Islam – many forced to live alone and in hiding – a cyber-place to encourage each other and safely discuss the Bible. Members also post essays about Christian apologetics and entries about perceived errors and conflicts in the Koran. Anyone can read the posts, and sections about the Koran are often met with profanity-laced outpourings of anger from Muslims.

In one satirical entry, someone posted a cartoon mocking hard-core Salafi Muslims for being hypocritical. Attallah had not “liked” the cartoon, but Muslim villagers in Al-Mahamid, friends of Attallah’s Muslim Facebook friends, saw the cartoon as an indictment of Islam, increasing their anger against him for liking the site, according to his lawyer and Samaan.

On May 28, Muslims printed and distributed leaflets demanding vengeance against Attallah. One leaflet read, “You will not be men if you don’t kick him out of your village,” according to Samaan.

In response, Attallah “unliked” the page, but the next day villagers attacked his house. When police came, they arrested Attallah and charged him with Egypt’s version of a blasphemy law – showing “disdain” for a heavenly religion. All the Muslims who attacked Attallah’s house were released without charge.

“The Egyptian law only goes one way, only against people who are innocent,” Samaan said. “Who should be in jail, someone for pressing ‘like’ or the person who is going around burning and attacking people?”

According to the Egyptian penal code, violation of Article 98F is punishable by “detention for a period of not less than six months and not exceeding five years, or paying a fine of not less than 500 pounds and not exceeding 1,000 pounds.”

A violation of the article is described as an act that advocates or spreads “extremist thoughts with the aim of instigating sedition and division,” or an act that shows disdain or contempt for “any of the heavenly religions or the sects belonging thereto.” Using religion in a way that harms “national unity or social peace” is also a violation.

On Jan. 14 and 15, Egyptians passed a referendum on a new constitution that, according to supporters, ensures the basic rights of free speech and belief for Egyptians – or at least for those belonging to approved branches of the three “heavenly religions” as delineated in the Koran. But the existence of a blasphemy law in Egypt in itself, human rights activists said, is a violation of Egypt’s new constitution, which was supposed to take effect on Jan. 18.

"According to the constitution, Kerolos should not be in jail, because it allows freedom of speech and expression, but the judges are not using the new constitution and are still working with the old law," Samaan said. "They are basically ignoring the new constitution."

Samaan said the constitution is like a beautiful frame placed around an ugly photograph to make it seem better; the constitution is merely an attempt to give the state credibility. "It's just a beautiful frame, but it is not really for use," he said.

Historically, Samaan said, judges in Luxor Province in Upper Egypt have been very aggressive in prosecuting blasphemy cases, handing down sentences well above statutory limits. Last June, a Luxor Province judge issued a sentence of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$14,270), against Demyana Abd Al-Nour, an elementary school teacher from Sheikh Sultan Primary School in the village of Al-Edisat, accused of committing blasphemy. The fine was well in excess of the amount allowed by law and Al-Nour's ability to pay.

She has been living in hiding in Europe for almost a year as her case winds through the appeals process. A hearing was scheduled for June 1, but the judge assigned to the case did not appear for reasons undisclosed to media. Her next hearing is scheduled for Sunday (June 15).

Human rights groups say that the blasphemy law is used disproportionately against the Coptic minority of Egypt. A study released in May 2013 by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) found that 41 percent of blasphemy cases taken to court from Jan. 25, 2011, to Dec. 31, 2012, were filed against Christians, who make up only about 10 percent of Egypt's population of more than 85 million people.

Attallah was held in jail for four days until presented to a judge for his first hearing. Samaan said authorities questioned him without the presence of any lawyer. During the hearing, a group of Islamists brought around 20 lawyers to the court to support their claims of blasphemy, but the judge ordered the attorneys out of the courtroom and postponed the case.

A new hearing date was scheduled for June 24, and Attallah returned to prison. Because a judge never signed an order for him to be held for an additional 15 days, he is now technically being held illegally, Samaan said. He said the judge likely postponed the case because there was no evidence presented against Attallah during the hearing.

Abd-Alaal, Attallah's attorney, agreed.

"There is no physical proof of a crime," Abd-Alaal said. "The act of which he is being accused did not happen."

Before Attallah even set foot in the courtroom, Islamists started an attack on the village of Al-Mahamid. First they turned off electricity to the village. As people began filling out of their homes to escape the summer heat, the Islamists set fire to a Coptic-owned carpentry supply store.

The fire spread to a Christian-owned clothing store and then to a three-wheel motorcycle taxi known as a *tuk-tuk* that was parked nearby. At least three stores were destroyed. There were no casualties in the attack, but Abd-Alaal said things are still very strained in Al-Mahamid.

"The atmosphere is very tense; anyone could use it to start sectarian violence," he said.

Samaan said numerous attorneys, including Copts, turned down the case. Most blasphemy cases are deemed as hopeless, problematic and even dangerous for the defending attorney. Abd-Alaal, a Muslim, said he took the case ultimately because he thought Attallah was innocent.

"A lot of other lawyers refused the case because they thought they would lose," he said. "I accepted the case because I have faith. I believe he is innocent from all the evidence I have."

Abd-Alaal said he expects a verdict in the case at the next hearing.

Court upholds writer's five-year prison sentence for insulting religion

By Rana Muhammad Taha

Daily News Egypt (11.03.2014) - The Beba Misdemeanour Court in Beni Sueif upheld on Tuesday a court verdict handing author Karam Saber five years in prison for insulting religion.

Saber is accused of contempt of religion for a book he wrote in 2010 entitled "Where is Allah". He received his jail sentence in June 2013 in absentia; the author challenged the verdict.

Hamdy Al-Assiuti, one of the members of Saber's defence team, said the court disregarded the defence and evidence submitted by Saber's lawyers. He added that the verdict would be appealed within ten days.

Saber is accused of promoting infidelity, inciting polytheism and insulting God. His defence team argued that the court trying Saber lacks the proper jurisdiction to do so. They also argued that the investigation was lacking and that the charge was fabricated. They suggested the testimonies against the writer are a result of personal feuds between Saber and police and Ministry of Endowments representatives because of Saber's work defending farmers' rights.

Saber is the director of the Land Centre for Human Rights, which provides human rights assistance to farmers.

Al-Assiuti criticised the charge of contempt of religion, describing it as "outdated".

"The legislator should take more positive steps against the charge of contempt of religion," Al-Assiuti said. He added that such a charge violates certain articles in the newly-passed constitution.

Article 64 of the text states that freedom of belief is "absolute"; it gives followers of Abrahamic religions the right to practice their religious rituals and build houses of worship, leaving the organisation of this right up to the laws.

"In practice, this doesn't apply," Al-Assiuti said. He accused the public prosecution of disregarding the freedom of belief and freedom of expression.

The book "Where is Allah" is a collection of short stories published in 2010. Saber's sentence of five years in absentia and a bail of EGP 1,000 came after a group in Beni

Suef governorate filed a complaint against Saber at the Beni Suef prosecutor general's office in 2011, accusing him of contempt of religion.

The book was analysed by both the Beni Suef diocese and Al-Azhar; both of which released similar reports saying that the book goes against religion.

After the reports were released, the case was referred to Homeland Security, which backed up the reports by the religious institutions.

Gamal Eid, a human rights lawyer on Saber's defence team and director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, claimed that the verdict is "the harshest sentence handed to [a writer] in the past 20 years".

Egyptian priest claims church attack was Muslim Brotherhood 'revenge'

Shots fired at church; policeman killed

World Watch Monitor (04.02.2014) - The priest of an Egyptian church attacked last week says his church was targeted as part of a wider pattern of retribution from Muslim Brotherhood supporters against churches and security forces following the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi last summer.

Around 70 churches were attacked last summer in retaliation against the dispersal of protest camps set up in the wake of Morsi's deposition. Many Muslim Brotherhood members hold Christians at least partly responsible for the overthrow, especially following comments made in support of the army by Coptic Church leader Pope Tawadros II.

In the latest attack on a church, a policeman was killed and two others injured when the Church of the Virgin Mary in the 6th of October Diocese came under fire on Jan. 28.

Father Morcos Joachim told World Watch Monitor that the attackers were seeking to avenge the recent arrest of many members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

"They targeted the security forces to seek revenge for the arrest of many Muslim Brotherhood members and also they targeted the church for inciting the sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians," he said.

The priest said he suspects the attack on the police was a response to the arrest of many Muslim Brotherhood members at a Jan. 25 march in the 10th District of the 6th of October city, west of Cairo.

"The police arrested many of them at the march, so what happened on Tuesday was their backlash," he said.

Fr. Joachim described how four armed men parked outside the church in the middle of the afternoon and opened fire, killing 33-year-old officer Mohamed Taha Syed Abu Hamid, whom the priest described as a "very respected and kind man."

The priest said the assailants were chased away by local residents, who shot and injured one of them, 30-year-old Mohamed Abdel-Raman. He was later arrested, along with two

other suspects, Mohamed Abdel-Hamid Ibrahim and 29-year-old Abu Anas. The fourth suspect's identity has yet to be released.

Fr. Joachim said the number of policemen outside the church has increased since the attack.

A church member added that Muslim residents had joined with Christians in chasing after the attackers in the aftermath of the shooting.

"Many people followed the car," Gergis Adel said. "They were able to stop it and hold one of the attackers after injuring him in his arm, but the others were able to escape. The Muslim residents cooperated with their Christian brothers to follow the attackers and arrested one of them."

Old wine, new skin?

Analysis: Egypt's new constitution contains welcome ideas, but no guarantee they will be followed

World Watch Monitor (16.01.2014) - For the second time in 13 months, Egyptians have approved a new constitution. Compared to the constitution they just tossed aside, the new charter promises Christians a stronger standing and better representation than ever in the history of the Arab Republic. Coptic Pope Tawadros II and other Christian leaders endorsed it.

After the brief but disastrous rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, the new constitution is cause for optimism, to be sure, but the document by itself won't change the situation for Christians in Egypt. Like other national charters, it announces principles of religious freedom. But Egypt also needs lawmakers and judges who establish and interpret laws in line with the constitution's ideals. Here, the future is not as clear: The new constitution promises Christians a place in its legislative assemblies, for example, but not in its courts.

Even so, early returns indicate the new constitution has won overwhelming approval, even as many of the supporters of the former Islamist regime of the Muslim Brotherhood and ousted president Mohamed Morsi sat out the vote in protest.

Egypt's new constitution represents yet another swing of the pendulum since the revolution of 2011 that toppled autocrat President Hosni Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood mobilized 13 million voters in June 2012 to elect Morsi, who supervised work on a new constitution. Work on the document lagged as frustrated Christians and other liberal elements dropped out of the Islamist-dominated drafting assembly. Late in 2012, Morsi ordered the remaining delegates to finish their work in one night, and pushed the draft out for a quick vote.

Widespread anti-Morsi protests backed the military's removal of the president in July. The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed, and work began on a new constitution.

The new charter reflects the desire to undo Muslim Brotherhood influence, and expresses an ultra-nationalism that idealizes the army as the protector of the people's will. As many Egyptians pointed out, voting in favor of the new constitution was an endorsement of the June 2012 revolution that drove out Morsi. The new constitution is a nationalist project intended to counter the Brotherhood's Islamist policies and focuses on the unity of the Egyptian people, bringing together Islam's crescent and Christianity's cross.

Consequently, supporters of the revolution would have been seen as traitors to the nationalist cause if they had voted against the document.

Highlighting the government's appeal to national unity, Egypt's interim president Adly Mansour visited the Coptic Papal Seat at Saint Mark's Cathedral, the first Egyptian head of state to do so in more than 40 years. This gesture did not go unnoticed; Pope Tawadros endorsed the new constitution and urged Copts to vote in favor of it.

The new constitution has one major element in common with the document it replaces: It establishes Sharia as the principle source of legislation. But there is a difference.

Prior to the Brotherhood's ascension to power in 2012, the interpretation of the "principles of Sharia" had been left to the courts. The 2012 constitution specifies, in Article 219, that the principles "include general evidence, the foundational principles of Islamic jurisprudence (usul ul-fiqh), and the reliable sources from among the Sunni schools of thoughts (madhahib)." The potential consequences were far-reaching; Article 219 allowed Sharia law to penetrate all spheres of social and personal life, paving the way for literal and archaic interpretations of Sharia, as well as application of punishment.

The new constitution removes Article 219.

It also removes Article 212, which had granted the government far-reaching powers to control endowments, and thus church finances, and by extension their operations and social services. By removing Article 212, the new constitution takes the power of the church purse away from a government that will continue to be dominated by Muslims in a country where Islam remains the state religion.

Both the old and new constitutions ostensibly guarantee the independence of Christian and Jewish religious affairs, and several new articles theoretically imply greater religious freedom. Article 64 sets forth the "absolute" freedom of belief (instead of the "inviolable" freedom established in the previous document), though it is restricted it to the Abrahamic religions, leaving Baha'i, Shia, atheists and agnostics without constitutional cover. Article 74 prohibits the founding of religious political parties and parties that discriminate against "sex, origin, sect or geographic location". Article 53 promises all "citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, color, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason".

An activist who works closely with persecuted Christians in the countryside said the addition of Article 63, which forbids forced displacement of citizens, is especially welcome. Since the 1990s, the state has turned a blind eye to displaced Christians in Upper Egypt and other rural regions. Under threat of violence and faced with massive repression and discrimination by Islamists, tens of thousands Christians had forcibly been displaced.

Constitutions typically confine themselves to broad principles, and usually are not the place for the detail of carrying them out. But Egypt's new charter speaks to several specific Christian concerns.

In contrast to the previous constitution, for example, the new constitution acknowledges the cultural and historic status of Christians, and grants them greater political representation. In both the preamble and in Article 50, it refers to the cultural and historic heritage of the "Church of Jesus" and the Copts in particular. Article 244 enshrines "appropriate representation in the first House of Representatives" for Christians, among other minorities. Article 180 reiterates this principle on the level of local councils.

The new constitution also tackles one of the most enduring and sensitive issues for Egypt's Christians: Church building and renovation permits. Article 235 promises that "in

its first legislative term after this Constitution comes into effect, the House of Representatives shall issue a law to organize building and renovating churches, guaranteeing Christians the freedom to practice their religious rituals". It's the first time in Egypt's history that a constitution has addressed this issue.

It is worrisome, then, that such detailed provisions for Christians are not to be found in other places in the document. The judicial sector, for example, remains mostly unreformed. It gains a measure of independence in the new charter by moving the power to choose the prosecutor general from the president to the Supreme Judicial Council. But there is no provision reserving a share of seats on the bench for Christians. The articles in the new constitution concerning the courts are the same articles in the old constitution concerning the courts.

Elsewhere, there is nothing to indicate whether the rights of religious minorities will be mirrored in, for example, educational curricula. Nor are there new mechanisms to hold individuals and institutions accountable for breaches of constitutional rights.

Christians, about one-tenth the population in the officially Islamic country, have long been frustrated trying to obtain state jobs. Just as it cared out space for Christians in legislative assemblies, the new constitution could have carved out space for Christians in the civil service. But it doesn't.

"It is the best constitution Egypt has had yet, but ... [it is] still disappointing", said an Egyptian human rights activist, who asked not to be named. The military-run interim government waged an intense vote-yes campaign, and dissenters – including some of the leaders of the 2011 revolution – have found themselves in trouble with the authorities.

So indeed, compared to the last constitution, Christians have more rights. However, the structural, societal, bureaucratic and judicial discrimination that has plagued Egypt's Christians since the founding of the Arab Republic has historically been a consequence of the non-implementation of the different constitutions. Without any new enforcement mechanisms, it is not likely that much will change for Egypt's Christians. Their rights will remain theoretical.

To put it in the words of government official from the Egyptian Foreign Service, before this week's vote: "This constitution is written for foreigners, not for Egyptians. Egyptians do not respect simple traffic rules; How could they respect constitutional articles? No one read the constitution. Still, the constitution will be passed with a majority vote of at least 70%."

At best, this new constitution represents a return to the pre-Brotherhood status for Egypt's Christians. The wine-skins are new; the wine, however, is not.

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Shot Copt dies on New Year's Eve after hospital 'negligence'

Christian reportedly shot by Muslim Brotherhood protesters, then refused treatment

World Watch Monitor (06.01.2014) - A Coptic Christian man died on New Year's Eve from a gunshot wound to the head after three hospitals in Cairo are reported to have turned him away.

Ihab Ghattas, 23, was shot outside Mar Girgis (St George's) Church in the Ain Shams area of Cairo after celebrating mass. The Maspero Youth Union (MYU), a Coptic activist group, claims he was shot by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood following a protest outside the church by the Islamist group.

In a statement released on New Year's Day, the MYU claimed that Ghattas died because of "negligence" on the part of the hospitals which refused to treat him.

Mideast Christian News (MCN) reports that Ghattas was denied access to one hospital because it was deemed not to be an emergency and another due to a lack of beds. The third hospital refused to treat him due to the absence of an intensive care unit, according to the MYU.

A fourth hospital, St. Peter's in Heliopolis, admitted him but he died soon afterwards. The MYU said that by this stage he had been "bleeding for three hours". The group has called for an investigation.

Muslim Brotherhood supporters were reported by MCN to have fired birdshot at St. George's Church, after which a group of young people from the church, including Ghattas, had joined police in defending it.

Other protests reportedly took place across the country, but police used tear gas to disperse them.
