

Coptic Blogger in Egypt Threatens Hunger Strike

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✖ A Coptic Christian blogger in Egypt held in prison for more than a year without charge said Monday he will go on a hunger strike unless authorities grant his next application for release.

Hani Nazeer, a 28-year-old high school social worker from Qena, Egypt and author of the blog *"Karz El Hob,"* received word Monday that his latest application for release, sent to the Ministry of the Interior a week ago, was denied. His attorneys said they would re-apply for his release tomorrow.

The interior ministry did not "supply the grounds for refusal" according to Rawda Ahamad, Nazeer's lead defense attorney.

"He has no charges against him," Ahamad said. "He is not a criminal. He must be released immediately. He's an innocent man – anyone exposed to this severe injustice would do the same."

On Oct. 3, 2008, Nazeer was arrested by Egypt's State Security Investigations (SSI) and sent to Burj Al-Arab prison. Although police never charged him with any crime, Nazeer has been detained for more than a year under Egypt's administrative imprisonment law.

Nazeer ran afoul of SSI officers a few days before his arrest when a group of local teenagers visited his website and clicked on a link to an online copy of *"Azazil's Goat in Mecca,"* a novel written under the pseudonym "Father Utah." The book is a response to *"Azazil,"* a novel by Yusuf Zidane, critical of Christianity.

Insulting religion is illegal in Egypt, but the law is enforced unequally. Zidane's critique of Christianity garnered him fame and awards throughout the Arab world. Nazeer's website link cost him his freedom, despite the fact that police have never publicly produced any evidence linking Nazeer to Utah's work. After Nazeer was arrested, posts continued on Utah's website.

Nazeer has reported to his attorneys that he has been placed in prison with felons, some of them violent. He also claims that prison authorities have pressured him to convert to Islam.

Gamel Eid, executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the group representing Nazeer, stood by his client's accusations, saying police have urged inmates to suggest to Nazeer that officers would work to free him if he were to convert to Islam.

Nazeer's situation is complicated by the fact that his writings upset both Islamic authorities and the hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. On one hand, he criticized the increasing Islamization of Egyptian civil society. On the other, he lamented the political involvement of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In one post, Nazeer wrote that a gathering of activists at a Coptic church was inappropriate because churches were meant to be venues for prayer, not for politics.

According to Eid, Nazeer was arrested with the complicity of leaders in the Coptic Orthodox Church. In October of 2008, police detained Nazeer's relatives at a police station and threatened to hold them until he came out of hiding. Nazeer turned himself into the police station on the advice of Bishop Kirollos of Nag Hammadi, Nazeer reported to his attorneys. Kirollos assured Nazeer he would be detained no more than four days and then be released.

Kirollos had denounced Nazeer to security, Nazeer told his

attorneys.

All attempts to reach Kirolos about his alleged involvement in Nazeer's arrest were unsuccessful. Several attempts to reach Bishop Anba Yoannes, authorized to speak about the case on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Church's Pope Shenouda III, were also unsuccessful. Egypt's SSI, a political police force run by the Interior minister, routinely declines to comment on cases.

This week's application will be sent to a court within the Ministry of the Interior. But under the emergency law, police officials have the power to ignore court orders. When local police execute a court order to release prisoners held under Egypt's emergency law, security police commonly re-arrest them minutes later.

The law, enacted after the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat, allows authorities to hold people without charge. Eid estimated that there are approximately 14,000 people imprisoned under this law. In 2005, while running for re-election, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak promised to replace the contested law. But in May of 2008, the Egyptian government extended the law for two more years.

Mamdouh Nakhla, an attorney and civil rights activist in Egypt, said oppression of Coptic Christians is common and that many police officers in Egypt are the "agents of persecution." At best, he said, they are complicit in acts of persecution. At worst, he added, police collude with others hostile to Christianity.

"They give green lights to Islamists, and protect them, and give them the feeling that they are immune from prosecution," he said.