

Tanzanian Court Acquits Two Evangelists of 'Illegal Preaching'

✖ A Tanzanian court recently acquitted two evangelists of "illegal preaching."

After 10 months of hearings, a Kariakoo area court in Dar es Salaam closed the case against Anglican Christians Eleutery Kobelo and Cecil Simbaulanga, who were arrested in October 2009 after Muslims invited them to participate in a religious debate at which the opponents did not appear, but authorities did.

The two evangelists maintained that no Muslims showed up to the neutral site of the supposed inter-faith debate until Islamists arrived with government security agents who charged them with "using religious sermons to incite Muslims and Christians into viewing each other with suspicion."

The accusers had claimed that the Christians' message that Jesus is God had annoyed Muslims and therefore disrupted a peaceful coexistence between those of the two faiths.

Kobelo told Compass by telephone that the Muslims failed to show up in court to support their allegation of illegal preaching. After the verdict, Christians shouting for joy greeted the evangelists as they left the courtroom, he said.

"We are grateful that that the court has done justice and made its ruling based on Tanzania's constitution that allows for freedom of religion and assembly," Kobelo said. "We thank the Christians worldwide for praying for us and Compass for highlighting our plight."

Simbaulanga said the message of Christ's atoning death and resurrection cannot be stopped.

"The court decision will make us preach the gospel more vigorously, and many Muslims will turn to Christ," he told Compass. "Muslims tried to stop the movement, but nobody can stop the gospel."

Kobelo and Simbaulanga were in jail for seven days before they were released on bail on Oct. 27.

Simbaulanga was imprisoned for 62 days between December 2006 and February 2007 in Kigoma, he said. Denied bail, he was accused of trying to convert Muslims to Christ and "abusing Islam" by saying Muhammad had married a young girl. Several cases are pending against him in different courts, he said, and Muslims are constantly searching for him.

An estimated 62 percent of Tanzania's population is Christian and 35 percent is Muslim, mostly Sunni; other religious groups make up the other 3 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Department of State.

Police in the Tanzanian capital of Dodoma stopped two

Christian evangelists from reading excerpts from the Quran in an outdoor event on March 18, 2009, according to the state department's 2009 International Religious Freedom Report. Officers temporarily detained them and released them with a warning not to read the Quran during sermons to avoid antagonizing the Muslim community.