

A Muslim Exodus

It's not unlike Moses crying out to Pharaoh in ancient Egypt, saying: "Let My people go!" Only today it's not Jews seeking an exodus but Christians appealing to Muslim rulers for justice. They are demanding the right for Muslims to choose whom to worship and with which religion to identify.

More than a billion Muslims around the world are denied the universal freedom of religion, according to Kamal Fahmi, Sudanese spokesman for Set My People Free, a religious-rights network founded in Egypt in 2008.

"The present uprising presents us with a chance to demand equal rights for Christians in North Africa, but the outcome is uncertain," Fahmi says. "It could very well end as in Iran—with an Islamist takeover."

Set My People Free is represented on several continents after originating at a Christian retreat in Turkey. In countries as far apart as Australia and Sweden, national committees have organized protest marches. A recent religious-rights petition to the Swiss Parliament gathered more than 50,000 signatures.

After meeting with third-generation Christians in Yemen, Fahmi left his position as senior leader of a prominent Middle East and North Africa mission to work with the network full time. He was shocked to see the outworking of the Muslim anti-conversion law—a grandchild in a Christian family still had to act, publicly and officially, as a Muslim. "It is forbidden for Muslims to change religions," Fahmi explains. "Legally there is no such thing as an ex-Muslim."

Consequently, Muslims can never have the religion clause in their identity papers altered. They cannot send their children to Christian classes. They cannot marry their daughters to Christian men. Even the embassies of democratic nations will not allow such "legally Muslim" women to marry non-Muslims,

Fahmi says. The U.S. Embassy in Cairo, for example, requires a written document proving that the American bridegroom has converted to Islam before marrying him to a “Muslim” woman.

Fahmi and Set My People Free are denouncing this enforcement of Muslim anti-conversion laws by secular states and challenging democratic nations to stand up for citizen rights. Converts are seen and treated as traitors not only to Islam but also to the state. These so-called apostates can be sentenced to death. Alternatively, their marriages are nullified, they lose custody of their children or they abandon their right to an inheritance.

Fahmi has met with numerous victims throughout the Arab world and speaks out for them through Set My People Free. “They all had to go into hiding, and in the end they all had to leave their countries,” says Fahmi, who himself is not hiding.

By protesting, Fahmi says he is merely sharing the same risks Muslim converts face daily. “Besides, we do not have a choice,” he continues. “Martin Luther did not have a choice when he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. He had to do it, because it is only the truth that sets us free.”

Despite the oppression, the number of Muslim converts is growing. According to a Set My People Free online petition, there are at least 70,000 ex-Muslim Christians in Algeria alone. As Set My People Free gains momentum, Fahmi points to the inspirations for the network: William Wilberforce, the British leader instrumental in the abolishing of the slave trade, and Martin Luther King Jr.

“Nobody could foresee the radical change their actions would bring, but here we are,” Fahmi says.