

Christian Teen Jailed for Insulting Islam

A Christian teen was sentenced to three years in jail by an Egyptian court on Wednesday for **insulting Islam**.

The case follows previous charges filed against Christians and moderates for **blasphemy** in recent months, adding to concerns that Islamists are using their newly gained political power to stifle freedom of expression.

On April 4, Gamal Abdou Massoud, 17, was convicted in an Egyptian court for posting cartoons on Facebook deemed offensive to Muslims and distributing them to friends at school in the Upper Egypt province of Assiut.

The cartoons, published in December, led to violent Muslim protests in neighboring villages that lasted for two days. Several Christian houses were burned and several Christians were injured during the protests.

On Dec. 31, village elders, including representatives from the Salafis—a group that adheres to the strict Saudi Wahhabi doctrine of Islam—and local police accused Massoud of inciting sedition. They agreed to detain Massoud and evict his family from the village, reported the Assyrian International News Agency. Massoud was reportedly held in custody for three months prior to receiving the three-year prison sentence in court yesterday.

“Assiut child’s court ordered the jailing of Gamal Abdou Massoud ... for three years after he insulted Islam and published and distributed pictures that insulted Islam and its Prophet,” the court said in a statement seen by Reuters. Human rights lawyer Negad al-Borai said the jail sentence was the maximum penalty under Egyptian law for insulting Islam.

Massoud's case follows similar charges filed against Christians and secularists for defaming Islam in recent months. On January 9, Christian telecom mogul Naguib Sawiris, who founded the Free Egyptians political party, was charged with "blasphemy and insulting Islam" when he reposted a cartoon of a bearded Mickey Mouse and a veiled Minnie Mouse on Twitter.

While an Egyptian court dismissed on March 3 the second of two cases filed against Sawiris, other cases remain pending, including charges filed in early February against Adel Imam, Egypt's leading comic actor. Imam was given a three-month prison sentence by an Egyptian court for "defaming Islam" for a role he played in a 2007 film and is waiting for his appeal to be reviewed.

"The battle, of course, is being waged by Islamists who want their interpretation of the religion to be declared as the only acceptable version," said Barry Rubin, the director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center. "Westerners don't understand that when that happens anything more moderate or flexibly traditional hence becomes illegal and punishable. The Islamist counter-Bill of Rights proclaims that the country's people have no freedom of speech or freedom of religion, no right to free assembly or of the press."

Aidan Clay, International Christian Concern's regional manager for the Middle East, said blasphemy charges, like those filed against Gamal Abdou Massoud, will unfortunately only increase with time. He expects Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, with a large Salafi minority, dominate power in Egypt's parliament and are now dictating the process of writing Egypt's new constitution. He also predicts a high probability that an Islamist will win the presidential election in May.

"As Islamists consolidate government control, it is inevitable that Islam will become a foundational influence within

Egyptian law. Currently, the military is perhaps the only force in Egypt stalling the country's complete transition into an Islamic state," Clay said.

"However, if freedom of speech is already being attacked by Islamists while Egypt's military still holds some power, how much more will it be attacked once Islamists have complete control? Sadly, the liberal activists who were largely responsible for ousting President Mubarak from power a year ago are now seeing Islamists crush the very freedoms many of them had fought so dearly to defend."