

# Christian's Six-Year Sentence Upheld in Egypt

A judge in Upper Egypt has upheld a six-year prison sentence for a **Coptic Christian** wrongly convicted of blasphemy against Islam and inciting sectarian strife, his lawyer said.

The judge in Assuit on April 5 refused to strike down a Feb. 29 sentence delivered to Makarem Diab, 49, of the town of Abnoub in Assuit Province. The charges stem from an argument that Diab had in February with Abd Al Hameed, a fellow employee at Deer Al Gabrawy Prep School.

From the start, the charges against Diab were inflated, according to his lawyer, Ahmed Sayed Gebaly.

"I know Makarem well, because we grew up together, and I know he wouldn't do that," said Gebaly, a Muslim. "To be honest, he didn't do anything wrong. If he did, I will have told him."

Gebaly said he was surprised by how far Al Hameed took the accusations. "The whole thing was just an ordinary discussion," he said.

Al Hameed told Diab, an administration worker, that Jesus had sex with at least 10 women who were "*Mehram*" or forbidden to Him under Islamic law (though Islam appeared more than six centuries after Jesus), according to Gebaly. *Mehram* status refers to forbidden marriage or sexual relations, such as those between immediate family members.

Diab countered Al Hameed's claims—for which there is no historical record—by stating that Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic religion, had more than four wives—a view commonly held by Islamic scholars, though disputes arise over whether he had more than four wives over the course of his life or at one time.

For reasons that are not publicly known, Al Hameed waited for 11 days to report his allegations against Diab to a misdemeanor court. Police arrested Diab and held him for four days before he was presented to a judge. On Feb. 29, in a 10-minute court hearing with no defense attorney present, the judge sentenced Diab to six years in prison for “insulting the prophet” and “provoking students.”

Diab received an appeal hearing on March 16, but Al Hameed instigated a massive riot by a large throng of Muslim attorneys outside the courthouse, according to Gebaly. The lawyers became so enraged that they burst into the courtroom during the hearing and assaulted Diab’s attorneys. They also blocked access to the courtroom.

The judge upheld the six-year sentence but immediately scheduled an appeal hearing. Gebaly said the judge upheld the sentence out of fear.

Gebaly was outside the courthouse getting legal papers for the case when the attack happened.

“Soon after that, I was called by these [Diab’s] lawyers, and they told me that they were beaten up inside the court and in front of the judge, so I went back to sort out the problem, and I was shocked when the judge kept the six-year sentence,” he said.

Most of the lawyers defending Diab were Muslims, he added.

Gebaly went to the next hearing on April 5; once again, the judge’s ruling surprised him.

“We were expecting that he would be released with no charges, but the law was used in the wrong way, and now we are trying to appeal again, if his appeal gets accepted,” Gebaly said.

Diab remained in Assuit General Prison awaiting appeal. Gebaly said that he is being treated as well as one can be while in

prison.

The action against Diab is yet another example of how members of the Muslim majority in Egypt are increasingly using religious-based laws to persecute Christians or even Muslims who don't conform to a strict interpretation to Sunni Islam.

On April 4, a judge sentenced Gamal Abdou Massoud, 17, a Coptic Christian, to three years in prison for allegedly **insulting Islam**. Massoud denied the charges, but the court claimed that he posted cartoons on his Facebook account that mocked the Islamic religion and Muhammad. The court also claimed that he distributed the pictures to other students. His lawyers plan to appeal the sentence.

On March 3, a Cairo court dismissed a case against Naguib Sawaris, a Copt and telecommunications tycoon, who was accused of insulting Islam for placing a cartoon of Minnie Mouse in a veil on his Facebook site as a satirical comment on what Egypt would look like if Islamists gained political power in the country.

On April 24, a Cairo court upheld a conviction against actor Adel Imam for blaspheming Islam but later in the week struck down a separate conviction of the same charge. Imam, arguably the best-known actor in the Arabic-speaking world, ran afoul of a lawyer with connections to the Salafi movement for his satirical roles about extremism.

The sentence carries three months in jail and a fine of 1,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$165). Imam's lawyers plan to appeal the decision.