

Condemned to Hang, Pregnant Sudanese Doctor Refuses to Recant Faith in Christ

Meriam Yahia Ibrahim, a 27-year-old Sudanese doctor due to have her second baby next month, has been condemned to death by hanging after refusing to renounce her Christian faith on Thursday, despite pressure on her to do so, even in court.

Her lawyer reported that, after the court had given her three days to reconsider, Ibrahim bravely asserted again that she is a Christian; Agence France Presse reports that an Islamic cleric spoke with her in the caged dock for about half an hour. She was also addressed in court by her Muslim name.

On May 11, the Public Order Court in El Haj Yousef in Khartoum had sentenced Ibrahim to death for apostasy. Her sentence that day to 100 lashes for alleged “adultery” has also been upheld.

Amnesty International has condemned the sentences as “appalling and abhorrent.” Its Sudan researcher Maner Idriss says that Sudan is a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in which “everyone has the right to freedom of religion.” This includes the “freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

Ibrahim’s lawyers say they will appeal to a higher court to get her sentence overturned, though it is unlikely to be carried out until her second child has been weaned, a provision in local law.

Ibrahim was initially arrested and released on bail under suspicion of committing adultery in September after someone,

claiming to be a relative, lodged a criminal complaint against her. This claimed that she was a Muslim and therefore illegally cohabiting with a Christian man.

Under Sudanese law Muslim women may only marry Muslim men. Since her father was a Muslim, the authorities regard Ibrahim as a Muslim and do not recognize her marriage to a Christian.

After she countered the adultery charge by saying that she was a Christian, the authorities arrested Ibrahim and detained her at the Omdurman Federal Women's Prison with her 20-month-old son on Feb. 17. At this point she was accused of apostasy—of apparently “leaving her Islamic faith,” a new charge incurring the death penalty.

Three witnesses from western Sudan came to Khartoum in March to testify of Ibrahim's lifelong Christian faith, but they were not allowed to testify. Ibrahim showed the court on March 4 that she was a Christian by producing her marriage certificate, which states that she is a Christian and that her marriage was conducted in a church in Khartoum in 2012.

This case is so far unique in Sudan, as there are no other documented sentences from Sudanese courts, based on people of different faiths coming together in marriage.

The African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies says this case demonstrates “the internal contradictions of Sudanese law and its incompatibility with Sudan's diverse population and international commitments.” Lawyers point out, for instance, that her son is being held in violation of article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag was born in November 1987 in a small town in western Sudan to an Ethiopian Orthodox mother and a Muslim Sudanese father. Her father disappeared from her life when she was 6 years old, and her Ethiopian Orthodox mother raised her in the Christian faith. Later they moved to Khartoum, where the mother died in 2011.

Ibrahim met Daniel Wani, who has dual South Sudanese and United States citizenship, in a church in Khartoum and they married in a church ceremony in 2012. Both are qualified doctors. The couple's 20-month-old son, Martin Wani, also has U.S. citizenship by virtue of his father's U.S. citizenship.

If her death sentence is upheld her children's custody would be granted to the government, as the husband is not granted any rights over his children due to being a Christian.

Middle East Concern reported that prison guards and other prisoners have abused Meriam while she is in prison. Meriam is also being denied medical treatment, including prenatal care for her unborn child. Muslim scholars have also been visiting her, pressuring her to return to the religion of her father.

A family member said: "We are concerned for her well-being; it is not very safe for her to be in the prison with dangerous criminals."

The government is denying Wani visiting rights to his wife and child, and has revoked his passport. They are keeping Martin in prison with his mother because they are prohibiting his Christian father from caring for him, as they consider the child a Muslim.

Ibrahim's sentence is the latest and most significant in a series of repressive acts by the Sudanese government against religious minorities. If the sentence is carried out Ibrahim would become the first person to be executed for apostasy under the 1991 penal code, prompting concerns that the charge may increasingly be used against anyone who converts from Islam.