

Court Rulings Mirror Fears, Hopes in Egyptian Vote

In the lead-up to the country's first democratic presidential election, a court ruling confirmed fears that justice will continue to elude the Christian minority in post-revolutionary Egypt, while another verdict offered some hope.

On May 21 a judge sentenced 12 Coptic Christians to life in prison for their alleged part in a riot in Abu-Qurgas village, in Minya Province, that left two Muslims and one Christian dead. Eight Muslims charged with the same crimes in the same riot were all acquitted.

The ruling shocked even Copts accustomed to biased and brutal legal judgments.

The sentencing came against the backdrop of the first round of what is being touted as Egypt's first truly democratic presidential election. After the first round of elections held May 23-24, unofficial results show the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi leads with ex-prime minister Ahmed Shafiq following close behind.

Mursi and Shafiq will face each other again in a run-off election scheduled for June 16-17.

Brazen Bias

On April 18, 2011, a wealthy Coptic Christian lawyer in Abu-Qurgas, Alaa' Rushdy, had placed a speed bump in front of his house, and a minibus driver angered by it got into an altercation with security guards posted at Rushdy's home.

Many of the particulars about the start of the ensuing riot cannot be confirmed conclusively, but multiple Egyptian news outlets stated that guards at Rushdy's home or others at his house armed themselves at the sight of a gathering Muslim

throng and began shooting in order to prevent an attack on their village. Reports agreed that Muslims then swept over Abu-Qugas, leaving dozens of Coptic homes and businesses in ashes.

There were no reports of any damage to Muslim-owned homes. Two Muslim men and one elderly Christian woman were killed.

In all, 20 men—12 Christians and eight Muslims—were arrested and charged with multiple crimes, including murder, disturbing the peace, inciting “sectarian strife,” arson and possession of unlicensed firearms. All the Coptic Christian defendants were found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. All the Muslim defendants were released.

Athanasious Williams, a Coptic Christian human rights lawyer in Egypt and a leader in the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, said the trial was completely unjust but that injustice in the courts toward Christians is normal in Egypt.

“There is a history of unfair trials against the Christians when Muslims attack them,” Williams said. “So the court is seen as being unfair.”

Glimmer of Hope

A rare verdict in the case of a Muslim who killed a Christian, however, held out some hope for Copts. On May 14 an Egyptian court led by Chancellor Mahmoud Salama upheld a death sentence against Amir Ashour Abd al Zaher, a police officer who in 2011 boarded a train, attacked a group of Christians and shot one dead.

Samia Sidhom, managing editor of *Watani* newspaper in Cairo, said the ruling went against “an unwritten rule” that judges cannot give the death penalty to a Muslim who kills a Christian.

“It is very rare. For many of us, the ruling came as a good surprise,” she said. “Most of us expected he would be declared

mentally deranged.”

On the afternoon of Jan. 11, 2011, Al Zaher, 29, a police officer posted in the province of Minya, boarded train number 979, began shouting “God is great” and opened fire on six Coptic Christians with a service pistol, according to witnesses.

Al Zaher killed Fathy Mousaad, in his 70s, with a shot to the chest. He turned the pistol on five others, wounding Mousaad’s wife, Emily Hanna Tadaly, 61; Sabah Shenoda Soliman, 52; Marian Nabil Zaki, 25; Magy Nabil Zaki, 26; and Ehab Ashraf Kamal, 30. The survivors were taken to the Christian-run Al Ray Al Saleh Hospital, treated and released.

All those shot were Copts. According to witnesses, Al Zaher identified his victims by their lack of the head covering. The vast majority of Islamic women in Egypt now wear some type of veil.

In court, Al Zaher claimed that he wanted to sit in an empty seat next to Mousaad’s daughter, and when Mousaad refused to let him, the two got into an argument ending with the Muslim pulling out his pistol and opening fire. Al Zaher’s defense also made some effort to portray him as being mentally ill, with his wife testifying to support this claim.

In the end, the evidence against Al Zaher was overwhelming. A forensic report stated that bullets removed from the victims were fired from Al Zaher’s service pistol, which was in his possession when he was arrested after the shooting.

On March 12 a judge in Upper Egypt sentenced Al Zaher to death, a sentence that had to be approved by Egypt’s Grand Mufti, a state appointed Muslim leader. No execution date has been set.

Election

The first stages of Egypt’s first democratic presidential

election left two at the top: former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, an independent candidate who at one time was a member of the Mubarak administration, and Mohamed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party, an Islamist party connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Cases like the Abu-Qurgas trial maybe a portent of the things to come for Christians in Egypt regardless of who wins the election, said rights attorney Williams; persecution of Christians will continue in Egypt; the question is how bad will it be, he said.

"I am expecting the worst in all cases," Williams said. "Either the Islamists will take over, or Ahmed Shafik will. If the Islamists take over, we will be like Iran, and they will enforce *sharia* law, and there will be no freedom of religion. There will be no freedoms of any kind. There will be no freedom in art, opinion or anything. If Shafik takes over, it will be the same way it was before."