

Egypt Court Sentences 8 to Death Over Prophet Film

An Egyptian court convicted in absentia Wednesday seven Egyptian Coptic Christians and a Florida-based American pastor, sentencing them to death on charges linked to an anti-Islam film that had sparked riots in parts of the Muslim world.

The case was seen as largely symbolic because the defendants, most of whom live in the United States, are all outside Egypt and are thus unlikely to ever face the verdict. The charges were issued in September amid a wave of public outrage in Egypt over the amateur film, which was produced by an Egyptian-American Copt.

The low-budget *Innocence of Muslims*, parts of which were made available online, portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, womanizer and buffoon.

Egypt's official news agency said the court found the defendants guilty of harming national unity, insulting and publicly attacking Islam, and spreading false information—charges that carry the death sentence.

Maximum sentences are common in cases tried in absentia in Egypt. Capital punishment decisions are reviewed by the country's chief religious authority, who must approve or reject the sentence. A final verdict is scheduled on Jan. 29.

The man behind the film, Mark Basseley Youssef, is among those convicted. He was sentenced in a California court earlier this month to a year in federal prison for probation violations in an unrelated matter. Youssef, 55, admitted that he had used several false names in violation of his probation order and obtained a driver's license under a false name. He was on probation for a bank fraud case.

Florida-based Terry Jones, another of those sentenced, is the pastor of Dove World Outreach, a church of less than 50 members in Gainesville, Fla., not far from the University of Florida. He has said he was contacted by the filmmaker to promote the film, as well as Morris Sadek, a conservative Coptic Christian in the U.S. who posted the video clips on his website, were also among those charged.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Jones said the ruling “shows the true face of Islam”—one that he views as intolerant of dissent and opposed to basic freedoms of speech and religion.

“We can speak out here in America,” Jones said. “That freedom means that we criticize government leadership, religion even at times. Islam is not a religion that tolerates any type of criticism.”

The connection of the other five sentenced by the court was not immediately clear. They include two who work with Sadek at a radical Coptic group in the U.S. that has called for an independent Coptic state, a priest who hosts TV programs from the U.S., and a lawyer living in Canada who has previously sued the Egyptian state over riots in 2000 that left 21 Christians dead.

The other person is a woman who converted to Christianity and is a staunch critic of Islam.

The official news report said that during the trial, the court reviewed a video of some defendants calling for an independent Coptic state in Egypt, and another of Jones burning the Quran, Islam’s holy book. The prosecutor asked for the maximum sentence, accusing those charged of seeking to divide Egypt and incite sedition. All of the defendants, except Jones, hold Egyptian nationality, the agency added.

Some Christians and human rights groups worry that prosecutions for insulting religion, which existed to a degree

under the secular-leaning regime of Hosni Mubarak, will now increase with the ascent of Islamists to power.

Curt Anderson contributed reporting from Miami, Florida

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