

Egypt Sentences Christian to 6 Years in Prison for Liking Facebook Page

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned Kerolos Shawky, a Christian in southern Egypt, has been convicted and sentenced to six years in prison and a fine of 6,000 EGP (\$840 USD) on charges of blasphemy and contempt of Islam. The ruling was handed down on Tuesday. His defense team plans to appeal and hopes the conviction will be reviewed before the end of this month, one of his lawyers told ICC.

As ICC reported, Kerolos was accused of violating Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code which prohibits “ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife” but is often used as a means of persecuting religious minorities, as the United States Commission on Religious Freedom highlighted in its 2014 Annual Report. The accusations brought against Kerolos also sparked violence against Christians in the surrounding area as shops and homes were vandalized and set on fire.

Rafla Zekry Rafla, a lawyer representing Kerolos and president of the Human Rights Commission of the Luxor Bar Association, told ICC he feels the charges are unfair. “Kerolos didn’t intend to insult the Islamic religion, only he made a like on the page of Knights of the Cross on Facebook,” Rafla told ICC. “He doesn’t have much experience in the internet plus he suffers from poor eyesight. So there was not any intention for the contempt or blasphemy of Islam,” he continued.

Kerolos’ case and the attacks on Christian-owned property demonstrate the high level of sectarian tensions that continue to be present, Jay Roddy, researcher with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, told ICC. “Shortly before the man’s

trial was set to take place, Christian-owned property in the same village was set ablaze in what appears to be a related attack," Roddy continued.

While there was hope that the election of Abdel Fatah El-Sisi would be a positive sign for Christians, this is now the third conviction of a Christian on seemingly insignificant charges. On June 15, an appeals court confirmed the conviction of Demyana Abd al-Nour on charges of blasphemy. On June 18, Bishoy Armia Boulous was sentenced to five years in prison for charges that have not been disclosed, but believed to be inciting sectarian violence for allegedly sharing reports of attacks on churches.

Todd Daniels, ICC Regional Manager for the Middle East, said, "The Egyptian legal system appears to have no concern for upholding the rule of law or protecting the fundamental rights of Egyptian citizens. From frivolous convictions on accusations of blasphemy like those brought against Kerolos and Demyana or the conviction of Bishoy, to the cases involving journalists, political dissidents and protestors, fundamental human rights are being trampled. Egypt must quickly abandon the use of sham trials that violate the most basic rights of all citizens, including its Christian minority. The United States should use its role as a key ally and a significant donor of funds to Egypt to ensure that the country is moving to protect the fundamental rights of its citizens."