

# Egyptian Author Questioned for Contempt of Religion

Egyptian prosecutors have questioned an award-winning novelist over accusations he insulted religion, in the latest of a series of cases to cause concern over freedom of expression in Islamist-run Egypt.

Writer **Youssef Ziedan** said he had been interrogated for four hours this week about his 2009 novel, *Arab Theology*, which has become a best seller since it was republished recently.

The prosecutors were examining a three-year-old report from the Islamic Research Centre, a state-sponsored body of religious scholars, which said Ziedan had offended followers of **Islam**, Christianity and Judaism alike.

Ziedan asked why the authorities are investigating *Arab Theology*, which discusses the origins of religious violence, while Egypt faces major political, social and economic problems.

"It was really shocking and strange to find myself talking about philosophy with state security officers, especially now, at a time the state is suffering from extreme turmoil and street violence, which should be the focus of their work," Ziedan told Reuters after his **interrogation** on Tuesday.

Egyptian law prohibits insults against Islam, Christianity and Judaism, laying down penalties of up to five years in jail. Egypt has a large Christian minority but its historic Jewish community has dwindled to almost nothing in recent decades.

The law has long been on the books, but was enforced only occasionally under deposed President Hosni Mubarak. However, campaigners have raised concerns about freedom of thought and expression under President **Mohamed Mursi**, an Islamist elected last year after the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak.

Ziedan, a Muslim known for discussing non-traditional religious ideas in his novels, said he was questioned by the state security prosecutor in a case brought by public prosecutor Talaat Ibrahim. Mursi appointed Ibrahim in November after sacking the previous incumbent, a Mubarak-era official.

The opposition has accused Mursi of defying a law that prevents the firing of public prosecutors. Some judges and public figures saw the move as an attempt by the **Muslim Brotherhood**, which supports Mursi, to control the judiciary.

Brotherhood spokesman Yasser Mehraz said his group had nothing to do with the Ziedan investigation. "Generally speaking, we at the Brotherhood believe that different ideas should exist and ideas should be fought only by ideas," he said.

### **Flexing Their Muscles**

Human rights activist Gamal Eid said the *Arab Theology* case had been revived by a Salafi—one of those who want Egypt to follow a yet stricter interpretation of Islam than the Brotherhood favours.

"The Islamic Research Centre's report was made in 2010, but a hardline **Salafi** Islamist person recently sent it to the (prosecution) officials," said Eid, who sent an aide to the interrogation. "Of course the case shows the continuation of Islamists flexing their muscles and their attempts to shape the country according to their own form of Islam."

*Arab Theology* appeared at the end of 2009 and was recently reprinted. So far it has sold about 40,000 copies, far above average sales of books in Egypt of 4,000 to 6,000 at best.

"The Islamic Research Centre's report also accused me of inciting strife in society and ... of mocking religions and spreading radical thoughts," said Ziedan.

"I admit that my ideas are against all radical Islamist groups, which include the Brotherhood," he said, but added: "The book is entirely philosophical and anti-violence."

His work *Azazeel* (Beelzebub) won the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, backed by the Booker Prize Foundation. However, some Christians said the book insulted their religion.

Prosecutors also questioned Ziedan about that book before the revolution, but took no further action. Such cases have increased since **Islamists** gained power last year.

In December, a 27-year-old Egyptian Christian was jailed for three years for posting online an anti-Islam film that ignited Muslim protests around the world. In November, seven Egyptian Christians living abroad were sentenced to death in absentia for participating in the video.

A court sentenced Egyptian comic actor Adel Imam, renowned across the Arab world, to three months in jail and a fine of 1,000 Egyptian pounds (\$150) in April for insulting Islam in his films and plays. Imam was acquitted on appeal.

Ziedan said such cases, including his own, were a sign of the times. "I see the case, like many other former ones against writers and creative people, as a form of pressure that has become a trend in the Brotherhood's world."

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*Editing by David Stamp and Alistair Lyon.*

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