

Egyptian Court Sentences Priest from Attacked Church Building

A priest in Egypt was sentenced this week to six months in jail for a minor construction violation at his church building, while no one in a mob that burned the same structure down has been arrested.

The Rev. Makarious Bolous of the Mar Gerges Church in Aswan was sentenced on March 4, but neither the imams who called for the attack nor the Muslim villagers who destroyed the church building last September have been charged with any crime.

Bolous said the ruling, coupled with the absence of prosecution against those who burned down the church building, is clear evidence of **persecution** and a legal double standard between Christians and Muslims.

"I feel it is unjust," Bolous said. "It's not fair."

The lower court that made the ruling also fined Bolous 300 Egyptian pounds (US\$50). Bolous remained free March 6 awaiting appeal.

Local government officials said the building was 2.5 meters taller than what they had approved on a series of architectural drawings. Bolous said the citation was issued days after the fire.

The priest said the charges surprised him. A significant percentage of construction projects in Egypt are done without permits, he said, and even when permits are issued, adherence to their stipulations is casual and enforcement is lax. The village where the church building once stood is surrounded by homes that have two or three extra floors built outside of

permitted specifications and by others that were built with no permit at all, according to Bolous.

“The whole village is full of people who are building against their licenses,” Bolous said. “So the whole thing is, ‘Why did they only cite the church and pick on the extra bit of building?’”

Bolous’ attorney, Osama Refaat, said the citation was unusual because by law contractors, not property owners, are responsible for permit violations.

“The right law was used, but in the wrong way,” Refaat said.

The Attack

On Sept. 30, shortly after afternoon prayers, approximately 3,000 villagers set fire to and then demolished the Mar Gerges building in the El Marenab village of Aswan. The mob also razed four homes near the church building and two businesses, all Christian-owned. Widespread looting was also reported.

“Imams in more than 20 mosques called for crowds to gather and destroy the church and demolish the houses of the Copts and loot their properties,” Michael Ramzy, a villager from El Marenab, told local media in September.

The tension in El Marenab began the last week of August, when **Muslim extremists** voiced anger over renovations taking place at Mar Gerges. Muslim villagers claimed that church officials were turning a guesthouse on church property into a church. They were also upset that symbols of the Christian faith, such as crosses, could be seen from outside the church building.

That same week, Muslim villagers began blockading the entrance to the church building and threatening Copts on the street—in effect making them hostages in their own homes.

On Sept. 2, a meeting was held with military leaders and village elders in which the local leadership of the Coptic

Orthodox Church agreed to remove all crosses and bells outside the building. Peace returned briefly to the village, but by early the next week, the Muslim villagers abandoned the agreement and went back to harassing local Christians. They demanded the removal of domes newly constructed on top of the church building, and the hard-line Muslims—ignoring pleas by priests to leave the church building alone—called for it to be burned.

Throughout the dispute, Muslim leaders in the village claimed that the renovations were illegal because the building wasn't a church but a hospitality facility—even though the original structure on the site was used as a church building for roughly 100 years.

The governor of Aswan, Mostafa al-Sayyed, sided with the rioters and cast blame for the attacks on the Copts and local leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church. He claimed he had never given permission to turn a guesthouse into a church, in effect blaming the Copts for bringing the attack on themselves. But documents produced by church officials and independently verified by a non-sectarian group, The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, showed that Al-Sayyed signed off on construction permits that authorized the renovation of an existing altar area inside the building.

Bolous said March 6 that tensions remain in the village. Despite government guarantees to fund and build a new church structure to replace the old one, the promises have proven empty.

"It's been six months now, and even after Field Marshall Tantawi gave the permission to rebuild the church, I cannot go back to the church or hold any prayers there or even go to the village at all," Bolous said, adding that part of the problem is that Al-Sayyed blocks all attempts to build the replacement. "He keeps saying, 'Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after—we are going to do it,' but it never

happens.”

The villagers who burned down the church building and have escaped criminal prosecution, Bolous said, are the same ones blocking the construction of a replacement. Because he can't go back to the village, approximately 40 Coptic families in El Marenab are without a priest and cannot meet for Mass or other meetings traditionally held at a church building.

Protests and Death

Copts across Egypt were incensed at being blamed for the destruction of the Mar Gerges Church building. Coptic leaders also accuse the government of playing a colluding role in the violence by not enforcing the law, which requires imprisonment as a penalty for acts of sectarian strife, “thuggery” and vandalism of private property.

On Oct. 9, thousands of people marched through the streets of Cairo to protest the governor's statements, the government's lack of action to stop attacks against Christians and its refusal to prosecute perpetrators of **violence against Christians**.

The protest turned into a blood-bath after counter-protestors opened fire on some of the demonstrators, and soldiers ran over others with riot-control vehicles. Of the 27 people killed, at least 23 were Christians. Witnesses claimed that the shooters and the military were seen working closely together on the evening of the protest.

The army denied any responsibility for the killings, but eventually charged three soldiers with what amounts to accidental vehicular manslaughter. No one was been charged in connection with any of the shootings.

By comparison, the government has charged two priests with inciting sectarian strife, illegal possession of firearms, illegal possession of a bladed weapon, and destroying public property—charges that are much more serious than anything the

soldiers face.