

Iranian Pastor Convicted of Apostasy

An appeal by an Iranian pastor convicted of apostasy has failed.

According to Todd Nettleton with Voice of the Martyrs, "The initial reports were that the Supreme Court had upheld the conviction against him, they had upheld the death sentence, and he would be executed."

However, conflicting information has just reached VOM which sheds a whole new light on the case. Nettleton says their partners are working hard to confirm this information: "The reports over the last 24 hours are that, in fact, the Supreme Court did not uphold the death penalty. They sent the case back to the local court in his area where he would have the opportunity to recant, and if he did that, then the death sentence would go away."

The background: In 2009, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a leader in the Full Gospel "Church of Iran" network, was arrested and imprisoned after protesting a decision by the government requiring that his son study the Koran.

He was charged with apostasy, which carries a death sentence under the revised penal code. Still, the fulfillment of the sentence would be rare indeed. "In the last 20 years, no Christian has been executed by the state for apostasy," Nettleson says. "So, it's rare that we have a verdict and that the sentence is actually carried out."

The 11th Circuit Criminal Court of Appeals for the Gilan Province upheld Nardarkhani's death sentence and conviction for apostasy, but the sentence was delayed. "It does seem that the Iranian government is aware that this case is being watched by the rest of the world," notes Nettleton. He goes on

to say that “it does seem that they’re at least hearing the protests from people around the world about putting a Christian man to death simply because he’s not a Muslim anymore.”

Whether it’s pressure internally or externally, the latest information on the case buys Nardarkhani some time. “They’ve sent it back to the lower court. They are supposed to get him to recant his faith and return to Islam. If he doesn’t, our understanding is that he still could face the death penalty.”

According to VOM, he is among several others in his church (including his wife) who have been arrested by Iranian officials because of faith in Christ. It is also because of cases like these that open more doors. The apostasy death penalty was intended to quell the rise of interest in Christianity. However, “When their government fails or when there is injustice, they see that as the failure of Islam,” Nettleson says. “They are very open to other messages, including the message of the gospel of Jesus.”

As a result, Nettleton says: “The Christians of Iran are incredibly bold in their witness, and the people of Iran are incredibly hungry for the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Ask God to equip Nardarkhani to stand firm in his faith, and pray that he will sense the love and support of all those praying for him and working on his behalf. Pray, too, that the Iranian authorities involved will be convicted of their injustice and overturn the case.