

Morocco Drops Evangelism Charges Against Convert to Christianity

The case of a Moroccan convert to Christianity sentenced to 30 months in jail for evangelism is expected to be officially dismissed on Thursday when the judge provides his final ruling, after the charges against him were concluded to have lacked evidence at an appeals court hearing last week.

Mohamed el Baldi, 34, from the town of Aïn Aïcha, near Fes, was given 2 1/2 years in prison in September, and ordered to pay 5,000 dirhams (\$600) for “shaking the faith of a Muslim.”

He was arrested after his house was raided on Aug. 28 and items linked to his faith, such as his Bible, were confiscated. He was given conditional freedom after serving less than one month of his sentence, at a brief appearance before the Court of Appeal in Fes on Sept. 26.

His formal release was pending the outcome of a final appeal hearing first scheduled for Oct. 10, and then delayed to Dec. 31. When that hearing was also postponed, the Moroccan Association for the Defence of Human Rights labeled the trial a “comedy.”

When the appeals court did reconvene on Thursday, the judge ruled that el Baldi had engaged in general conversation about his faith, but that there was no evidence of coercion or his having offered financial incentives for converting.

The original 30-month prison sentence was widely criticized and an online petition, addressed to King Mohammed VI, was launched to request his release.

The Moroccan Association for the Defence of Human Rights has

welcomed the court's decision, which they say is the result of media attention given to the case and actions of human rights groups.

"The case can be considered closed as it has been established that the accusation was false," Mohamed Oulad Ayad, President of the rights group in Fes, told World Watch Monitor. "El Baldi will soon fully recover his freedom. The verdict will be confirmed on Feb. 13. The whole trial has been a comedy, instead of addressing the real problems of the country, such as unemployment."

Morocco has a population of nearly 33 million. Islam is considered the religion of the Kingdom, with King Mohammed VI holding the title of "Prince of the believers." The church in Morocco numbers around 25,000 members, the majority of which are expatriates, while there is also a significant Jewish community. Registered churches and associations include the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant and Anglican churches.

Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. According to Article 220 of the Penal Code, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs or from attendance at religious services is unlawful and may be punished by three-to-six months' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams. The Article applies the same penalty to anyone who "shakes the faith of a Muslim," or converts him to another religion.

Morocco is ranked No. 44 on Open Doors International's World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries where it is most difficult to practice Christianity.

The list cites Islamic extremism as the major challenge facing Morocco's Christians. The moderate Islamist Party for Justice and Democracy (PJD) has held power since winning parliamentary elections in 2011, following a general referendum on a

reformed Constitution after 'Arab Spring' protests.

On April 16, the government's High Council of Ulemas, the highest religious authority in Morocco, issued a fatwa that was published in the national Arabic-language daily, Akhbar al-Youm, stating that Muslims who reject their faith should be "condemned to death." The publication of that fatwa has raised questions about its possible outcomes, particularly among Christian converts.