

Muslims Hold Christians Under Stronghold of Fear in Zanzibar

On Tanzania's semi-autonomous island of Zanzibar, Christians live in a climate of fear. It's a place where a young man flees the island to escape death threats from his Muslim family, and a Christian who accidentally burned pages of the Quran opts for jail by entering a guilty plea rather than face certain death from a furious mob.

Yusuf Abdalla, 23, fled to Moshi, mainland Tanzania, after his family threatened to kill him in June. Having converted to Christianity in October after hearing the gospel on the radio, he was enrolled at a vocational school in Zanzibar city to learn tailoring when his family found out in March that he had left Islam.

The beating he then received from family members left him with injuries to his head, hand and torso, as well as a serious mouth wound and substantial loss of blood, said an area pastor who requested anonymity.

"The family then took back the tailoring machine which they had bought him," the pastor said. "They also vowed not to support his training."

As soon as he recovered enough to leave, Abdalla found refuge on the premises of the pastor's church before staying at his home on May 5. Within two months, reports had reached Abdalla's family that he was staying at the pastor's house, and on June 10 they threatened to kill him, the pastor said.

The church arranged for his escape to Moshi.

Another convert from Islam, Juma Suleiman of Chake-Chake on

the neighboring island of Pemba, is also facing death threats. Suleiman became a Christian just two months ago when Tanzania Assemblies of God pastor Yohana Mfundo preached to him while he was in prison, Mfundo said.

Suleiman was released a little over two weeks ago, and family members have already threatened to kill him. He is now in hiding and plans to flee the island.

The Safety of Jail

In Kiembesamaki, near Zanzibar city's airport, area pastors said 28-year-old Ramadhan Hunda Tuma earlier this year opted for jail by entering a plea of guilty to charges that he burned the Quran, rather than face an enraged mob calling for his death.

More than 50 Muslims were packed into the courtroom to hear the judge's Feb. 21 ruling on Tuma, whose landlady had ordered him to burn his trash after evicting him because he had converted to Christianity; he was not aware that among the trash was a small copy of the Quran used by beginning students in madrassas (Islamic schools), area pastors said.

"Outside the courtroom, there was a mob baying for his blood in case he was set free," said Pastor Leonard Massasa of the Evangelical Assemblies of God-Tanzania. "One lady from church overheard them say, 'If he is going to be released, then we will kill him.'"

Tuma, member of a church of another denomination in Zanzibar city, accidentally burned part of the Quran.

"Due to the conditions prevailing then, Tuma pleaded guilty because he feared for his life," said another pastor, who requested anonymity. "He chose to go to jail rather than to be released only to be killed."

Arriving home from a Sunday church service, Tuma found the wealthy landlady furious to learn that he had converted to

Christianity; she had thrown all his belongings out of the house. She ordered him to leave, the pastor said. Tuma burned the trash under the supervision of his landlady, who reported him to a sheikh in a nearby mosque. A raucous crowd of Muslims showed up to kill him before police arrived and took him to the police station, the pastor said.

The church is caring for Tuma's young family: his wife, 6-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter, the pastor added.

District Magistrate Khamis Ali Simai of Mwanakwerekwe, Zanzibar, sentenced Tuma to 18 months for "disrespecting a religious faith" and six months for "threatening public peace," though both terms are to run simultaneously, according to International Quran News Agency (IQNA). Simai ruled that Tuma's burning of the Quran on Nov. 16 angered the Muslim community, thereby jeopardizing public peace, according to IQNA.

The judge said the punishment was to serve as warning to other would-be offenders, IQNA reported.

Prosecutors led by Raya Issa Mselem said they were not satisfied with the ruling and intended to appeal for a harsher sentence; Mselem said a stiffer penalty would better deter others who would be tempted to commit similar offenses, according to IQNA.

Tuma, who represented himself and was put under tight police protection, pleaded for leniency on grounds that he was the sole breadwinner for his family and that he was suffering from a stomach ailment.

Dangerous Cafés

In Pemba, it has become extremely risky for churches to have their documents typed or printed in cybercafés, sources said, as shop personnel are saving copies that they take to Muslim sheikhs in order to disclose Christian activities.

Their findings are announced in mosques, the pastors said.

"They have announced in their mosques that no Muslim should sell land to infidels," said pastor Yohana Makulanya of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The Muslim majority oppresses religious minorities in more subtle ways. Schools teach only Islamic studies, not Christianity, and any student stating that Jesus is Lord will not receive a grade, the pastors said.

"Sometimes our children are forced to change their Christian names to Muslim names so as to be considered for employment," said the Rev. Apolinali Mapendo Musaki, a Catholic priest.

At times churches are deprived of piped water.

"Here in Wete, we rely on rainwater; no piped water is supplied to us," said the Rev. Stephen Kamwendo of the Anglican Church.

The church leaders said many Christians have been forcefully converted to Islam, including four from the Catholic Church and six from the Seventh-day Adventist church.