

Radical Islamist Preacher: Christian Women Should Wear Veil to Avoid Rape

Many Egyptian viewers were horrified when preacher Hisham el-Ashry recently popped up on prime-time television to say women must cover up for their own protection and advocated the introduction of religious police.

That an obscure preacher could get publicity for such views was seen as another example of the confused political scene in Egypt since the revolt that toppled Hosni Mubarak gave birth to a cacophony of feuding voices.

"I was once asked: If I came to power, would I let Christian women remain unveiled? And I said: If they want to get raped on the streets, then they can," Ashry told Nahar TV last week.

Introducing a Saudi-style anti-vice police force to enforce Islamic law was "not a bad thing", he said, and added: "In order for Egypt to become fully Islamic, alcohol must be banned and all women must be covered."

Few take Ashry, who admits he flew to the United States dreaming of a Western lifestyle and romance but instead found truth in preaching, seriously. But his views have stirred emotions.

With the economic downturn and rising food prices putting pressure on the government, moderate Muslims, Christians and others worry their new-found political freedom is at risk of being exploited by hard-line Islamists bent on imposing their values on a society that has been traditionally moderate.

Watching a recent television interview in which Ashry expounded his ideas on women and sharia law, members of one

family jumped to their feet in outrage.

"Look at this crazy man! Where do you think we live! In a jungle? Or are all men like you, animals, unable to control their instincts?" Mona Ahmed, 65, shouted at the television screen in her living room.

"If I see him annoying any unveiled woman on the street I would punch him in the face. Wake up, man, this is Egypt, not Saudi Arabia," she yelled as her children tried to console her.

Ahmed, like many women in Egypt, has chosen on her own to cover her hair with the Islamic headscarf.

Egypt's top Islamic institutions, such as al-Azhar, the highest authority in Sunni Islam, and Dar al Ifta, the central authority for issuing religious rulings, have long said religious practices should not be imposed on people.

"Idiotic Thinking"

Egypt's Grand Mufti, the country's most senior Islamic legal official, has dismissed the self-styled preacher's views.

"This sort of idiotic thinking is one that seeks to further destabilize what is already a tense situation," Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa said in a statement to Reuters.

"Egypt's religious scholars have long guided the people to act in ways that conform to their religious commitments, but have never thought this required any type of invasive policing."

The Muslim Brotherhood of President Mohamed Mursi, who was brought to power in an election last year, has also distanced itself, if somewhat cryptically.

"The case of promotion of virtue and prevention of vice is within the jurisdiction of the authorities and not individuals or groups," said Brotherhood spokesman Mahmoud Ghozlan. "It is not anyone's right to intervene."

Mursi has pledged not to impose Islamic codes of behavior and to protect adherents of all religions equally. But he has also enacted a new constitution that has more Islamic references than its predecessor and that critics say fails to protect freedoms and the rights of Christians and other minorities.

Activists say although Mursi's camp is not keen on religious austerity, stronger condemnation is required at this sensitive time.

"As long as such actions are not seriously condemned by the officials in public speeches, it leaves room for radicals to freely act and impose things on people," said human rights activist Gamal Eid.

The image of Egypt's bearded leadership flanked by their fully veiled wives sends a powerful psychological message that may belie their official words, they say.

"Islamist officials need to take a clearer stand on their views about rights and freedoms and act strictly if those rights and freedoms were threatened."

Converting Christians

Ashry left Egypt for New York in the 1990s, when the country was still firmly under Mubarak's rule, in search of a better life.

"I went there with a dream to get a blonde girl and a big car," he said in one of his televised interviews. "(But) I was advised on the plane to cherish my religion and not get taken by the USA or risk being spoiled and losing my faith."

His religious convictions grew stronger over the next 15 years in the United States, he said.

"I had, thanks to God, guided many Christians to Islam. I can't tell how many as I stopped counting when their number exceeded 100," he said.

It was when he was working at a men's clothing factory in New York that he became convinced that Egypt needed a Saudi-style anti-vice force.

"(My goal was) to make all Egyptians love it," he said.

A few find him inspiring.

"He advocates what I believe is right," said Ahmed Mahmoud, 18, in Cairo. "It is about time to enforce God's law in order to be rescued from all the corruption we live in."

Ashry is just one conservative influence among many. In the six months since Mursi came to power, preachers and vigilante groups have been flexing their muscles on the streets.

In July, a young man holding hands with his fiancé was stabbed to death in Suez, and in October, a face-veiled teacher cut the hair of two 12-year-old girls who were not wearing scarves. Just last month, an Islamist group in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula threatened to launch a campaign against cigarette smoking and drug use in the lawless desert region.

Radical Salafi figures called for Muslims not to greet Christians at Christmas, celebrated by Egypt's Copts on January 7. Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 84 million population, which is majority Sunni-Muslim.

"Such comments scare us to death of course," said Christian activist Peter el-Naggar.

"But we don't think such people are right or will have any strong grassroots support. Egypt has always been home to moderate and tolerant Islam. By God's will it will remain so."

Those who rely on the tourism industry in Cairo and at the luxury beaches of the Red Sea are defiant and anxious at the same time.

"Only we can control ourselves," said taxi driver Waleed

Mahmoud, 36. "No human being can force another to pray or beat them to pray. It doesn't work."

Editing by Maria Golovnina and Sonya Hepinstall.

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