

Sharing Video of Islamic Scholar Lands Christian Year in Prison

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that Michael Mounir Beshay has been convicted of blasphemy for “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion” in violation of Article 98 (f) of the Egyptian Penal Code. Despite steps taken by the Sisi-led government to bring about greater tolerance and reforms, the conviction of Beshay is just another of many recent incidents highlighting the continued persecution of the country’s Christian minority.

The decision was handed down by the Economic Misdemeanors Court in Dakahlia, Egypt, on Tuesday, May 5. The Lawyer Hamdi Asiouty, who holds the case of Michael Mounir Beshay, along with the lawyer Samuel Tharwat told ICC, “The next appeals hearing of the case of Michael will be this Saturday, May 9, 2015. In the last hearing the judge sentenced him to one year imprisonment and a fine of one thousand Egyptian pounds.”

According to Ishak Ibrahim, researcher on religious freedom for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “In November 2014, the young man [Beshay] posted a video clip from a program on the satellite network, al-Qahera wal-Nas. In it, Mohamed Abdullah Nasr, known to the public as Sheikh Mezo, was discussing the Hadith on the “suckling of adults.” For several months, the video went unnoticed until in February 2015, when dozens of Muslim villagers from Damian, in the Daqahliya governorate, demonstrated in front of his house. They called for Beshay to be charged with contempt of religion, and set fire to his motorcycle.”

In response to the public outcry, security forces went to Beshay’s workplace and arrested him. His fiancée was also

detained and held for two days for questioning. The case was put into the Economic Misdemeanors Court, and on Tuesday Beshay was given a sentence of one year.

This is not the first such incident. As ICC reported on in 2014, Kerolos Shawky was also charged with blasphemy for liking a Facebook page. He remains in hiding but has been sentenced to six years in prison. Christian convert Bishoy Armia Boulos continues to languish in prison under charges of blasphemy related to his conversion. And in a yet to be decided case, a teacher and four students in Beni Mazar, Minya, are still in holding pending investigation of blasphemy after a film was discovered in which they are mocking the Islamic jihadist group ISIS.

While many are hopeful of reforms following the election of President Sisi, the issue of blasphemy charges has continued, along with other persecution such as attacks on churches and kidnappings.

As Asiouty continued, “the cases of blasphemy of religion in Egypt don’t relate to the law; the court verdict of these cases come back to the circumstances and the climate of every case. In the case of Michael I see that the arrest of him is invalid. If the judge applied the correct law in the case of Michael he would acquit him,” Asiouty concluded.

On Saturday, May 9 the courts will have another opportunity to apply the law, and perhaps in this case justice will be served.

Todd Daniels, regional manager for the Middle East said, “While Egypt has an important role to play in countering violent extremism in the region, it must address the issues of extremism it has domestically. These issues continue to emerge both in society—in violent mobs protesting outside of homes, burning property—and in a judicial system that convicts on charges that only stoke the fire of radical extremists. The

fact that a Christian may be imprisoned for sharing a video of Islamic scholars discussing an issue within Islam highlights just how little space there is for discussion and how important it is that the Sisi government promotes religious freedoms that will allow for debate to happen to confront these violent tendencies.”