

Turkish-Armenian Writer Jailed for Blasphemy

An Istanbul court has sentenced a Turkish-Armenian author and blogger to more than a year in prison for insulting the Prophet Muhammad, local media reported on Wednesday, weeks after a similar case caused alarm among secularists.

Sevan Nisanyan, who has authored several books and who runs a blog on what he describes as “history, religion and a (little) politics”, posted a link to the offending blog on his Twitter account following the ruling.

The accompanying message read: “Let’s share the article that brought a sentence of 13.5 months from the Istanbul 10th Criminal Court for insulting religious bla bla bla.”

Just over a month ago, world-renowned concert pianist Fazil Say was handed a suspended jail sentence for insulting religious values on Twitter, including one tweet poking fun at a muezzin, someone who makes the Muslim call to **prayer**.

Say’s sentence stirred passions about the role religion should play in Turkish public life and highlighted how much has changed since Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan’s AK Party, which has roots in Islamist politics, swept to power a decade ago.

Erdogan’s AK Party has witnessed unprecedented prosperity and is admired among Western allies keen to portray NATO member Turkey as a beacon of political stability in a troubled region.

But Erdogan’s opponents have increasingly accused him of posing a threat to the modern, secular republic founded by Kemal Ataturk on the ruins of the Ottoman empire 90 years ago.

They also say a judiciary once renowned for defending the

secular republic against Islamist influence now finds itself answering to religious conservatives.

Nisanyan was sentenced to one year and 45 days for a blog post last year entitled "Hate speech needs to be combatted" in which he wrote:

"It is not hate speech to make fun of an Arab leader who claimed he had contacted Allah hundreds of years ago and received political, financial and sexual benefits accordingly.

"It is a test of freedom of expression at an almost kindergarten-level."

Media reported that the sentence could not be converted to a financial penalty but that Nisanyan had a right to appeal. The court could not be immediately reached for comment.

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