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Ethiopian Evangelical sent back to prison for 'causing outrage to religious feeling'

World Watch Monitor (27.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2tAnzoG> - An Ethiopian court of cassation has rejected an appeal by an Evangelical Christian sentenced to seven months in prison for "causing outrage to religious peace and feeling".

Temesgen Mitiku Mezemir, 24, the leader of an Evangelical fellowship group, was taken back to prison in the southern city of Arba Minch, after being [released on bail](#) in May pending the outcome of his appeal. Mezemir was found guilty in February of [defaming the tabot](#), a replica of the Ark of the Covenant sacred to Orthodox Christians.

The judges of the cassation court in Wolaita Zonal Administration, 300km south of the capital Addis Ababa, said on 20 June they had found "no legal misinterpretations" on Mezemir's case and upheld the sentence by the lower court.

Local sources told World Watch Monitor that with deduction of time he already spend in detention, Mezemir, 24, still has to serve four months and ten days in jail. However, he can request parole after serving two-thirds of his sentence and could be released in two months.

World Watch Monitor understands the charges against him were brought by members of the predominant Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), to which just under half of Ethiopia's population belongs.

The EOC is seen by some Ethiopians as a symbol of national identity and its leaders play a prominent role in state and religious affairs. However relations between the EOC and the fast-growing Evangelical churches are often strained, characterised by mutual suspicion.

Arba Minch lies in an ethnically diverse part of Ethiopia known as the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. Between 1994 and 2007 the proportion of Protestants there jumped from 35 per cent to 55 per cent, while the proportion of Orthodox Christians fell from 27 per cent to 20 per cent.

Background

Mezemir was charged on 23 January after telling EOC members to compare Orthodox accounts of the tabot with information about the Ark of the Covenant on the Internet.

He denied that by downloading a picture of the tabot he had intended to insult the EOC, and explained to the judge at his 26 January hearing that he had downloaded it for reference, showing the website from which he had sourced it. There is no law in Ethiopia against possessing or sharing such photos.

Local Evangelicals expressed concern at Mezemir's sentence, arguing that it set a precedent whereby anyone could bring unfounded accusations against Evangelicals with impunity. They also expressed concern that the [legal process was wrought with irregularities](#).

One member of Mezemir's fellowship group told World Watch Monitor that the weeks leading up to the court case had been marked by several violent incidents for which he believed members of the EOC were responsible.

Ethiopian Evangelical who 'outraged religious feeling' given second chance to appeal

World Watch Monitor (01.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KsbOaK> - An Ethiopian court of cassation has said it will hear the appeal of an Evangelical Christian sentenced to seven months in prison for "causing outrage to religious peace and feeling".

The appeal hearing is scheduled for 9 May and follows the rejection of a previous appeal by a lower court.

The cassation court in Wolaita Zonal Administration, 300km south of the capital Addis Ababa, also ordered the authorities in the southern city of Arba Minch to release Temesgen Mitiku Mezemir on bail.

Mezemir, 24, the leader of an Evangelical fellowship group, was found guilty in February of defaming the tabot, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant sacred to Orthodox Christians.

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Ethiopian Protestant loses appeal against prison sentence for 'causing outrage to religious peace and feeling'

World Watch Monitor (22.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2pFpNkJ> - An Ethiopian court has turned down the appeal of an Evangelical Christian sentenced to seven months in prison for "causing outrage to religious peace and feeling".

In its verdict, published on 19 March, the court upheld an earlier sentence given by a judge in the southern city of Arba Minch on 2 February.

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Highly unusual

Mezemir was charged on 23 January after telling EOC members to compare Orthodox accounts of the tabot with information about the Ark of the Covenant on the Internet.

At that hearing, the court expected to hear the prosecutor's witnesses, but in a highly unusual turn of events, the judge instead invited court attendees to give their opinion of the accused. After the hearing, Mezemir and some other Evangelicals were reportedly attacked outside the court, while police failed to intervene. Five of the Evangelicals were injured.

Members of the Evangelical church appealed to the Justice Department to replace the judge and change the venue. The judge was replaced.

A second hearing took place on 26 January, after the defendant's request for extra time to provide witnesses had been refused. The hearing took place amid heavy security and there was no unrest.

Mezemir denied downloading a picture of the tabot to insult the EOC, and explained to the judge that he had downloaded it for reference, showing the authorities the website from which he had sourced it. There is no law in Ethiopia against possessing or sharing such photos.

After the judge delivered his verdict, Mezemir's lawyer lodged an appeal.

Precedent

Local Evangelicals expressed concern at Mezemir's sentence, arguing that it set a precedent whereby anyone could bring unfounded accusations against Evangelicals with impunity. They also expressed concern that the legal process was wrought with irregularities.

One member of Mezemir's fellowship group told World Watch Monitor that the weeks leading up to the court case had been marked by several violent incidents for which he believed members of the EOC were responsible.

He said that Evangelicals in Arba Minch were attacked shortly before the Orthodox celebration of Epiphany on 19 January, when they were blamed for the disappearance of a festive banner. He said Orthodox leaders had urged people to defend their religion and that some members had interpreted this as a call to arms. Some Evangelicals were physically attacked while others fled to the compound of the local Kale Hiwot Evangelical church for safety.

He added that in early January a group of more than 70 people from Arba Minch, believed to belong to the EOC, broke into the group's meeting place, destroying its pulpit, chairs and tables, and stealing musical instruments.

The group reported the damage to the police, but the source said the people who had carried out the vandalism attacked members of the Evangelical fellowship group "right at the gate of the police station".

He continued: "They used machetes, hammers and rocks. Our members sustained injuries on their heads, arms and feet. One of our members had machete wounds on his arm."

The source said the attack outside the police station occurred after people believed to belong to a radical anti-reform wing within the EOC, Mahibere Kidusan, had spread a rumour that the Evangelicals were taking over the local EOC.

Ethiopian Christians arrested for 'praying against government'

World Watch Monitor (10.01.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2uli540> - Seven Ethiopian Christians have been arrested and detained in the north-western town of Chagni on suspicion of praying against the government.

A local source told World Watch Monitor the seven men, members of the Meserete Kiristos church, were followed and overheard by a local militia group when they went up a mountain to pray. When the Christians prayed "against Satan's power and kingdom" (a common choice of words in certain evangelical churches in Ethiopia), the group accused them of referring to the government.

The Christians have not been formally charged yet but they were refused bail at a court hearing on 2 January and remain in custody. It is not clear when their next court appearance will be.

Ethiopia is 29th on the newly released 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. The pressure on Christians there is adjudged to be "very high" because of religious and ethnic tensions, combined with political and civil unrest. Also, the government is growing more authoritarian and has restricted religious institutions.

Ethiopia's northern Tigray State, for example, has been considering adopting a new law that would restrict Christian activities to within official church compounds, rendering illegal the activities of smaller churches that do not have official buildings and instead gather in private homes.

Although Ethiopia guarantees religious freedom on paper, Pentecostal churches in rural areas often face restrictions in a society dominated by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC).

World Watch Monitor has reported regularly about attacks on Christians and closure of churches in the country.

Map of religion in Ethiopia (GeoCurrents)

However, the latest (2007) census showed that Christianity is still Ethiopia's main religion (63 per cent of the population), and it is expanding its influence. Over the past decade, Ethiopia's religious map has changed considerably – for centuries the country consisted of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian core, a Sunni Muslim zone in the east, and an animist/indigenous-faith area in the south and the lowland reaches of the far west. In the last 10 years, indigenous faiths have diminished, in most cases yielding to Protestant Christianity, which is said to be the fastest-growing religious group in Ethiopia. This is making the country home to "one of the fastest growing evangelical churches in the world," wrote theologian Allan Anderson in 2014.

Release of some imprisoned politicians

Meanwhile Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced on 3 January that the government will release some imprisoned politicians.

He also told reporters that the notorious Maekelawi detention centre in Addis Ababa is to be closed and turned into a museum.

The announcement came as a surprise in a country where the government has been criticised by rights groups for its stifling of opposition and until recently denied the existence of political prisoners.

The PM, however, announced that he wanted to make space for political dialogue and national reconciliation.

Beyene Petros, chairman of Medrek, the biggest opposition coalition, told the Wall Street Journal that the news was “music to my ears”, but that he would have to “see it to believe it”. His own deputy has been detained for over a year.
