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EGYPT: Abuse of state custody in a case of freedom of religious expression

Reda Abdel Rahman: Abuse of state custody in a case of freedom of religious thought and expression

USCIRF Commissioner Sharon Kleinbaum Advocates for Egyptian Reda Abdel Rahman through Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

USCIRF (10.02.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3Jj42xq> – U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

Commissioner **Sharon Kleinbaum** today announced her adoption of **Reda Abdel Rahman** through USCIRF's **Religious Prisoners of Conscience (RPOC) Project**. Abdel Rahman, a member of Egypt's Qur'anist Muslim community, has been in state custody since August 2020.

"Abdel Rahman is being held simply for being a member of Egypt's Qur'anist community and peacefully expressing his religious beliefs. Not only has he been unjustly detained on unsubstantiated terrorism allegations, but prison authorities have also mistreated Abdel Rahman, denying him vitally necessary medical care," said USCIRF Commissioner Kleinbaum. *"Authorities should stop harassing the Qur'anist community and immediately release Abdel Rahman so he can receive proper medical care."*

Qur'anists in Egypt are a Muslim minority that view the Qur'an as the only legitimate source of authority for religious rulings and reject the authenticity and authority of the Hadith, the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. These beliefs, which Egyptian authorities view as a deviation from mainstream Sunni Muslim interpretations, have made Qur'anists a longstanding and repeated target of Egyptian officials.

Egyptian security forces detained Abdel Rahman and several of his family members in August 2020, questioning him about his religious beliefs and his relationship with his uncle, Qur'anist scholar and former USCIRF fellow Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour. Egyptian authorities released Abdel Rahman's relatives after a few days, but Abdel Rahman remained forcibly disappeared for more than 40 days. In October 2020, he appeared in front of state prosecution and was falsely accused

of joining ISIS and promoting religious extremism. He is currently being held in pre-trial detention, which the court continues to renew in multiple, successive 45-day increments.

*“USCIRF commends the Egyptian government’s recent release of Christians **Patrick Zaki** and **Ramy Kamel**, but other religious prisoners of conscience such as Reda Abdel Rahman remain in prison. Egypt should continue on this path by releasing Abdel Rahman and dropping all charges,”* USCIRF Commissioner Kleinbaum added.

The cousin of Reda Abdel Rahman, Sherif Mansour, joined us on an episode of the USCIRF Spotlight **podcast** to highlight the case of Abdel Rahman. In its **2021 Annual Report**, USCIRF continued to recommend that the U.S. Department of State place **Egypt** on its Special Watch List for engaging in severe violations of international religious freedom. USCIRF’s November 2021 **Egypt Country Update** notes Egypt’s incremental steps toward improving religious freedom, but also highlights the need to improve conditions for religious minorities, which in addition to members of the Qur’anist community include Coptic Christians, Shi’a Muslims, Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, non-theists, and Jews.

USCIRF Commissioners advocate for the release of individuals imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief through the RPOC project.

Biography of Reda Abdel Rahman

Reda Abdel Rahman is a teacher at the al-Azhar Institute in the northern governorate of Sharqiya as well as a former

blogger on topics related to Qur'anism. Over the years, Reda has been arrested several times, each time for his expressing his religious beliefs as a Qur'anist. Qur'anists are a small Muslim minority in Egypt who regard the text of the Qur'an as the only legitimate source of authority for religious rulings.

Their rejection of the authenticity and authority of the Hadith—the collected sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions—contrasts with the views of Sunni Muslims, the predominant religious community in Egypt, who consider the Hadith an indispensable religious source in addition to the Qur'an.

Authorities have subjected Reda and his family to harassment and prosecution for their religious beliefs. Prior to his first arrest, Reda's workplace investigated him for articles posted on his blog about Qur'anism, forcing him to promise that he would no longer write articles about religious texts.

In October 2008, Sharqiya State Security forces raided Reda's home, arrested him, and questioned him about his religious beliefs and practices. No formal charges were filed. After more than 80 days, he was finally released in January 2009 following a court ruling ordering his release and prosecutors' last-ditch attempts to investigate him for blasphemy-related offenses.

In July 2015, authorities arrested Reda again and held him for a few days for promoting Qur'anism on his blog. Authorities ordered him to stop writing about his religious beliefs and communicating with his uncle, Qur'anist scholar and activist Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour. Mansour, a leader of Egypt's Qur'anist movement and a former USCIRF Joseph R. Crapa fellow from 2009 to 2010, was arrested in the 1980s because of his religious beliefs, and he and his family faced repeated harassment and detention. In 2002, the United States granted Mansour and his family political asylum.

On the midnight of August 21/22, 2020, Egyptian security forces arrested Reda and several of his relatives. Authorities

questioned Reda about his religious beliefs and his relationship with Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour. While Reda's relatives were released a few days later, Reda remained under arrest and was forcibly disappeared for more than 40 days.

After emerging on October 7, 2020, he appeared before state prosecution accused of joining ISIS and promoting religious extremism. The exact charges leveled against Reda are unclear. State investigators allege that Reda and two of Mansour's adult children living in the United States were planning terrorist attacks in Egypt, targeting the police and armed forces as part of a terrorist network Mansour had established. Authorities also claim to have confiscated weapons and explosives from Reda's home, but his legal team have been unable to review the alleged evidence.

Since his arrest in August 2020, Reda has remained in pre-trial detention, despite not being indicted on formal charges. Reda is being held at Kafr Saqr Police Station in Sharqiya. The criminal court in Zagazig, the capital of Sharqiya, continues to extend his imprisonment by multiple, successive terms of 45 days. The court's January 2022 order to renew his detention was the eighth such extension. On December 12, 2021, Reda turned 45. It was the third time he has spent his birthday in state custody.

Throughout his detention, Reda has complained of severe pain which has intensified during his prolonged detention. While "disappeared" between August and October 2020, he was denied proper food and clothing. Almost immediately, he began experiencing pronounced physical issues, including dental pain and back pain from being forced to sleep without a bed on the floor, for which he received no treatment. While his medical condition is not fully understood, a doctor in custody with Reda in the autumn of 2021 suggested his pain while urinating could indicate untreated kidney stones. While the region's public prosecutor approved the November 2021 request from Reda's family that he receive medical attention, prison

authorities have not complied as of February 2022. Additionally, there are concerns about Reda's mental health following his brother's death in December 2021. Reda's family sent letters asking for him to be granted a leave to receive condolences with his family, but authorities did not respond.

Photo : Reda Abdel Rahman

Further reading about FORB in Egypt on HRWF website

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