

IRAN: Anglican Church member given third prison sentence at retrial

Article 18 (18.05.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2TmAuHD> – An Iranian Anglican Church member has been reconvicted of membership of a “Zionist Evangelical Christian” group “hostile to the regime” at his retrial, and convicted of the additional charge of “propaganda against the state”.

Ismaeil Maghrebinejad, 65, was informed of the verdict on Saturday, 16 May, following his retrial the previous Saturday at the 1st Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz.

Judge Seyed Mahmood Sadati reached the same verdict as in his initial February ruling by giving Ismaeil a two-year sentence for “membership of a hostile group”, but added an additional year in prison for “propaganda against the state”.

While it is likely that Ismaeil will only have to serve the longer sentence of two years, he also faces an additional [three years in prison](#) for his January conviction at a civil court for “insulting Islam”, which he would have to serve separately.

Ismaeil, who is appealing against all three convictions, initially faced four charges after his [arrest](#) in January 2019 – also “apostasy”, for which he could have faced the death sentence.

That charge was dropped during a November 2019 hearing, but the other three charges were found “applicable”, although the charge of “propaganda against the state” was not cited in his 27 February [conviction](#), so it appeared that it had been combined with the other charge of “membership of a hostile group”.

Why the retrial?

Judge Sadati called for the 9 May retrial himself, saying he had been unhappy with his initial verdict and wanted to make some “corrections”, giving hope to Ismaeil and his family that the judgment may be quashed.

However, despite the protestations of his lawyer, Farshid Rofoogaran, that Ismaeil had “in no way, shape or form been a member of any hostile organisation”, he was given an even stiffer sentence.

In his ruling, Judge Sadati referred to the findings of the intelligence agents of Iranian armed forces, who were responsible for his arrest, and Ismaeil’s alleged “admission” of guilt – for acknowledging that a Bible verse from the book of Philippians had been sent to his phone by a Christian satellite TV channel.

A printout of the verse was shown to him in the court, which he acknowledged, after which he was dismissed from the room.

His lawyer, Mr Rofoogaran, proceeded to argue that the court

had not been presented “with one single reason, piece of evidence or document that would justify the verdict issued”.

He added that the indictment was “very vague” and “lacked any supporting statement”, and that Ismaeil’s only “crime” had been to receive a message from a Christian satellite television channel; he hadn’t even forwarded it to anyone.

“Even if those groups that have Telegram or WhatsApp channels are accepted as ‘hostile’,” Mr Rofoogaran said, “receiving messages without forwarding them to anyone else does not constitute membership of that organisation.”

Mr Rofoogaran went on to criticise the way the case had been handled, noting that the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” had not been observed.

Article18’s advocacy director, Mansour Borji, pointed out that “Ismaeil’s arrest took place without any prior evidence being found against him. Instead, the intelligence agents went through his personal belongings and tried to dig up evidence against him. The charge that didn’t stick they had to drop; the charges that remain have no legal basis.”