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## **NEPAL: Pastor sentenced to 2 years in prison for saying prayer can heal COVID-19**

**Pastor in Nepal sentenced to 2 years in prison for saying prayer can heal COVID-19**

By Anugrah Kumar

The Christian Post (05.12.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3G1q8hr> – A court in Nepal has sentenced a pastor to two years in prison

under the country's harsh anti-conversion law for merely saying that prayers can heal COVID-19, according to reports.

The District Court in Dolpa this week sentenced Pastor Keshab Raj Acharya to two years in prison and a fine of \$165 (20,000 Rupees) for suggesting on social media that prayer could bring healing from the coronavirus, the U.S.-based persecution watchdog International Christian Concern said in a statement.

Pastor Acharya was first arrested on March 23 last year from his home in Pokhara, Gandaki Pradesh Province, on charges of spreading false information regarding COVID-19. Though he was released about a fortnight later, he was rearrested moments later on charges of "outraging religious feelings" and "proselytizing."

After more than three months in prison, he was released on July 3, 2020, after paying bail equal to about \$2,500.

In a viral video published on the internet, Pastor Acharya prayed in front of his congregation, saying, "Hey, corona – you go and die. May all your deeds be destroyed by the power of the Lord Jesus. I rebuke you, corona, in the name of Lord Jesus Christ. By the power or the ruler of this Creation, I rebuke you. ... By the power in the name of Lord Jesus Christ, corona, go away and die."

William Stark, ICC's regional manager for South Asia, said: "For more than a year, authorities in the Dolpa District have seemed bent on convicting Pastor Acharya of something and

punishing him for simply being a Christian pastor. Since the new constitution was adopted in 2015, Nepalese Christians have been concerned that Article 26 and its enacting laws would be used to target their community.”

Stark added that “Nepal’s sweeping anti-conversion law must be repealed if religious freedom is truly a right to be enjoyed by the country’s citizens.”

After his release last July, Acharya had told Morning Star News that it was a “very difficult” time for him.

“I would think of my little children and my wife, and I would cry out to the Lord in prayer. I would look up at Him in hope that if it is in His will that I should be put through this, He would get me out of this,” he said at the time.

Acharya told the outlet he believed government officials and police worked together against him. “They were laying a thorough plan to make sure I would stay in the jail for a longer period.”

Senior Counsel Govinda Bandi, who was defending the pastor, told the U.K.-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide at the time that his repeated arrest was a “very worrying sign of the trajectory of religious freedom in this country.”

“The police are clearly acting outside the scope of the constitution and without any regard to the rules of criminal

procedure,” Bandi said. “There seems to be a concerted effort to use the draconian provisions in the Penal Code to target him that will also threaten the wider minority community with penal sanctions for practicing their religion or belief. Furthermore, the whole allegation against him, is forged on unfounded and prejudiced allegations. This is without a doubt a targeted persecution and a travesty of our justice system.”

Christians have been under attack since before the promulgation of the country’s new constitution in September 2015.

Low-intensity blasts occurred in two churches in east Nepal around the time. Pamphlets promoting Hindu nationalism were found at each of the churches and a nationalist group, Hindu Morcha Nepal, issued a press statement calling for Christian leaders to leave the country and for Christian converts to return to Hinduism.

The constitution establishes Nepal as a secular country but also effectively bans evangelism, as it states that no one is allowed to make an attempt to convert people of other religions to his or her own. It also calls for the protection of Hinduism, the majority religion.

Article 26 (3) of the constitution states: “No person shall behave, act or make others act to disturb public law and order situation or convert a person of one religion to another or disturb the religion of other people...such an act shall be punished by law.”

In 2018, Nepal’s government added the controversial portion of

the constitution to the country's criminal code, which states that an individual found guilty of even encouraging religious conversions can be fined up to \$670 (50,000 rupees) and imprisoned for up to five years.

Hindu nationalist groups in Nepal allege that Hinduism is under threat as more people could be converted into Christianity. They have been calling for the exclusion of the term "secularism" – which in the South Asian context means equal treatment of all religions by the State – from the charter of Nepal, which was a Hindu monarchy until 2006.

Persecution watchdog Open Doors USA ranks Nepal at No. 34 on its World Watch List of 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

*Photo : Pastor Keshab Acharya | Morning Star News*

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