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## **Egyptian Court acquits men accused of abusing Coptic woman**

Associated Press (18.12.20) - <https://cutt.ly/xhMh2bj> - An Egyptian criminal court acquitted three Muslim men accused of stripping naked an elderly Coptic Christian woman and parading her through the streets of a village in southern Egypt in 2016, the state's official news agency reported.

The three had been sentenced to 10 years in absentia in January, before they were detained and stood a retrial for the attack in the southern province of Minya, where an armed Muslim mob had attacked the 70-year-old woman four years ago, after rumors spread that her son was having an affair with a Muslim woman. Such relations are taboo in conservative Egypt.

The court handed down the verdict as the retrial of the three concluded on Thursday.

Egypt's chief prosecutor, Hamada el-Sawy, on Friday instructed his legal team to look into a possible appeal, the state MENA news agency reported.

The May 2016 attack shocked the country. At the time, Anba Makarios, Minya's top Christian cleric, told a talk show host on the private Dream TV network that the woman was dragged out of her home by the mob who beat her and insulted her before they stripped her off her clothes and forced her to walk through the streets as they chanted Allahu Akbar, or "God is great."

It also elicited a storm of condemnation on social media where users blamed the incident on the strong influence in the area of ultraconservative Muslims known as Salafis. In the same eruption of sectarian violence, seven Christian homes were looted and torched in the Minya village of Karma.

Christians, who make up almost 10% of Egypt's population of more than 100 million have long complained of discrimination at the hands of the Muslim majority.

Also Friday, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the "deteriorating" human rights conditions in Egypt. The resolution came on the heels of the Italian prosecutors' decision to formally put four high-ranking members of Egypt's security forces under investigation for the 2016 kidnapping, torture and killing of 28-year-old Italian student Giulio Regeni in Egypt.

Egypt's parliament promptly denounced the resolution as unacceptable. The measure accuses Egyptian authorities of "misleading" and "hindering" progress in the investigation and called on EU member states to pressure Egypt to cooperate with Italian judicial authorities to allow for a formal indictment of the four suspects. However, such resolutions from the European Parliament have little significance as foreign affairs are left to each member state.

As late as last month, Egyptian prosecutors were insisting that Regeni's killer remains unknown. Authorities have alleged the Cambridge University doctoral student fell victim to ordinary robbers.

The EU parliament resolution also listed a set of human rights violations recorded in Egypt since last year and condemned the recent crackdown on the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, one of the country's few remaining advocacy groups.

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## **Sectarian violence breaks out in Minya**

***Sectarian violence broke out in the village of Barsha in Minya governorate, Upper Egypt, on 25 November, when hundreds of local Muslim villagers attacked the homes and properties of local Christians.***

CSW (27.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Jth3ew> - The incident began after rumours circulated that a Christian man, who remains anonymous to ensure his security, had posted a comment on his personal Facebook page that was deemed insulting to Islam. The man claims that his page had been hacked.

The assailants also attempted to attack the church of Abou Sefin, where the congregation was celebrating the beginning of the Coptic fast. A minibus belonging to the church was burnt, and several homes and properties were damaged, but no one was hurt. Police were deployed quickly, and arrested a number of local Muslims and Christians who were involved in clashes.

The allegation that sparked the violence comes amid a significant increase in the number of people arrested on charges relating to contempt of religion and blasphemy during 2020.

CSW's CEO Scot Bower said: "While we are relieved that nobody was hurt in this incident, the Egyptian government must do far more to combat sectarian violence and bring an end to the culture of collective punishment in the Minya region. This incident must be thoroughly investigated, with those responsible brought to justice. The societal hostility underpinning sectarian discord, which facilitates frequent outbreaks of violence in the area, must also be addressed. We encourage the Egyptian authorities to engage positively with human rights organisations to promote religious diversity and equality of citizenship through civic engagement and education."

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## **Christians and others arrested for 'insulting Islam'**

***Heated Facebook exchange leads to charges against teacher.***

Morning Star News (23.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/361xJIX> - A young Christian teacher in northeastern Egypt is facing charges of insulting Islam after he posted comments on Facebook, according to local reports.

Youssef Hany of Ismailia, a city on the Suez Canal 78 miles northeast of Cairo, posted the comments earlier this month in reply to a Muslim who had expressed her opposition to criticisms of Islam by the president of France and other French citizens.

Hany was reportedly arrested on Nov. 11, as was a Muslim woman identified only by her Facebook name, Sandosa, for comments on social media allegedly defaming Islam. The next day they were reportedly charged under Article 98(f) of Egypt's penal code, which outlaws insulting a "heavenly religion," namely Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Hany and the Muslim woman could face up to five years in prison and a fine of 500 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds (about US\$30 to US\$60) under a law that calls for a minimum of six months of prison. They were released on bail on Nov. 14, one of the attorneys volunteering to represent them told news outlet Al-Monitor.

The attorney, Makarios Lahzy, told Al-Monitor that the charges they are facing are unconstitutional. Egypt's "blasphemy" law against insulting religion has come under fire for violating the country's constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and religious freedom. Used almost exclusively against criticisms of Islam, the law is rarely invoked against frequent, public anti-Christian comments.

The law has also been criticized for arbitrary use. Lahzy, director of the Minority and Religious Groups department of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, said the law "does not clearly and expressly define contempt of or defamation [of religion] and leaves the notion loose and unreliable."

After Hany's comments appeared in a heated exchange on Facebook, other social media users circulated the comments, creating a swirl of opposition leading to a Twitter hashtag calling for him to be tried and sentenced with the maximum punishment as an example to others who might criticize Islam, according to online news outlet Al Wafd News.

Advocacy group Copts-United pointed out a social media post calling for Hany and others to be killed.

"He must be killed," reads a screenshot of the post. "Someone volunteer, people, we will not continue to debate with a few absent-minded minorities...We will squash them..."

While Hany was arrested for allegedly insulting Islam, those who subsequently insulted Christianity and called for Hany to be killed were not detained, Copts-United noted. The group reported that writer Ernest William commented on the arrest of Hany on his Facebook page, asking if Egypt's blasphemy law applied only to comments critical of Islam.

"Did the authorities not see the comments transcending the contempt for Christianity to contempt for Christians and the outright call to kill not only Mr. Hany, but the Copts as a minority, as one of them claimed?" William wrote.

After Hany's post circulated online, an attorney filed a complaint against him and his Facebook page at the district attorney's office, which also received complaints from other lawyers, leading authorities to investigate and arrest him, according to online news outlet Al Masry Alyoum.

Al-Monitor reported last week that Egyptian authorities recently began expanding detention or prosecution of citizens on charges of blasphemy. Ayman Rida Hanna and Mounir Masaad Hanna, a Coptic Christian, were arrested in June 2019 after they discussed Muslim prayer on a video. Referred to criminal trial on Nov. 11, they were held

in pre-trial detention since their arrest in spite of repeated calls to release them, their attorney told Al-Monitor.

On Nov. 13, young Muslim comic Mohammad Ashraf was reportedly arrested for "insulting Islam and threatening Egyptian family values" during a stand-up comedy routine.

Al-Monitor reported that rights activists were working on amendments to Egypt's blasphemy law that would stop imprisonment of citizens based on comments or sarcastic videos.

In addition to the blasphemy law, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Aug. 18, 2018 approved a new law regulating the internet that granted the government broad powers to restrict freedom of expression, violate citizens' privacy and jail online activists for peaceful speech, according to Human Rights Watch.

Supporters of Egypt's blasphemy law, mostly Islamists and government officials, say the law is meant to dissuade and punish those in Egypt who use religion to instigate "strife and division" or spread "disdain and contempt for any of the revealed religions or the sects belonging thereto."

Rights advocates have said the law needs to distinguish between honest critique of religion and speech explicitly meant to incite violence, but that in any event judges and police would be biased toward Muslims and against Coptic Christians.

Human rights activists in Egypt and abroad say that the blasphemy statute violates basic standards of human rights and is most often used to stifle free speech or as a weapon by members of the Sunni Islamic majority to attack religious minorities such as Coptic Christians.

Since the Egyptian constitution was passed in 2014 by referendum, there have been numerous, high-profile blasphemy cases filed against Coptic Christians on charges that were either fabricated or completely false, human rights activists said.

Coptic teacher Demyana Abd al-Nour, 27, was sentenced to six months in an Egyptian prison on June 15, 2014 after she lost an appeal of an earlier conviction of violating Article 98(f). Al-Nour originally had been sentenced to pay a fine of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$14,270), an exorbitant amount that her family could not pay. The judge in the Luxor Court of Appeals, Chancellor Ahmed Abd-Al Maksoud, replaced the fine with the prison sentence.

### ***Coptic Christian kidnapped***

In North Sinai Province, advocates have petitioned the minister of interior to intervene in the kidnapping of Nabil Habashy Salameh, a 61-year-old Coptic Christian businessman responsible for building the only church in Bir al-Abd.

The abduction took place on Nov. 8 at 8 p.m., some 50 meters from Nabil's house. Gunmen pushed Salameh into a car as he was going to a shop and drove away, firing into the air to scare away pedestrians.

Copts-United reported the kidnappers drove across town without being intercepted in spite of heightened security as a result of long-time terrorist acts in the area.

Egypt ranked 16th on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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## **Arrest of Reda Abdel Rahman, Professor at the al-Azhar Institute**

***The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) calls for the release of an Azhar teacher accused of spreading "Quranism" and the end to the prosecution of people with different religious affiliations.***

EIPR (17.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3pUoZG9> - The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) called for the release of Reda Abdel Rahman, a teacher at the al-Azhar Institute in Kafr Saqr, Sharqia Governorate, and the dropping of the charges against him and others for publishing what is known as Quranism. Sources from Abdel Rahman's family said that on August 22, 2020, security forces arrested him and seven other relatives, all of them belonging to the family of Ahmed Sobhi Mansour, a former professor at al-Azhar University and a thinker known for adopting the doctrine of Quranism, and the sources added that the security forces asked them questions related to their relationship with Ahmed Sobhi Mansour and the fact that they adopted the doctrine of the Quranists, and released all of them except for Reda Abdel Rahman, who continued to be held in the National Security headquarters in Kafr Saqr.

The sources confirmed that they learned a few days ago that Reda was transferred from the National Security headquarters in Kafr Saqr to another location, which the security personnel refused to disclose. On September 13, al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper quoted security sources saying that the security forces had arrested a group of people accused of reviving Quranism in Egypt, and that the defendants were referred to the Supreme State Security Prosecution for investigation in preparation for their trial.

Sources from Abdel Rahman's family said that he had been repeatedly detained without any charges being brought against him several times for expressing his thoughts on his blog, and after his last detention in 2016, the security services ordered him to completely stop his activity and cut off his contacts with Ahmed Sobhi Mansour, and the sources added that he actually closed his blog and stopped any activity and cut off his communication with Mansour since that time.

"Professor Ahmed Sobhi Mansour, was a lecturer at the Department of History at the Faculty of Arabic Language at al-Azhar University, was suspended by the university administration in 1985 due to adopting different ideas from the prevailing doctrine inside the university. He continued work and intellectual and social activity outside the university, and he was arrested for a period of two months, and the security services' pursuit of him and his family continued. And he immigrated to the United States of America in 2000, where he obtained political asylum."

EIPR condemns the prosecution of those affiliated with religious ideas different from the prevailing ideas in society or adopted by the state. It calls for guaranteeing freedom of belief and freedom of expression as rights guaranteed by the constitution, and calls for an immediate halt to trials for "contempt of religions" in accordance with Article 98 (f) of the Penal Code according to which the prosecution of holders of a wide range of ideas and beliefs, ranging from different Islamic schools of thought from the Sunni creed, such as: the Shiite sect, the Quranists, the Ahmadi, or those with critical opinions of the religious heritage, to the persecution of those with atheistic or non-religious ideas. These are the trials that have not slowed down at any time and continue until now, as the Mashtol al-Souq Misdemeanor Court in Sharqia last June sentenced two young men to one year in prison on charges of promoting Shiite ideas in accordance with the provisions of the same article.

EIPR also warns of the danger of using Article 27 of the Law to Combat Electronic Crimes issued in 2018 to target the same spectrum of non-traditional ideas and trends, under the pretext of "misuse of social media." Last June as well, and according to this article, the Economic Appeals Misdemeanor Court in Alexandria upheld a 3-year prison sentence and a fine of 300,000 EGP was imposed on a blogger on charges of participating in managing the "Egyptian Atheists" Facebook page.

Further reading: <https://www.anhri.info/?p=18991&lang=en>.

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## **Coptic Christians targeted with mob violence**

***A mob of Muslim extremists attacked the Coptic Community in the village of Dabbous in the Samalout suburb of Minya governorate, Upper Egypt, on 5 October. A number of the attackers have been arrested, along with several Copts who tried to defend themselves.***

CSW (12.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nJvcUg> - Tension arose during a Coptic wedding on 3 October when a fight broke out between some Copts and two Muslim men from a neighbouring village, who were supported by local Muslims. Two days later, a large mob attacked the Christian community in the village, throwing stones at them and their homes and causing some property damage.

Samalout police were deployed to the village in the aftermath of the attacks and arrested 12 Copts and an unknown number of Muslims. Efforts are underway to convince Copts and Muslims in the village to hold a reconciliation session.

Reconciliation meetings are extra-judicial procedures commonly used to resolve sectarian disputes. They generally impose ad-hoc and often unconstitutional conditions on the victims of the violence, with the authorities often accepting the outcome in lieu of investigating and prosecuting the actual perpetrators of the violence.

Dabbous is home to a church building which was constructed in 2005. However, extremists have refused to allow local Christians to use it for worship purposes and the building has been under police protection since 2008. Over 2,000 Copts live in the village, but they are obliged to travel to neighbouring villages to attend church services.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: "More must be done by the Egyptian government to end sectarian discord and violence in Upper Egypt, including by ensuring that incidents such as this are thoroughly investigated and those responsible are brought to justice through judicial processes and not, as is being sought in this case, informal extra-judicial procedures. CSW is also concerned that despite recent progress in the legalisation of church buildings, the Copts in Dabbous have not been able to use their church building since 2005, in violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief. This outstanding injustice within the community must also be tackled as a matter of urgency, including through civic engagement and education that promote religious diversity and equality of citizenship."

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## Two young men in al-Sharqia sentenced to one-year imprisonment for promoting ideas belonging to Shi'ism

EIPR (28.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cMwpF9> - On Saturday 27 June, the State Security Misdemeanor Court in Mashtoul al-Souk in Sharqia Governorate, in Case No. 154/2019, sentenced Mustafa al-Ramli and Mahmoud Youssef to one year in prison, for allegedly promoting ideas belonging to Shi'ism. The security forces arrested the defendants on May 16, 2019 and they were kept hidden in an unknown location until they were presented to the Mashtoul al-Souk Prosecution on July 20, 2019, and the prosecution ordered that they be detained pending trial and renewed their remand since then.

The arrest report, filed on July 19, 2019, stated that the security forces found in their homes, books on the Shi'a sect and "prayer soil" that Shi'ites use to prostrate (when praying), according to the Shi'ite doctrine. The National Security Investigation report attributed to the accused, participating in establishing a group in violation of the provisions of the law, to spread Shi'ism. During investigations, the two defendants denied having established any group. Mustafa al-Ramli told his lawyer that he did not know the second suspect and only met him in custody, while waiting for trial.

The court did not allow the lawyers to obtain the case file and only allowed them to see it quickly, and the case documents did not include any specific publications published by the defendants that would qualify as promoting Shiite doctrine, while the accusation articles included article 98 (f) of the Penal Code known as "contempt of religions" that punishes "promoting extremist ideas that ridicule divinely-revealed religions."

EIPR Lawyers argued that the accusations were false and that article 98 (f) of the penal code was unconstitutional.

This ruling is one of many rulings on charges related to belonging to Shi'ism and promoting its ideas, preceded by the ruling of the Cairo Criminal Court in May 2019 against Alaa Obaid, an Azhari teacher residing in Mansoura, with a 15-year prison sentence and a fine of 500,000 EGP on charges of communicating with foreign bodies and receiving money from them, establishing a website and printing books that promote Shi'ism, including a book written by the accused titled "The Virtues of the People of the House (Prophet Muhammad's Household) in the Qur'an and the Sunnah," according to the merits of the criminal court ruling.

In 2016, EIPR published an analytical report entitled "Restricted Diversity in the Religion of the State: The Religious Freedom of the Shia Egyptians". It recommended that the state take urgent measures in the short term and start a process of radical reform of official religious policies in order to guarantee freedom of religion, belief and religious diversity.

This ruling is also one of a series of rulings punishing freedom of religious expression, the most recent of which, a week ago on Sunday, June 21, 2020, where an Appeals Misdemeanor Court of Alexandria upheld the sentence of imprisonment of the activist and blogger Anas Hassan for a period of three years and a fine of 300,000 EGP, for "insulting religion" and "misuse of social media" and moderating the "Egyptian Atheists" Facebook page.

## 70 church buildings legalised, church and mosque demolished

***Egyptian authorities legalised 70 church buildings for worship purposes on Tuesday 19 May***

CSW (21.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2XBdZ3k> - The decision was issued following a meeting of the Government Committee that oversees the legalisation of churches, which was chaired by the Prime Minister. This decision brings the total number of churches that have been legalised since the committee commenced its mandate in 2016 to 1638.

The legalisation of church buildings remains a controversial issue. Local authorities demolished a church building in Koum Al-Farag, Al-Behera governorate, on Wednesday 20 May following sectarian protests. The one-storey building had been used for worship purposes for 15 years. A few years ago local Muslims constructed a mosque next to the building, hoping to prevent it from being legalised as a church. According to an ancient Islamic tradition (or common law), churches are prevented from being formally recognised or displaying any Christian symbols if a mosque is built next to them.

Recently, two additional floors had been constructed in order to accommodate the growing congregation, which sparked sectarian tension. To prevent further escalation, local authorities demolished both the church building and the mosque that was built next to it. 14 Christians, including the local priest and 4 women, were arrested when they tried to stop the authorities from demolishing the building.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: ***"CSW welcomes the legalisation of more churches in Egypt, and we encourage the administration to continue on the path of reforming legislation and addressing societal attitudes and practices that restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief. While the legalisation of these places of worship is a welcome development, we remain concerned by the destruction of both the church and mosque in Koum Al-Farag, which is not an effective way of addressing sectarian tensions. The government must work with local authorities to formulate civic interventions that address and transform the societal attitudes underpinning sectarian tensions."***

Although there have been noticeable improvements in the treatment of the Christian community during President Sisi's time in office, sectarian incidents continue to occur in certain localities, including the kidnap and forced conversion of Christian women. Such incidents are usually resolved through extra-legal community reconciliation sessions, which are often characterised by bias and unbalanced rulings that deprive victims, primarily Christians, of justice. CSW continues to call for those responsible for such incidents to be held to account through the legal system.

On 1 May the Coptic Orthodox Parish of Al-Manofyia [withdrew](#) from a civil society initiative to contain and resolve sectarian incidents via inter-community dialogue. The Egyptian Family House, a joint initiative that was created in 2011 by the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar, aims to strengthen religious harmony and create grassroots solutions to sectarian tensions.

The parish issued a statement in which it condemned the lack of action on the part of the Egyptian Family House in the case of the abduction of Rania Abdul-Masseih Halim, a Christian woman who disappeared on 22 April and subsequently [reappeared in a video](#) in which she claims to have converted to Islam and no longer wanted anyone to search for her. Her family believes these claims were made under duress.

