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Pastor imprisoned for missionary activities

HRWF (04.08.2022) – In July, Pastor Keshav Acharya was sentenced to one year in prison for attempting to convert Hindus in Nepal. Authorities originally arrested him for supposedly spreading COVID-19 misinformation. After they released him on bail, they arrested him two more times and accused him of attempting to coerce Hindus to convert to Christianity.

In November 2021, a court had sentenced him to two years in jail and a fine of 20,000 rupees (US\$166) for violating the Himalayan country's repressive anti-conversion law.

The sentence from the court in Dolpa district in Pokhara region of western Nepal on 30 November came about a week after it found Pastor Keshav Raj Acharya from Abundant Harvest Church guilty of proselytization.

The evangelical pastor was first arrested on 23 March 2021 by police in Kaski district after a YouTube video of him went viral on social media. In the video it was said that Covid-19 could be healed through Christian prayer.

Pastor Acharya denied uploading the video on the internet and he was released on bail about a month later.

However, he was immediately rearrested without a warrant, sent to prison and then charged under the anti-conversion law, accused of proselytizing and distributing Christian tracts in Dolpa district.

Anti-missionary legislation

Nepal is a former Hindu kingdom. The 2015 constitution declared the state a secular democracy.

Proselytization is a serious criminal offense, which began with adoption of the new constitution in 2015. Article 26 (3) of the constitution says: "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."

Nepal's government amended the Penal Code in 2018 and made conversion a criminal offense. Anyone found guilty of conversion and even encouraging conversion can be imprisoned for up to five years and fined up to 50,000 rupees (\$416).

About 81 percent of Nepal's 29 million people are Hindu, Buddhists account for 9 percent, Muslims 4.4 percent and Christians 1.4 percent, according to the 2011 census.

Photo : Pastor Keshav Raj Acharya was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine of 20,000 rupees (US\$166) for violating Nepal's anti-conversion law. (Photo: Christian Solidarity Worldwide)

Pastor Keshav released on bail pending appeal after being sentenced to 2 years in prison

HRWF/ IRFR (12.02.2022) - The International Religious Freedom Roundtable (IRFR) in the US is issuing an urgent call for the dropping of all charges against Protestant pastor Keshav Raj Acharya (33) of the Abundant Harvest Church in Pokhara city. On 19 December 2021, he was released on bail pending appeal.

On November 30 November 2021, Dolpa District Court in Nepal sentenced Pastor Keshav to two years imprisonment and a fine of 20 000 Nepali Rupees under Section 158 (1) and (2) of Nepal's Penal Code (2017) for sharing his faith. On 22 November, he was found guilty of proselytisation and immediately arrested and placed in prison. However, he was released on bail by the High Court Jumla after receiving an appeal against the verdict of the District Court. While we welcome his release on bail by the High Court, we remain concerned that the charges against him at the District Court Kaski for the same offence that have not been dropped yet. We are also concerned about the discriminatory treatment of Pastor Keshav throughout the process.

Police authorities first arrested Pastor Acharya Keshav in March 2020 from his home without an arrest warrant and did not file charges officially against Pastor Keshav until a week later in April when another District Administration Office in Kaski accused Pastor Acharya for disseminating false information for saying "Jesus can cure Corona" and praying for the stop of the Coronavirus in Jesus' name. The authorities then filed two additional charges targeting the pastor for exercising his freedom of expression by accusing him of proselytizing and "outraging religious feeling" under Section 158 and 156 of the Muluki Criminal Code, 2017 respectively.^[1] Several members of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable submitted a letter addressed to the earlier Attorney General Mr. Agni Prasad Kharel calling for the dropping of all charges against Pastor Keshav and drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of his arrest and detention.^[2] The US State Department's International Religious Freedom report also mentions the Nepal authorities' arbitrary arrest of Pastor Keshav.^[3]

In September 2021 police arrested two South Korean Catholic nuns for their charitable work and re-arrested and sentenced Pastor Keshav in November 2021.^[4]

¹ National Penal Code Act Nepal 2017, <http://www.moljpa.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Penal-Code-English-Revised-1.pdf> . 2017

2 Religious Freedom Roundtable Calls for Charges to Be Dropped against Pastor, Christian Today, 27 July 2020, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/religious.freedom.roundtable.calls.for.charges.to.be.dropped.against.pastor/135268.htm>.

3 United States Department of State, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom – Nepal, 12 May 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nepal/>.

4 "Korean Missionary Nuns Granted Bail in Nepal on Conversion Charges – UCA News." Ucanews.com, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/korean-missionary-nuns-granted-bail-in-nepal-on-conversion-charges/95031>; "Nepal Sentences Pastor to Two Years for Conversion – UCA News." Ucanews.com, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/nepal-sentences-pastor-to-two-years-for-conversion/95181> .
