

Egypt to try 7 Copts, US pastor over Prophet film

By SARAH EL DEEB, Associated Press – 18 hours ago

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's general prosecutor issued arrest warrants Tuesday for seven Egyptian Coptic Christians and a Florida-based American pastor and referred them to trial on charges linked to an anti-Islam film that has sparked riots across the Muslim world.

The case is largely symbolic since the seven men and one woman are believed to be outside of Egypt and unlikely to travel to the country to face the charges. Instead, the prosecutor's decision to take legal appears aimed at absorbing at least some of the public anger over the amateur film, which portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, womanizer and buffoon.

But some Christians and human rights groups expressed concern that trying people on charges of insulting religion, which also occurred to a degree under the secular-leaning regime of Hosni Mubarak, could only increase now that various strains of Islamists are gaining power. The arrest warrants were issued the same day that a Coptic teacher in southern Egypt received a prison sentence for Facebook postings deemed anti-Islamic, charges that predated the amateur film.

The prosecutor's office said in a statement that the eight accused, who include the film's alleged maker, face charges of harming national unity, insulting and publicly attacking Islam and spreading false information. The office said they could face the death penalty, if convicted.

Their case has been transferred to a criminal court, but no date for the trial has been set.

Among those charged is Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, an Egyptian Copt living in southern California and believed to be behind the film. Florida-based Pastor Terry Jones, who has said he was contacted by the filmmaker to promote the video, as well as Morris Sadek, a conservative Coptic Christian in the U.S. who pushed the video on his website, are also among those charged.

The connection of the other five accused in the case to the film was not immediately clear. Most of them live in the United States. They include two who work with Sadek in a radical institute for Coptic Christians in the U.S. that has called for an independent Coptic state; a priest who hosts TV programs from the U.S., a lawyer who lives in Canada and who has previously sued the government for clashes in 2000 that left 21 Christians dead.

They also include a woman who had converted to Christianity from Islam years back and is a staunch critic of the religion.

"We are not going to respond to Egypt. We do not take that particular threat very seriously," Jones said.

He added he hoped the U.S. government "would take a radical stand" on the case "that carries a possible death penalty for a U.S. citizen for exercising his First Amendment rights."

Sadek's phone was switched off. The others could not be immediately reached for comment.

Ultraconservative Salafi lawyer Mamdouh Ismail praised the prosecutor's decision. While recognizing that the eight will be tried in absentia, Ismail said referring them to a court will help curb public anger.

"Now these are legal measures instead of angry reactions, whose consequences are undetermined," he said. "This would also set a deterrent for them and anyone else who may fall into this" offense.

The prosecutor's statement, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, said that after studying the film investigators have determined that it contains scenes offensive to Islam and state institutions. It also says they questioned 10 plaintiffs before issuing the charges.

Nakoula, 55, told the AP in an interview last week outside Los Angeles that he was the manager of the company that produced "Innocence of Muslims." Jones also told AP that he was contacted by Nakoula to promote the movie.

Violence surrounding the film, clips of which appeared on YouTube, has included angry protests outside U.S. embassies worldwide and an attack on the American Consulate in Libya that killed the U.S. ambassador.

Both the Christians and rights groups say charges of insulting religion, vague in what constitutes an insult, are only pressed against offenses to Islam, and never to Christianity.

A Muslim preacher who tore the Bible in protest over the offensive film remains free without any charges. Another Coptic Christian who posted the film on his Facebook page and has posted other videos discussing the merits of atheism is currently under 15 days detention on accusations of insulting religion.

A Coptic teacher was sentenced Tuesday to six years for posting on his Facebook page drawings that were deemed to be insulting the Prophet, as well as comments considered an affront to the country's current president. The charges predate the amateur film, but anger was heightened outside the courtroom in southern Egypt, and many Islamists protested the sentence as too meager.

Medhat Klada, a Coptic Christian living in Switzerland, said the accused are referred to criminal trials without even interrogation.

"This is only to absorb public anger but there is no justice in Egypt," he said. "These charges are now used with force because of the rise of political Islam and the fierce fight" between the different strands among these groups.

Amr Gharbeia, a program director with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, argued against the constitutionality of the charges.

"This is not a call for prosecuting those who insult Christians or Shiites, but if we are going to use this charge only in one direction (against insulting Islam), then we should just call it off," he said.

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