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## **Egypt: ‘Outrageous’ guilty verdict in blasphemy case an assault on free expression**

An Egyptian activist has been sentenced to three years in prison after being found guilty of “defamation of religion”, a conviction Amnesty International called an outrageous assault on freedom of expression.

The court in Cairo found Alber Saber Ayad, a 27-year-old computer science graduate and activist, guilty of disseminating material on the internet that defamed religions.

He is expected to be released on a bail of EG£1,000 (US\$160) on Thursday 13 December pending his appeal. Amnesty International considered him to be a prisoner of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression, and had called for his immediate and unconditional release.

“This is an outrageous verdict and sentence for a person whose only ‘crime’ was to post his opinions online,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“This conviction will ruin his life, whether he serves the sentence or not. The court should have thrown the case out on the first day, yet now he’s been branded as having insulted religion.”

Alber Saber Ayad was arrested at his home in Cairo on 13 September 2012, after angry groups of men surrounded his house and called for his death, accusing him of heresy and atheism and of promoting Innocence of Muslims – a short film regarded by many to be offensive.

Police waited until the next day to respond to a call from Alber Saber Ayad’s mother. When they eventually arrived they arrested Alber Saber Ayad, confiscating his personal computer and CDs.

The activist’s lawyer told Amnesty International that his client’s trial was marred by the judge’s refusal to allow the defence to call key witnesses – including the arresting and investigating officers, and the individuals who first filed the complaints against Alber Saber Ayad.

While he was held at Cairo’s El Marg Police Station, a police officer reportedly incited other detainees to attack him. During his trial he was also held in poor conditions in Tora Prison – his cell was next to a sewer and lacked light or clean water until human rights organizations filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor on his behalf.

Alber Saber Ayad’s mother told Amnesty International:

“This is pure injustice ... I can’t believe during the investigations the boy was asked about his religion and how he practices it, this is none of their business, it’s been three months and I can’t eat or sleep because I can only see him 10 minutes per week. I am calling for Alber to be released, he is just someone

who says what he believes, and on the other hand [for the authorities to] try to catch the people who are really inciting violence.”

Amnesty International has submitted the case of Alber Saber Ayad to United Nations human rights mechanisms.

A wider threat to free expression

The verdict against Alber Saber Ayad comes just days before Egyptians vote on a new constitution which, if passed, will ban criticism of religion and individuals – opening the door to many more cases like this one.

While Article 45 of the draft constitution protects freedom of expression, it is undermined by articles 44 and 31, which prohibit insulting and defaming religion or individuals, respectively.

“Provisions in Egypt’s new constitution violate the country’s international obligations to uphold freedom of expression and would have a devastating effect on free speech in the future,” said Hadj Saharaoui.

“Egypt must stop using ‘blasphemy’ laws to prosecute people. Any new legislation or other measures must uphold people’s right to criticize religions and other beliefs and ideas as a vital part of the right to freedom of expression.”

International human rights law protects expression of ideas even when they are considered offensive or insulting.