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Libya must drop charges against politicians over women's rights cartoon

The Libyan authorities must drop charges against two politicians who published a cartoon on women's rights deemed to be offensive to Islam, Amnesty International said today.

Libyan National Party policy manager Ali Tekbali and Fathi Sager, the party's secretary general, are due to appear in court this Sunday, 16 June at the Criminal Court in Tripoli. They are facing the death penalty over a cartoon calling for gender equality and women's rights that was circulated on an electoral campaign poster last June.

The cartoon features a group of men discussing the role of women in Libyan society, including a bearded character. That same character appeared as the Prophet Muhammad three months later in a controversial anti-Islamic comic published by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo last September. The cartoon, however, did not make any reference to the Prophet Muhammad or to Islam.

The men face a string of charges under articles of the Penal Code which were used to repress political opposition and freedom of expression during the al-Gaddafi era. They are accused of spreading discord among Libyans and intending "to change basic principles" of the constitution, as well as insulting Islam and incitement to hatred. Two of these charges incur the death penalty.

"The charges against Ali Tekbali and Fathi Sager are ludicrous and must be dropped immediately. If convicted on these charges Ali Tekbali and Fathi Sager would be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to free expression," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

The party offices in Tripoli were raided by a military brigade under the Supreme Security Committee last November and closed by order of the prosecution.

Ali Tekbali and Fathi Sager are apparently the first men to be tried on such charges since the uprising, which toppled Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011.

"It's been almost two years since Libya guaranteed freedom of expression in its constitutional declaration. The authorities must stand by that pledge and urgently repeal all laws, which criminalize freedom of expression and assembly, and impose the death penalty," Hadj Sahraoui said.

"It is outrageous to think that speaking out on women's rights has become a crime punishable by death at a time when Libyan women are calling for increased participation in public life and the Constitution-drafting process."

Ali Tekbali, who takes responsibility for designing the cartoon in protest at conservative men's opposing women's right to education, says he found the picture by browsing on the internet for a bearded man.

He told an Amnesty International delegate who observed the first hearing of the men's trial in May, "The main point of the cartoon was to show that women are not buckets of sin walking on the street, as these men think. A society cannot prosper without the two sides working together."