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Egypt must overturn prison sentence for actor accused of 'insulting Islam'

A ruling against leading Egyptian actor Adel Imam, sentenced to three months in prison for "insulting Islam" in his films, sends out the message the country has not moved on from its Mubarak-era heritage of suppressing free speech, Amnesty International said.

The actor, who was also fined \$170 (around £105), was first found guilty in absentia in February for his film roles in a case originally brought last year by a lawyer. His lawyers filed an objection against the verdict but a Cairo misdemeanours court rejected the objection on 24 April and upheld the original conviction. The lawyers say he may appeal Tuesday's sentence.

The lawyer has filed a second complaint against Adel Imam and five other writers and producers on similar charges for their role in creating and broadcasting films and plays that Adel Imam acted in. The verdict in the second case is expected on Thursday.

"This ruling sends a strong message that Egypt has still not moved on from the era of quashing free speech," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Adel Imam and the five other filmmakers should not be punished for peacefully expressing their opinion, even if those views do not sit comfortably with some critics."

In filing his complaint of contempt of religion, the lawyer used Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which punishes "whoever exploits religion in words or writing or any other methods to promote extremist ideologies, with a view of stirring up sedition, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity and social peace."

Imam's case is the latest of several lawsuits in Egypt concerning freedom of expression.

In June last year, Coptic Christian Telecoms chief Naguib Sawiris was accused of "contempt of religion" in two separate lawsuits after he posted a picture of a bearded Mickey Mouse and a veiled Minnie Mouse on Twitter in June 2011.

Both cases were dismissed on the grounds that the legal reasoning put together by the prosecution was not sound.

Meanwhile, a court in the northern city of Helwan sentenced trade union boss Kamal Abbas to six months in prison for "insulting an official" in February this year.

Abbas, who was convicted in absentia, was charged after he spoke out against a leading member of Egypt's official trade union at an International Labour Organization conference last June.

In the same month, activist Gaber Elsayed Gaber was acquitted by a court in the northern town of al-Wayli of “disturbing public security” and attacking the reputation of Egypt’s ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

Gaber Elsayed Gaber was serving a year in prison after distributing leaflets which criticized the SCAF.