

# Amnesty International

## Public Statement

4 June 2014

Index: MDE 12/031/2014

### **Egyptian human rights activist facing prison for ‘contempt of religion’**

A leading human rights activist faces prison for writing a book deemed to show contempt for religion, Amnesty International warned today.

On 5 June 2014, a court of appeals in Beba will hear the case of Land Center for Human Rights director Karam Saber, who was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison for “contempt of religion” in his book, *Where is God?*

A lower court in Beba, in the governorate of Beni Suef, tried, convicted and sentenced the activist in his absence in May 2013. The court later upheld his conviction on 11 March 2014 following a re-trial, ordering his release pending appeal on bail of 1,000 Egyptian Pounds (US\$140).

If imprisoned, Karam Saber would be a prisoner of conscience, held solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression, and Amnesty International would call for his immediate and unconditional release.

Karam Saber faced charges of breaking Article 98(f) of Egypt’s Penal Code, which criminalizes “exploiting religion” for seditious purposes or showing disdain or contempt for religion.

The human rights activist was not aware he was the subject of a criminal investigation until the court sentenced him in his absence last year, he told Amnesty International. The Prosecution did not summons him for questioning as part of its investigation, which was opened following a complaint against him lodged by a private individual.

Karam Saber’s lawyers have also challenged the case before an administrative court, claiming that it breaches constitutional safeguards on freedom of expression.

No person should be prosecuted for showing disdain or contempt for religion. International human rights law protects expression of ideas even when they are considered offensive or insulting.

Amnesty International urges Egypt to uphold its international obligations to protect freedom of expression, including under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, by amending its Penal Code to comply with these obligations and with its own constitution.

As the Human Rights Committee, the UN body that monitors state compliance with this treaty, noted in its General Comment on freedom of expression: “prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief systems, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant.”

The Committee also remarked that it is impermissible for states to use such “to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith.”

Egypt's Constitution, adopted following a public referendum in January 2014, guarantees freedom of thought and expression (Article 65) and prohibits custodial sentences for publishing offences not connected with incitement to violence and discrimination or defamation (Article 71).

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Egyptian authorities not to prosecute individuals based on blasphemy laws which criminalize criticism of or insult to religious beliefs.

Over the years, the organization has documented a number of cases where individuals, including social media activists and a school teacher, have faced criminal prosecution for "showing contempt of" religion.

In a recent case, the Prosecution ordered the detention of a Coptic Christian man in Luxor on allegations of "insulting Islam", state news reported on 31 May 2014.

[/end]