

Egyptian Christian's recognition struggle

Contributed by Christopher Landau
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Mr El Gohary and his daughter fear for their lives' after converting

By Christopher Landau

BBC Religious Affairs correspondent, Cairo

Maher al-Gohary has converted from Islam to Christianity. In spite of facing death threats, he's engaged in a legal battle to have his changed religion recognised on his official Egyptian documents.

We drive through the chaotic streets of Cairo to meet Mr Gohary's lawyer at a petrol station.

His client lives in hiding, and doesn't disclose his address.

He faces threats to his life - as a result of abandoning Islam for Christianity.

When we meet, in a small first floor office on an anonymous Cairo street, Maher al-Gohary is matter-of-fact about the dangers he faces.

The problem is that some judges rule according to their beliefs, not according to law

Nabil Ghobreyal, lawyer

"I am afraid. Many, many people can kill me and my daughter anytime," he says.

I asked him whether he felt these threats to his life were serious.

Yes," he replied. "Anyone may kill us in the street."

His teenage daughter, also a Christian, sits at her father's side.

She, too, has been warned about the consequences of religious conversion.

"While I was going to school, someone stopped me and told me if my father does not go back to Islam, they will kill him and kill me," she tells me.

Legal recognition

Her father's legal challenge is a simple one.

He wants his state identification documents amended, so that his religious status is described as Christian.

Such a change would also mean his daughter could receive Christian religious education.

His lawyer, Nabil Ghobreyal, has already represented his client at several legal hearings - but no judge has yet issued a final verdict.

At the most recent, on 7 February, Mr Ghobreya believes he made a convincing case that Egyptian civil law offers no obstacles to religious conversion.

He believes the real problem is that the law is being ignored.

Who are Egypt's Christians?

Egypt has the oldest and largest Christian community in the Middle East

About 10% of Egypt's 80 million people are Christians

Egyptian Christians are known as Copts, a word derived from the Greek word Aigyptos, meaning Egypt

The Christian community is divided into: Coptic Orthodox, Coptic Catholics, Coptic Evangelicals (Protestants) and other minorities

They have their own pope, Pope Shenouda III, and give allegiance to him rather than to Rome

"The court should have ruled in the first session of this case to allow Mr Gohary to change his religion from Muslim to Christian," he explains.

"But the problem is that some judges rule according to their beliefs, not according to law."

Those beliefs lead some Muslims to support harsh penalties for those who abandon the Muslim faith.

Some believe that to renounce Islam - known as apostasy - should be punished by death.

But human rights lawyers in Egypt are convinced that the country's law allows for the freedom to change religion.

At the Arabic Human Rights Information Network, I met Gamal Eid, a lawyer fighting a similar case on behalf of another religious convert.

He believes that if Mr Gohary's case is successful, it could have far-reaching consequences.

"Many people in their ID are Muslim, or Christian, or Jewish - but they believe different things," he says.

"Many of them are afraid to convert officially. If that door opens - huge numbers of people will try to convert from Muslim to Christian. The law gives them this right."

Egypt's Christian communities have deep roots - with many churches pre-dating Islam.

But some feel as though they have to exist in secret, or at the very least to be discreet about their activities.

At morning prayer at a Catholic church in Cairo, I come across Father Rafiq Greish.

He tells me that while his church is free to hold services when it wants, he is prevented from sharing his Christian faith as widely as he would like.

All my hope: peace, and peace. Only peace. We didn't find it in Egypt now

Maher El Gohary

And he says that some women in his congregation, who have converted to Christianity, go to great lengths to hide their changed religious status from friends and family.

"When they go out from the church, they put their veil on again, and they go home with their veil as if a Muslim woman," he explains.

"Because she's afraid from her brothers, her father, in her work, she cannot say she was converted - and this is part of our problems."

Mr Gohary's legal challenge is being watched closely by supporters of religious freedom who believe it is under threat in many Middle Eastern countries.

Any change in the law would not necessarily improve his personal safety, but it would mean recognition for the faith he holds dear.

He told me that what he really wants is to be able to live a normal life, without fearing for his safety. And that several other countries have now offered him asylum on religious grounds.

But all he wants is to be able to stay in the place of his birth - and freely practise the religion he's chosen.

"All my hope: peace, and peace. Only peace. We don't find it in Egypt now."