

The Horror: No Justice For Coptic Grandmother Assaulted In Egypt

by Hugh Fitzgerald



A **Coptic grandmother** in the village of Al-Karm, in the Minya governorate, in Upper Egypt, was stripped naked, and her house burned down, by three Muslims, in 2016. It was certainly an atrocity. And the perpetrators are known; they denied nothing; they were proud of what they had done, teaching the odious Copts a lesson. She and her lawyers have been fighting for justice ever since. But for Copts in Egypt, there is no justice. The Egyptian state, in the form of its judiciary, ultimately acquitted the three Muslims, even though their guilt was never in doubt. The preliminary Jihad Watch report on this appalling case is [Media Line](#), December 24, 2020:

Egypt's Christian community is frustrated and angry after an Egyptian court acquitted three Muslim men in an assault on an

elderly grandmother, in a case illustrating the sectarian tensions in the country that has dragged on for several years.

The court in Minya-Upper Egypt handed down its decision last week in the 2016 assault, which included the stripping naked of then-70-year-old Suad Thabet and the burning down of her home, and four other homes, as well as the injury of three other Copts.

The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in a statement after the verdict was announced on December 17 warned of “the repercussions of not condemning those involved in these attacks, which entrench the absence of justice and discrimination between citizens on the basis of religion, and encourage the recurrence of such sectarian attacks, in addition to what they represent in terms of a message of tolerance of incidents of violence against women in a public forum.”

On May 20, 2016, the village of Al-Karm in the Abu Qurqas district, south of the Minya Governorate, located 180 miles south of Cairo, was the site of sectarian attacks on several Christian residents of the village, in the wake of rumors of an affair between a local Christian man and a Muslim woman. When a Muslim mob did not find the man at home, they threw Thabet and a daughter-in-law out in the street and stripped Thabet of her clothing in front of her home. Meanwhile, a gang of angry Muslims roamed the village streets chanting angry and hostile slogans at Christian citizens in general.

Mere “rumors” of a liaison between a Coptic man and a Muslim woman led to a Muslim mob invading a Coptic neighborhood, determined to find the man and, there can be little doubt, kill him. But as he was not at home, as a kind of consolation prize the maddened mob seized his 70-year-old Coptic grandmother, Suad Thabet, pulled her outside to the front of her house, where

they stripped her naked. After all, why not? She was a Copt, and the grandmother of the man they sought; she deserved no better. She should be thankful they didn't beat or kill her.

“They dragged me out, burned the house, threw me in front of the house, and took off my clothes just as my mother gave birth to me ... they did not even leave my underwear, and I shouted and cried,” Thabet said. “And then our Lord saved me from their hands ... And people took me inside their house, I took an old jalabiya [a traditional garment in Upper Egypt] and put it on.” When some of the assailants returned looking for Thabet, her neighbors told them that she was not there.

Some of the Muslim mob, apparently not satisfied with having humiliated Suad Thabet in a particularly awful way, and having burned down her house, destroying what little she had – and burned down the houses of four other Copts, as well, just for fun – returned to see what further harm they might inflict on her. Fortunately, she was by that point in hiding.

The southern province of Minya is home to a large number of Copts, Egypt's biggest Christian community.

A week after the attack, on May 27, 2016, a delegation of members of the Egyptian Parliament and leaders from Minya tried to hold a traditional reconciliation session and close the case without involving the courts. They went to Anba Makarios, bishop of Minya and Abu Qurqas, but he refused to receive them, and the Copts of the village refused to reconcile. The Diocese of Minya and Abu Qurqas, in a statement announcing its rejection of the traditional reconciliation session, called for the arrest of those involved in the attack and for them to be brought to trial in an Egyptian court.

Muslim leaders – members of the Egyptian Parliament and local leaders from Minya – thought that the Copts might be willing

to engage in a “reconciliation” that is apparently a kind of informal justice, arranged between the parties and not involving the state (and thus there is no question of prison) where the payment of sums of money are negotiated so as to satisfy the victim and make the case disappear. But the Copts, right up to Anba Makarios, the Bishop of Minya, were not having it; they wanted the full force of the Egyptian criminal system to be brought to bear in punishing the three malefactors. They still had hope that even a Copt might obtain justice. They were wrong.

Eager to prevent more sectarian violence by Muslims and to reassure the Copts, President El-Sisi commented:

“All Egyptian women have all our esteem, respect and love. It is not appropriate for this to happen again. The law and accountability must be applied no matter how many wrongdoers,” Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said days after the attack. “I hope that this lady will not be sad. We do not accept the discrimination between us as Egyptians and whoever erred should be held accountable, starting with the president of the republic,” Sisi also said.

Welcome words from President Al-Sisi. They no doubt gave Suad Thabet and her family, and Egypt’s Copts, the hope that in this case, given how outrageous the crime, justice would be done. But that is not how things turned out.

Over the last four years, the Egyptian courts have heard three different cases regarding this incident. On April 7, 2018, the Abu Qurqas misdemeanor court in Minya sentenced Thabet’s son Attiya Daniel to two years in prison with hard labor for committing adultery, and in absentia sentenced the Muslim woman he is alleged to have been involved with. His sentence later was reduced to one year. The only witness to the alleged adultery was an 11-year-old girl. Thabet’s son served his sentence and left the village with his wife and

children.

So those “rumors” about a possible liaison between a Coptic man – Suad Thabet’s son Attiya Daniel, and a Muslim woman – which led to the Muslim mob stripping her and burning her house down, turns out to be based on the word of an 11-year-old girl. How reliable is such testimony? How likely is it that an 11-year-old would have been present when illicit sexual congress was taking place? Isn’t this testimony more likely the result of a young girl’s fervid imagination running wild, or perhaps the result of her having been coached by a grownup wanting to get a Copt in trouble? And hadn’t the 11-year-old been raised, after all, to view Copts as the enemy, who like all non-Muslims, were “the most vile of created beings”?

The Public Prosecutor issued arrest warrants and summonses for several defendants in the case of the assault on Thabet, known as the “lady of Al-Karm,” and the burning of her home. All but one were later released on bail that ranged from one thousand to tens of thousands of Egyptian pounds. The case was later closed due to insufficient evidence.

In response, Thabet’s attorney filed a grievance against the Public Prosecutor’s decision. On February 15, 2017, the third circuit of the Minya Criminal Court decided to refer the accused in the incident for criminal trial, and ordered a reinvestigation of the case.

The act of the Minya Criminal Court, ordering a reinvestigation of the case, held out the hope that justice might – just – be done. Alas, It was not to be.

The first court hearings began in April 2018, but soon the trial was postponed, in part because the judges felt embarrassed to hear the case. Finally, on Jan. 11, 2020, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced the three defendants in

absentia to ten years in prison and 100,000 pounds (\$6,400 USD) in civil compensation.

Why would the judges be “embarrassed” to hear the case? Isn’t it a case, rather, not of embarrassment but of fear, fear that if the judges found the accused Muslims guilty, they themselves might become the target of violence from other Muslims outraged at the verdict? Nonetheless, after almost two years since the court hearings began, the judges of the Minya Criminal Court were brave enough to sentence the defendants in absentia – and possibly only because they were in absentia, which meant they likely would escape justice, would never be found among the 90 million Egyptian Muslims, so many of whom, finding nothing wrong with their behavior, would help them hide – to ten years and a fine of \$6,400 USD. But even this decision, a symbolic victory of sorts, would not stand.

But on Dec. 17, 2020, the Minya Criminal Court acquitted the three defendants of their indecent assault on Thabet. A day after the verdict, on Dec. 18, Egypt’s Public Prosecutor ordered his office to study the possibility of an appeal.

And that is where things stand. The three Muslim defendants have been acquitted of indecent assault. Will there be an appeal? Don’t count on it. And what about the burning down of the Coptic grandmother’s house? Was there any judgment about that? The news reports do not say.

So that’s it. An inoffensive 70-year-old Coptic grandmother is assaulted by a Muslim mob because they could not find her grandson, whom they believed, solely on the testimony of an 11-year-old girl, had committed adultery with a Muslim woman. As he was unavailable to be beaten to a pulp, or perhaps murdered, they made do with punishing her, Suad Thabet, dragging her from her house and, in full view of the village, they stripped her naked, and then burned down her house. She is left with nothing. And the Egyptian judiciary finally

acquitted all three of her Muslim tormentors because, as Coptic Christian activist Beshoy Tamry said, “stripping an old woman in the street is not a crime because she is a woman and a Christian.”

Persecution and injustice have been the unhappy lot of the Christian Copts in Egypt since the Muslim Arabs arrived in the 7th century. The Qur’an hasn’t changed; it still inculcates contempt and hatred of non-Muslims, including the Copts. Why should we have expected a different outcome – that is, real justice – for Suad Thabet today?

First published in