

Egyptian Parliament considers outlawing atheism

January 8, 2018

WASHINGTON (RNS)—It soon may become a criminal offense to be an atheist in Egypt.

Amro Hamroush, head of the Egyptian Parliament's committee on religion, proposed legislation Dec. 24 that would make it illegal to profess no belief in God.

It already is against Egyptian law to "insult" or "defame" religion, and blasphemy arrests are on the rise. A conviction can bring up to five years in prison.

The new measure would criminalize the act of not believing in God—no insults or defamation of another faith required.

"It must be criminalized and categorized as contempt of religion because atheists have no doctrine and try to insult the Abrahamic religions," Hamroush said in announcing the proposed law.

The legislation has the support of Egypt's highest Islamic religious organization, the Al-Azhar. Mohamed Zaki, an Al-Azhar official, called it necessary "to punish those who have been seduced into atheism."

The Egyptian government long has punished blasphemy and has targeted atheists since the 2014 inauguration of President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi. At that time—three years after the 2011 revolution that ousted longtime Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak—the government announced a national plan to "confront and eliminate" atheism.

Later, a government-run newspaper denounced atheists as "the country's

second enemy after the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Since then, arrests of atheists have been on the rise. On Dec. 21, police in Cairo arrested a 29-year-old computer programmer who they say administered a Facebook page that is critical of religion. Under interrogation, the man acknowledged being an atheist.

The proposed Egyptian law came in for harsh criticism from Ani Zonneveld, founder and president of Muslims for Progressive Values, an international group based in Los Angeles.

“This criminalization of atheism contradicts the very essence of the Quran, verse 2:256, ‘There is no compulsion in faith,’” she said. “This legislation is anti-Islam.”