

Salafis call for death of Tunisian TV boss after “Persepolis” airing

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Secularists have accused Salafi radicals of attacking free speech in Tunisia, as a court said it will issue on May 3 its verdict in a blasphemy trial against Nessma TV over its broadcast of the award-winning film “Persepolis.”

The broadcast prompted calls by Salafi Islamists for the station chief to be put to death.

The trial of Nabil Karoui, who faces charges of violating sacred values and disturbing public order by showing the animated movie, resumed amid tight security on Thursday.

Dozens of conservative Salafi Islamists gathered outside the courthouse, some waving black flags inscribed with Islamic verses and placards calling for Karoui’s execution.

“Persepolis” is based on an account of a woman growing up in Iran under religious rule following the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Its broadcast ahead of the country’s elections in October was seen by many as an attack on the moderate Islamist Ennahda party that went on to win Tunisia’s first vote after last year’s revolution sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

Some religious Tunisians were also angered by a scene which they said contravened an Islamic ban on depictions of God.

The trial has pit the religious right against Tunisia’s secularist elite, which has denounced the trial as an attack on free expression and accused Salafis of seeking to turn back the clock in a Mediterranean nation known for its moderation.

Salafis, jailed and persecuted under Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, have become more assertive since last year’s uprising ousted the dictator from power.

“Free expression is on trial in Tunisia after the revolution and this poses a danger to Tunisians who call for the right to express themselves without permission from religious leaders,” Karoui told reporters on Thursday.

“I hope that we can turn a page on this once and for all and return calmly to work at Nessma.”

Tunisian prosecutors launched their inquiry after members of the public filed complaints over Nessma’s airing of the film.

Prosecution lawyers argued that there should be limits to freedom of expression and that the airing of the film was an attack on religious sensibilities.

The charges against Karoui carry a three-year jail term but observers said it was unlikely he would be incarcerated as the case appeared weak and a tough sentence would stir controversy in Tunisia,

where political tensions are running high.

“The judiciary was used in Ben Ali’s day to attack freedom of expression and we hope that it will not be used now to attack freedoms but to protect them,” said Radhia Nasraoui, a human rights lawyer who is part of the defense team for Nessma.

Amnesty International called on Wednesday for the charges against Karoui to be dropped, echoing demands by secular politicians who have defended Nessma throughout the trial.

“A trial over a film damages the image of Tunisia abroad,” said Nejib Chebbi, a veteran secular politician.

(Reuters, Al-Akhbar)

P.S.

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