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# Afghan Conversion Trial Update — The World is Watching

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Media reports indicate that the trial of an Afghan man charged with converting to Christianity may be diverted by a judicial finding that the man, Abdul Rahman, is insane. The trial judge hinted at this development in recent days, and building international pressure is raising new questions about the trial of a man who converted to Christianity 16 years ago — a “crime” that could cost Mr. Rahman his life, if convicted [see previous articles [here](#) and [here](#)].

Today, state prosecutor Sarinwal Zamari made similar statements. In effect, the move may be an attempt to avoid a crisis without ruling directly on Mr. Rahman’s conversion. Mr. Zamari told The Associated Press: “I think he could be mad. He is not a normal person. He doesn’t talk like a normal person.” From [CBS News: Moayuddin Baluch, a religious adviser to President Hamid Karzai, said Rahman would undergo a psychological examination. “Doctors must examine him,” he said. “If he is mentally unfit, definitely Islam has no claim to punish him. He must be forgiven. The case must be dropped.”](#)

That is the clearest evidence to date that would indicate the court’s plans. Yesterday, U.S. State Department registered its concern about the trial, and a U.S. spokesman indicated that the nation’s constitution should prevent such an execution.

Still, this falls far short of a bold defense of religious liberty in the face of such an abuse of power. Does the American military effectively support a government in Kabul that will allow such abuses of human rights and human dignity?

Of course, the art of diplomacy is found in making things happen without appearing to make them happen. One can only hope that American diplomats, along with political and military leaders, are sending a consistent message to the Kabul government. Such abuses of religious liberty cannot be allowed.

A ruling that Mr. Rahman is insane may avoid the immediate crisis (in an awkward and cynical manner), but it does not resolve the more fundamental issue: Will conversion be a capital crime in Afghanistan?

A good word from [National Review](#):

*We should have no illusions that Afghanistan — in many ways the backwater of the Islamic world — will soon embrace Western-style religious pluralism. But the trial of Abdul Rahman, who faces a potential death sentence for converting to Christianity some 15 years ago, is an affront to civilization. If there is always a balancing act between accommodating the religious beliefs of a traditional society like Afghanistan and coaxing it toward reform, the Rahman case is not a close call — killing or jailing someone for his religious beliefs is always wrong, and is especially galling in a country so dependent on American military forces and aid.*

*The Afghan constitution is a work of studied ambiguity when it comes to religious liberty. Article 2 says Islam is Afghanistan’s religion, but it also stipulates that other religions are free to perform their ceremonies “within the limits of the law” (whatever that means). Article 7 says the state shall abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — which includes the right of conversion — but Article 130 says, where there is no guidance for the constitution or other laws, Islamic laws apply. This is the kind of “living constitution” Ruth Bader Ginsburg can only dream about in the U.S. The Afghan document was deliberately written vaguely to bridge the divide between the country’s modernizers and its Islamists. The latter surely want to use the Rahman case to embarrass our ally President Karzai and to advance their interpretation of the constitution.*

*Yesterday, the State Department's Nicholas Burns adopted the right tone and substantive position when asked about the case by reporters. He said that, as far as the U.S. is concerned, the Afghan constitution guarantees religious liberty, and therefore Rahman shouldn't be punished for his conversion. But he also emphasized our respect for Afghan sovereignty. It is important that, while we push for justice in the case, we don't play into the hands of Karzai's enemies, who are eager to capitalize on the fears of a very traditional society. We should make it clear privately, but very firmly to Karzai — who would have to sign Rahman's death warrant — that we expect him to find some Afghan way to short-circuit the case before it ever gets to that point.*

*Conservatives in this country have been admirably willing to accept the compromises and frustrations that come with President Bush's attempts to reform recalcitrant parts of the world. The judicial murder of a Christian convert by a government that exists only on the basis of American power and good will, however, would be intolerable.*

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