

Pope's baptism of Muslim is questioned in Italy: Leaders shocked by event's high profile

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Pope Benedict XVI's baptism of an Egyptian-born formerly Muslim Italian journalist, known for being a strident critic of restrictions on religious freedom in Islamic countries, has been questioned by Muslim leaders in Italy.

Magdi Allam, a columnist and deputy editor of the Milan-based *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, was one of seven people from five countries baptized by the pontiff at the Easter Vigil Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on March 22.

"What shocked me is the high profile the Vatican gave to the conversion," said Yaha Sergio Pallavicini, vice president of the Religious Islamic Community, one of Italy's Muslim groups. He questioned why Allam had not been baptized in Viterbo, the city north of Italy where the journalist lives.

Allam was born in Cairo in 1952 and attended a Roman Catholic school in Egypt. He came as a young person to Italy, where he did his university studies, afterward working as a journalist and writing against Muslim extremism.

Allam has been under special police protection for five years because of death threats. He was an enthusiastic advocate of the U.S.-led military action against Iraq in 2003, and he has written a book in support of Israel. -*Ecumenical News International*