

Egypt: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

Since the Revolution of 25 January 2011, the human rights situation in Egypt has worsened progressively. This has occurred against a backdrop of rising terror attacks, and an economic deterioration severe enough for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to provide Egypt with USD12 billion in 2016. At the time, this was the largest loan ever received by an Arab nation.

Terrorism

Terrorist attacks periodically occur in cities, but are mainly concentrated in the Sinai Peninsula, where the government is engaged in counterinsurgency operations against terror groups – including Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis, an affiliate of Islamic State (IS, Daesh). While this terrorist threat regularly claims the lives of police and army officers along with civilians in this area, and often entails deadly hit-and-run attacks outside of it, special measures introduced in response to it have contributed to a grave deterioration in the human rights climate, including restrictions on freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Severe human rights abuses by members of the security services have been reported in North Sinai, including torture of detainees and extrajudicial killings.

The repression of human rights in the name of counterterrorism has included a crackdown on civil society, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights defenders experiencing what some Egyptian observers have described as the worst assault in history. This crackdown drew criticism from the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), which made Egypt a human rights priority country, the former United States (US) Secretary of State, the Federal Foreign Office in Germany, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Palm Sunday 2017 attacks

The government declared a three-month state of emergency, three days of mourning and increased security following attacks on two churches in northern Egypt on 9 April 2017. IS claimed responsibility for the attacks, in which 44 died and scores were injured.

The first bomb was detonated inside St George's Church in the city of Tanta, 120km north of Cairo. The bomber evaded security, and 27 people were killed and 78 wounded, according to the Ministry of Health. Families, children and church deacons were reported to have been among the casualties. In a show of unity in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, local Muslims rushed to mosques to donate blood for the injured. A few hours later, 17 people died and 48 were injured when a bomber detonated a device after being prevented from entering St Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria, where the

head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, was conducting the Palm Sunday service. The casualties included four police officers who had intercepted the bomber.

The attacks, which targeted the Christian community during a significant religious festival and at a time of maximum church attendance, were widely condemned, including by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, the UN Security Council and Pope Francis. The King of Saudi Arabia also expressed condolences.

Attacks throughout 2017

More than 100 Christians were killed in Egypt in 2017, with most attacks claimed by the local branch of IS.

On 26 May 2017 at least 28 people were killed and 23 injured when masked gunmen opened fire on three vehicles transporting members of the Coptic community to St Samuel the Confessor Monastery in Minya governorate. The gunmen were reportedly dressed in military attire and armed with automatic weapons. The victims included women, children and the elderly.

On 12 October 2017 Father Samaan Shahata Rizkallah, a 50-year-old Coptic Orthodox priest from Upper Egypt, was stabbed to death by an extremist. The man chased Father Samaan and stabbed him repeatedly in the head, neck and abdomen with a meat cleaver, and imprinted a cross on his forehead. An ambulance arrived at the scene an hour later and transported Father Samaan to a hospital, where he later died. Father Beymen Moftah of El-Malak Church in Matay, who was with Father Samaan during the attack, was also assaulted, but is reported to have survived his injuries.

On 22 December 2017 local Muslims attacked the church of Prince Tadrouss in the village of Kafr Al-Wasleen in Atfih town, Giza. The attack took place after Friday prayers following rumours on social media that Christians in the village were planning to install a bell. A mob stormed the church, destroying furniture and icons, and tearing books. They also attacked the Christian man who had donated the building for use as a church, injuring him and several members of his family. The head of Giza police, General Issam Saeid, visited the village and reassured local Christians that a number of the attackers had been arrested.

On 29 December 2017 a gunman affiliated with IS attacked a Coptic-owned shop in the Helwan neighbourhood south of

Cairo, killing two brothers. Later that day, the same gunman attempted to storm Mar Mina Church, killing members of the congregation and a police officer at the checkpoint guarding the church. Several others were wounded. He was intercepted and arrested before he could enter the church to detonate explosives. Nine people were killed overall in these two attacks.

Church construction continues to be the main cause of sectarian tension, particularly in Upper Egypt. On 31 August 2018 a mob gathered in the village of Demshao Hashem after Friday prayers, following rumours that work was underway to convert a building belonging to the local Christian community into a church. The attack resulted in injuries to two Christians and a firefighter, and severe damage to four Christian properties. Thirty-eight Muslims were arrested, 19 of whom are still in custody.

In another incident in al-Zeneiqa village in the town of Esna in Luxor governorate, a mob gathered outside a church building on 29 August 2018 to stop local Christians from using the building for prayer purposes, claiming the building was not licenced by the authorities. The local Christian community had previously submitted a request to regularise the status of the building and change its name to 'The Church of Virgin Lady'.

A similar incident occurred on 24 August 2018 in the village of Ezzbet Sultan in Minya, where a mob gathered outside a building used by the local Christian community after Friday prayers, demanding its closure. Earlier, the Christian community had submitted an application to license the building for prayer. Police officers were deployed to contain the situation, and the head of the police force in Minya subsequently visited the village and encouraged community leaders to calm down and respect the rule of law.

Attack on Sufis

Egypt has approximately 15 million Sufis, whose practices are considered by ultra-conservative Sunni branches of Islam to be blasphemous.

On 24 November 2017 a group of gunmen thought to be affiliated with IS attacked Al Rawda Mosque in Bir al-Abed, 125 miles north-east of Cairo. At least 305 people were killed and 128 were injured in the attack on the mosque, which belongs to the Sufi community. In March, the branch of IS in Sinai had posted a video featuring militants beheading two elderly Sufi men accused of practising sorcery.

Laws against blasphemy and contempt of religion are increasingly used to target and prosecute members of the atheist community. In late December 2017 Amro Hamroush, head of the Egyptian parliament's Committee on Religion, introduced a bill to make atheism illegal, saying, "The phenomenon [of atheism] is being promoted in society as freedom of belief, when this is totally wrong."

In March 2018 an atheist named Mohammad Hashem, who had been invited to Alhadath Alyoum TV studio to take part in a debate, was shouted down and kicked out by the host. Former Deputy Sheikh of Al Azhar Mahmoud Ashour, who was also a guest on the show, recommended that Mr Hashem receive psychiatric treatment.

In an opinion piece published on 20 January in *Egypt Today*, the editor in chief of the influential daily equated atheism with terrorism, stating, 'Atheism and terror are equally destructive.'¹

On 5 May 2018 Sherif Gaber, a 25-year-old blogger, was arrested for the second time and placed in police detention. Two months earlier the conservative al-Nour Party had filed a blasphemy claim against him with the public prosecutor. Mr Gaber was released on 7 May and has since left the country. He was initially arrested in 2013, and sentenced in 2015 to one year in prison with hard labour for 'professed atheism', 'insulting' Islam and 'defending homosexuality'. He had been in hiding until his second arrest, as the first case was ongoing.

Improvements in freedom of religion or belief

Under President Sisi, there have been some advances in the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), but only for the Christian community.

Under the current constitution freedom of belief is declared to be 'absolute';² however, 'the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing places of worship' is limited to 'the followers of revealed religions', i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and 'is a right organized by law.' In other words, the right of approved faith communities to practise or outwardly manifest their religion is subject to government control.

In 2015 President Sisi became the first serving president in the country's history to attend a Coptic Christmas Mass when he addressed worshippers at St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo on 6 January 2015 – Christmas Eve in the Coptic calendar. He visited again on Christmas Eve 2016. On both occasions he delivered a unifying message of national solidarity and equality of citizenship.

In February 2015 the president responded to the murder of 20 Copts in Libya by IS by appearing on national television to announce seven days of national mourning, launching airstrikes on IS strongholds in Libya, and paying personal condolences to Pope Tawadros II. In December 2016 he again declared three days of national mourning, this time following the bombing of the Church of St Peter and St Paul, which adjoins St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo.

In 2016 the parliament approved a law aimed to make building and restoring churches easier. Additionally, the government gave legal approval to 53 churches and service buildings to carry out religious rituals.

¹ *Egypt Today*, 'The atheists are coming', 20 January 2018 www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/40633/OPINION-The-atheists-are-coming

² Article 64, Egyptian Constitution (2014)

Recommendations

- Encourage the Egyptian government to ensure that measures put in place to combat terrorism do not violate human rights, including the freedoms of association, expression and religion or belief.
- Call on the Egyptian government to ensure that all reports of attacks on religious minorities are thoroughly investigated, and that wherever possible, perpetrators are brought to justice.
- Urge the Egyptian government to ensure that sectarian violence is prevented when possible, proper investigations are launched after each attack, and that accusations of complicity of security forces are investigated thoroughly.
- Ensure that steps are taken to bring an end to ‘customary reconciliation meetings’, which are convened following instances of sectarian violence, and which generally deprive victims of the opportunity to access legal channels and adequate recompense.
- Call on the Egyptian government to end discriminatory and restrictive policies, including state-sponsored religious initiatives depicting certain minority faiths and atheism as threats; legislation banning certain minority faith groups; processes that make registration of conversion challenging and unnecessary restrictions on the work of NGOs.
- Urge the government to extend the recognition, protections and courtesies given to the Christian community to all religious minorities.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.