

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 significant economic deterioration.

Under the current constitution freedom of belief is declared to be 'absolute';¹ however, 'the freedom of practising 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.'

Moreover, in the mandatory ID card, Islam, Christianity and Judaism are the only available designations. Although a Supreme Administrative Court ruling in 2008 allowed Egypt's Baha'i community to receive these cards, their religious designation must be left blank.² Additionally, while ID cards can reflect conversion to Islam, several individuals who have sought to change their religious designation after leaving Islam for another faith or adopting atheism experienced repercussions that may have deterred others from taking similar action.

In 2015 President Sisi became the first serving president in the country's history to attend a Christmas Mass at St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo on Christmas Eve in the Coptic calendar. He did so again in 2016. While welcome, this high-level endorsement is yet to permeate to the wider society, where Christian communities in Upper Egypt in particular continue to experience restrictions and hostility from officials and occasional violence from non-state actors.

Terrorism

Terrorist attacks occur periodically in cities, but are mainly concentrated in the Sinai region, where groups including Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis, an affiliate of Islamic State (IS, Daesh), operate. Special measures introduced in response have contributed to a deterioration in the human rights climate, including a crackdown on civil society and the alleged torture by the security services of detainees in North Sinai.

In April 2017, the government declared a three-month state of emergency, three days of mourning and increased security following IS bomb attacks on two churches in northern Egypt. The first bomb was detonated inside St George's Church in the city of Tanta, 120km north of Cairo,

killing 27 people and wounding 78. 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 attacks were widely condemned, including by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, the UN Security Council and Pope Francis.

Egypt's Sufi community, whose practices are considered blasphemous by ultra-conservative Sunni branches of Islam, have also been targeted by terrorists. On 24 November 2017 a group of gunmen thought to be affiliated with IS attacked Al Rawda Mosque, which belongs to the Sufi community, in Bir al-Abed, north-east of Cairo. At least 305 people were killed and 128 were injured.

Mob violence

Church construction continues to be the main cause of sectarian tensions, particularly in Upper Egypt. Even when Christians have received permission to renovate or build new churches, local Muslims have blocked their attempts to do so. Consequently, they are forced either to abandon the project, or to make concessions, such as building churches without bells, which is a typical outcome of extra-legal reconciliation sessions that are backed by local authorities.

Other minority religion or belief groups

The Shi'a community regularly experience hate speech and, along with the Quranists,³ face discrimination and restrictions on the free exercise of their religious beliefs. The Ahmaddiya community, which is not considered to be part of mainstream Islam, is obliged, among other things, to meet in private homes. The Baha'i community experiences similar discrimination, and the lack of legal recognition means Baha'i marriages cannot be legally registered.⁴

Laws against blasphemy and contempt of religion are increasingly used to target and prosecute members of the atheist community, which is afforded no legal protections under the country's constitution and experiences hostility and stigmatisation. In late December 2017 Amro Hamroush, head of the parliamentary Committee on Religion, introduced a bill to make atheism illegal.

¹ Article 64, Egyptian Constitution (2014)

² The Guardian, Egypt's step towards freedom of belief: March 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/mar/17/egypt-religion>

³ Those who view the Quran as the sole source of Islamic law and guidance.

⁴ Minority Rights Group International, 'Justice Denied, Promises Broken: The Situation of Egypt's Minorities Since 2014', January 2019 <https://minorityrights.org/publications/justice-denied-promises-broken-the-situation-of-egypts-minorities-since-2014/>

Limited advances in freedom of religion or belief

In 2016 the Egyptian parliament approved the Church Construction Law, which is aimed at making the process of building and restoring churches easier. In May 2020 CSW reported that 70 church buildings had been legalised for worship purposes, bringing the total number of churches that have been legalised since the law came into force to 1638. In some cases, approved applications are conditional, and churches must fulfil further requirements regarding building construction, health and safety, and council taxes, in order to retain their status.

Recent developments

Targeting of human rights defenders

A stringent and intrusive NGO law, updated in 2020 limits their activities to “societal development,” while “political,” “religious” or any activities deemed to “violate public order” are illegal. As a result, the number of NGOs operating in Egypt has continued to fall significantly, while those that remain experience constant surveillance and harassment.

In November 2020 police carried out a series of raids in which they arrested three staff members of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), one of the few human rights organisations still operating in the country. The organisation works on several human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and gender equality. After international pressure to secure their freedom, the three men were released on bail on 4 December. They face similar spurious charges related to national security.

Coptic activist Rami Kamil was arrested by police who raided his house in Cairo in November 2019 and is facing terrorism-related charges. He has now been detained for over a year. Mr Kamil’s detention has been extended on numerous occasions, and his hearing before the Supreme State Security Prosecution has been delayed twice. It is widely believed he was targeted because of his human rights work documenting violations of the right to FoRB.

On 23 February 2021 the Criminal Court reviewed Mr Kamil’s case, along with that of an estimated 1,200 detainees. The following day, on 24 February, it decided to extend Mr Kamil detention, and that of the other detainees, by a further 45 days.

Sectarian tension

On 20 May 2020, local authorities demolished a church building in Koum Al-Farag, Al-Behera governorate, following sectarian protests in response to the church’s construction of two additional floors to accommodate the

growing congregation. To prevent further escalation, local authorities demolished both the church building and a mosque that was built next to it by local Muslims hoping to prevent it from being legalised as a church. 14 Christians, including the local priest and four women, were arrested when they tried to stop the authorities from demolishing the building.

On 5 October, Muslim extremists attacked the Coptic Community in the village of Dabbous in the Samalout suburb of Minya governorate, Upper Egypt, after a fight broke out at a Coptic wedding between some Copts and two Muslims from a neighbouring village. Perpetrators reportedly threw stones at the Christians and their homes, causing some property damage.

On 25 November, hundreds of Muslim villagers attacked the properties of local Christians in the village of Barsha in Minya following rumours that a Christian man had posted a comment on his personal Facebook page that was deemed insulting to Islam. The man in question claimed his page had been hacked. A minibus belonging to the local church was burnt, and several homes and properties were damaged.

Blasphemy cases

CSW noted an increase in the number of people arrested on charges related to contempt of religion and blasphemy during 2020. For example, on 21 June atheist blogger Anas Hussein appeared before a court in Alexandria charged with ‘defaming religion and the misuse of social media and managing a Facebook page for Egyptian atheists.’ He was sentenced to 3 years in prison and received a fine of 300,000 Egyptian Pounds (approximately £15,000).

On 12 November comedian Mohammad Ashraf, was arrested and accused of “contempt of religion and disturbing the public peace,” after mocking the presenters of a local Quran radio channel. Mr Ashraf was released on bail on 21 November.

Youssef Hani, a Christian teacher, and a Muslim girl named Sundos were also arrested on 12 November, following an exchange on Facebook which was deemed “insulting to Christianity and Islam.” They were released the next day after issuing apologies. CSW is aware of five similar cases.

Other cases

On 27 June 2020, two Shi’a men, Mustafa Al-Ramli and Mahmoud Youssef, were found guilty of ‘spreading and promoting’ the Shi’a School of Islam and each sentenced to one year in prison. They were initially arrested and taken to an unknown location on 16 May 2019.

On 17 December 2020, a criminal court in Minya, acquitted three men accused of attacking, beating and stripping Mrs

Suad Thabet, 72, from the village of Al-Karm. The men were alleged to have been part of a mob that attacked the Christian community in Al-Karm after Mrs Thabet's son was accused of having a relationship with a divorced Muslim woman. The men were initially sentenced to ten years in prison, but this sentence was suspended when the presiding judge resigned. On 17 December Egypt's prosecutor-general ordered his technical office to examine ways of appealing the verdict once the court had issued the reasoning behind it.

Recommendations

To the government of Egypt:

- Increase the number of police and security service personnel in Upper Egypt and ensure they proactively investigate reports and incidents of sectarian violence and other crimes targeting religious minorities, bringing perpetrators swiftly to justice through judicial processes.
- Monitor the policing of sectarian incidents in order to ensure that police do not discriminate in the course of their duties, and conduct themselves in accordance with international human rights standards for law enforcement.
- Initiate civic education programmes to provide human rights training for police and security service personnel, as well as for local communities.
- Amend the new legislation on church building and renovation by removing the expansive and ambiguous grounds on which an application can be refused.
- Extend revised legislation on church building and renovation to cover the houses of worship of every religious community.
- Review all cases in which defendants are facing charges of blasphemy, insulting religion, insulting Islam, disdain and contempt for 'divine' religions, and related charges under Article 98(f) of the penal code, including a review of the practices of judges and courts where these charges have been brought.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders (HRDs) detained or awaiting trial on charges derived from their civil society work, including Coptic activist Rami Kamil, and investigate cases of wrongful imprisonment.
- Immediately lift travel bans on, and unfreeze assets, of HRDs, individuals from civil society, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- Urgently amend the NGO law in line with international norms and standards.