

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.'

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 rest of 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.

The government declared a three-month state of emergency, three days of mourning and increased security following IS attacks on two churches in northern Egypt on 9 April 2017. The first bomb was detonated inside St George's Church in the city of Tanta, 120km north of Cairo. 27 people were killed and 78 wounded. 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.

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.

Mob violence

Church construction continues to be the main cause of sectarian tension, 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 either forced to abandon the project, or to make concessions, such as building churches without a bell, which is a typical outcome of extra-legal reconciliation sessions that are backed by local authorities.

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 Christian community into a church. Two Christians and a firefighter were injured, four Christian properties were damaged severely.

Attacks 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 which belongs to the Sufi community in Bir al-Abed, north-east of Cairo. At least 305 people were killed and 128 were injured.

Other minority faith communities

The Shi'a community regularly experience hate speech and, along with the Quranists,² 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.³

¹ Article 64, Egyptian Constitution (2014)

² Those who view the Quran as the sole source of Islamic law and guidance.

³ 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/>

Targeting of atheists

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 parliamentary Committee on Religion, introduced a bill to make atheism illegal.

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 April 2020 CSW's sources report that 5540 applications for legalising church buildings have been submitted since the law came into force and the total number of approved applications now stands at 1,568. In some cases, approved applications are conditional and churches will have to fulfil further requirements regarding building construction, health and safety, and council taxes, in order to retain their status.

Recent developments

Coptic activist Rami Kamil was arrested by police who raided his house in Cairo during the early hours of 23 November 2019, and is facing terrorism-related charges. It is widely believed that was targeted because of his human rights work documenting violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Mr Kamil's hearing before the Supreme State Security Prosecution has been delayed twice. CSW's sources believe this may be a deliberate ploy to prolong the process and increase psychological pressure on the defendant and his lawyers.

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).