

Legal framework

Egypt's constitution declares that the right to freedom of belief is 'absolute'; however, it limits 'the freedom of practising religious rituals and establishing places of worship' to 'the followers of revealed religions', i.e., Christianity, Islam and Judaism. As such, other religious and belief groups, including Ahmadis, Atheists, Baha'is and Quranists, do not enjoy the same legal and constitutional protections.

All Egyptians are required to carry ID cards; however, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are the only available religious designations. In 2009 the Minister of Interior issued an order allowing authorities to use a 'dash' sign in personal documents to indicate that a person belongs to an unrecognised religious or belief group (Order 520); however, these groups still face a raft of difficulties and discrimination, including restrictions on meeting for worship, denial of legal registration of marriages, and denial of burial rights. Egypt's Shi'a minority experiences similar restrictions.

The Egyptian Penal Code (Law 58 (1937)) criminalises contempt of religion. Article 98(f), as amended in 2006, states: 'Whoever exploits religion in order to promote extremist ideologies by word of mouth, in writing or in any other manner, with a view to stirring up sedition, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity shall be punished with imprisonment between six months and five years or paying a fine of at least 500 Egyptian pounds.' The broad and equivocal terminology in this article allows charges to be brought for ambiguously defined offences, and has been increasingly used to target and prosecute members of the atheist community in particular.

Limited advances in freedom of religion or belief

In 2015 President Abdel Fattah Al-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. The president has also made repeated personal commitments regarding combatting sectarianism and discrimination against the Christian community; however, these sentiments are yet to permeate to the wider society.

In 2016 the Egyptian parliament approved the Church Construction Law, which is aimed at making the process of building and restoring churches easier. As of October 2024 the government committee overseeing the legalisation of churches had approved 3,453 applications out of the 5,540 that it had received since it began its mandate in 2017.¹ 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.

On 31 August 2023 Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly opened Abraham Ben Ezra Synagogue, one of the oldest synagogues in Egypt, after it had been renovated following the government's 2018 pledge of 1.25 billion Egyptian Pounds towards renovating and preserving Jewish religious

and cultural sites in the country. On 15 September 2023 the Jewish community in Cairo was able to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, for the first time in 70 years.

Despite limited advances in relation to the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in recent years, challenges remain for many religious and belief groups, and there has also been a progressive deterioration in the overall human rights situation since the Revolution of 25 January 2011.

Sectarian violence

Violence often manifests along sectarian lines, particularly in Upper Egypt, where church construction remains the primary source of tension. In numerous cases in which 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.

On 6 January 2024, for example, an extremist mob burned and destroyed a temporary church building in the village of Misha'at Zaafaranah in Abu Qarqas, Minya Governorate, Upper Egypt. Local Christians had been using the structure as a place of worship for four months after submitting every document required to obtain a permit, and it had been erected within the brick boundaries of land belonging to the church after they received no objection from the security services.

On 26 April 2024 an extremist mob attacked the construction site of a new Evangelical church in Al-Kom Al-Ahmar village in Minya Governorate, destroying the building's foundations and sewage system. The mob also attacked homes and properties belonging to Christians in the village, although no one was hurt. Christians in the village had obtained all the necessary paperwork and permissions to build the church, and construction had begun on 22 April with a police presence on the site.

The Egyptian authorities are often slow to address sectarian tensions, and to hold perpetrators of violence to account. In many cases, local authorities hold extra-legal 'reconciliation' sessions which impose ad-hoc, unjust and often unconstitutional conditions on the victims of sectarian violence, while failing to punish perpetrators adequately and thereby perpetuating impunity.

In November 2024 three Christian men were hospitalised after they were reportedly attacked by four Muslim men wielding knives and machetes in Ashruba Village in Bani Mazar, Minya Governorate. The three men were taken to the University Hospital in Minya, while some of the attackers were arrested by the police.

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), operate. Special measures introduced in response to the terrorist threat have contributed to a deterioration in the overall

1 Amnesty International, 'Egypt 2024' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/report-egypt/>

human rights climate, and have included a crackdown on civil society and the alleged torture by the security services of detainees in North Sinai.

Targeting of human rights defenders and activists

The authorities continue to crack down on individuals and organisations they perceive as critical of them. 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.

Numerous activists have been arrested and detained, in some cases for longer than the maximum threshold for pre-trial detention permitted under Article 143 of Egypt's Code of Criminal Procedure. Trials are often delayed repeatedly, while many activists have had their detention extended on multiple occasions.

Among those currently imprisoned is Quranist reformist thinker and lawyer Ahmad Abdo Maher, who was convicted of 'contempt of religion and disturbing public peace' and sentenced to five years in prison by an exceptional court in Cairo on 17 November 2021. Mr Maher's work has involved critical research into many controversial issues in Islamic history and theology, and he has been particularly critical of Islamic jurisprudence, the Islamic conquest and the slave trade that accompanied it. His nephew and fellow Quranist, Reda Abdel Rahman, was released from the police station at Kafr Saqr in Al-Sharqiya Governorate on 23 February 2022 after 18 months in pre-trial detention during which he is reported to have suffered mistreatment.

Recommendations

To the government of Egypt:

- Review all cases where defendants are facing blasphemy or related charges under Article 98(f) of the penal code, including a review of the practices of judges and courts where such charges have been brought.
- 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 minority communities, bringing perpetrators swiftly to justice through judicial processes.
- Extend revised legislation on church building and renovation to cover the houses of worship of every religious community.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders (HRDs) detained or awaiting trial on charges derived from their civil society work.

- Respect the legal stipulations for pre-trial detention.
- Urgently amend the NGO law in line with international norms and standards.
- Issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, ensuring they have unhindered access to all parts of the country and are able to meet with members of civil society without reprisal.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Mainstream human rights at every level of dialogue and diplomacy. This should include raising specific cases of HRDs and victims of FoRB violations, such as the sentencing of Ahmad Abdo Maher.
- Embassy officials in Cairo must endeavour to visit victims in prison, and to attend hearings where possible.
- Dialogues with Egyptian authorities should include calls for recognition and/or legal guarantees for unrecognised religious groups such as Ahmadis, Atheists, Baha'is and Quranists, including to burial and other basic rights.
- Urge the government of Egypt, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above 'To the government of Egypt'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Call on the government of Egypt to protect and uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by amending Article 64 of the constitution and repealing Law 263 (1960) on religious minorities, in accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), noting the recommendations of General Comment 22.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Egypt, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities, and those seeking to assist them.
- Call on Egypt to immediately lift travel bans and unfreeze the assets of HRDs, other individuals from civil society, and non-governmental organisations, and to condemn reprisals faced by those seeking to engage with the UN on the country's human rights situation.
- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention, follow court proceedings, and call on Egypt to protect all persons from arbitrary detention and to guarantee the right to a fair trial.
- Urge the government of Egypt, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Egypt'.

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free to believe**