

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, humanists 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.

In addition, laws against blasphemy and 'contempt of religion' are vaguely defined and have been increasingly used to target and prosecute members of the atheist community in particular. In late December 2017 Amro Hamroush, head of the parliamentary Committee on Religion, introduced a bill to make atheism illegal. This was unsuccessful.

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 to combatting sectarianism and religious discrimination between citizens, however these welcome moves 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. In August 2021, Fides News Agency [reported](#) that 1958 churches had been legalised for worship purposes since the law came into force. 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.

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 in Egypt, and there has been a progressive deterioration in the overall country's 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.

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.

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 to the terrorist threat have contributed to a deterioration in the overall 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.

In January 2022 Egyptian authorities released Coptic activist Rami Kamil after he had spent more than two years in pre-trial detention following his arrest in Cairo in November 2019. Mr Kamil is a prominent human rights activist and a founding member and coordinator of the Maspero Youth Union, a Coptic human rights organisation that emerged following the Maspero massacre of October 2011, in which over 20 Coptic protesters were killed when the military attacked a peaceful civil rights protest. It is widely believed he was targeted because of his human rights work documenting violations of the right to FoRB.

Among those currently imprisoned is Quranist reformist thinker and lawyer Ahmad Abdou 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 is known for his criticisms of the situation of freedom of speech and FoRB in the Arab and Muslim Worlds. His nephew and fellow Quranist, Reda Abdel Rahman, was released from the police station at Kafr Saqr in Egypt's Al-Sharqiya governorate on 23

February 2022 after 18 months in pre-trial detention, where he is reported to have suffered mistreatment.

According to Article 143 of Egypt's Code of Criminal Procedure, the maximum period of pre-trial detention must not exceed six months for defendants accused of crimes punishable by up to three years in prison, 18 months for crimes punishable by up to 15 years in prison and two years for crimes meriting death or life imprisonment.

Recommendations

To the government of Egypt:

- Review all cases in which 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 minority religious 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.

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 by repealing Law 263 (1960) on religious minorities, in accordance with the freedoms laid out in 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 religion or belief communities and those seeking to assist them.
- Call on Egypt to immediately lift travel bans and unfreeze the assets of human rights defenders and individuals from civil society and non-governmental organisations, and to condemn reprisals faced by those seeking to engage with the UN on the human rights situation.

- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention, follow court proceedings and call on Egypt to protect all persons from arbitrary detention and guarantee the right to a fair trial.

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, and the case of Reda Abdel Rahman.
- Embassy officials 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 Humanists, Bahai's and Ahmadis, including to burial and other basic rights.

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