

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt

Executive Summary

The constitution states, “Freedom of belief is absolute” and “The freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine religions [i.e., the three Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism] is a right regulated by law.” The constitution states citizens “are equal before the law” and criminalizes discrimination and “incitement to hatred” based upon “religion, belief, sex, origin, race...or any other reason.” The constitution also states, “Islam is the religion of the state...and the principles of Islamic sharia are the main sources of legislation.” The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and allows only their adherents to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. The constitution stipulates the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. Authorities executed Ahmad Saeed Ibrahim al-Sonbati on June 21 for the 2017 premeditated killing of Coptic priest Father Samaan Shehata of the church of Yulius al-Aqfahsi in the village of Ezbet Girgis, Beni Suef Governorate. In October, Alexandria’s criminal court sentenced brothers Nasser and Ali al-Sambo to life in prison for the December 2020 killing of Coptic Christian Ramsis Boulos Hermina. On February 10, the Court of Cassation upheld 15-year prison sentences for 10 defendants who participated in a 2013 church burning in Kafr Hakim, Giza Governorate. Minya’s Criminal Court on June 15 sentenced 10 defendants to five-year prison terms on charges of “vandalism, violence, and burning the homes of Coptic citizens” during a 2016 sectarian riot in the village of Karm in Minya. A court on November 17 sentenced lawyer Ahmed Abdou Maher to five years in prison with hard labor for defaming Islam in his book, *How the Imams’ Jurisprudence Is Leading the Nation Astray*, and for comments he made to BBC TV and al-Mayadeen TV. In June, the Economic Misdemeanor Appeals Court in Alexandria rejected an appeal submitted on behalf of atheist activist and blogger Anas Hassan contesting a February 27 verdict sentencing him to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 pounds (\$19,100) for managing “The Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page. Authorities twice renewed Quranist Reda Abdel Rahman’s detention. Al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb and Coptic Pope Tawadros II hosted a celebration marking the 10th anniversary of Family House, a foundation established after the 2011 suicide bombing at Alexandria’s All Saints Church and dedicated to communal reconciliation. In December, authorities banned Shia activist Haidar Kandil, a reporter for *al-Dustour* newspaper, from travelling to Moscow where he planned to seek employment. On September 25, the Supreme Administrative Court issued a final verdict that banned the use of mosques for political purposes and upheld the state’s right to supervise them. According to analysis by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, the government continued to ban the importation and sale of Baha’i and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature, and authorized customs officials to confiscate religious materials from the groups’ adherents. The Mansoura Emergency State Security Misdemeanor Court on December 7 ordered the release of Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) researcher Patrick George Zaki after 22 months of pretrial detention pending an investigation on charges related to his 2019 article on anti-Copt discrimination. The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities opened the first stop on the 2,100-mile Holy Family Trail, the biblical route believed to have been taken by Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. In September, the government launched its National Strategy for Human Rights, which contained a section dedicated to “Freedom of Religion and Belief” prescribing steps to reform religious discourse and promote religious tolerance. In December, press reported the Ministry of Justice sent the draft Personal Status Law for Christians to the cabinet for approval. The cabinet had not sent the draft legislation to the House of Representatives at year’s end. Coptic human rights attorneys filed a lawsuit on August 25 demanding the Minister of Interior’s Civil Status Department remove the “religion” field from the national ID card.

In April, ISIS-Sinai Peninsula (ISIS-SP) released a video that documented the killing of Nabil Habashi, a local Coptic Christian and cofounder of the only church in the district of Bir al-Abd, one of the focal points of ISIS-SP operations. On July 27, Copt Shenouda Salah Asaad was stabbed to death, allegedly by a Salafist neighbor, in Assiut Governorate. In April, sectarian clashes in al-Mudmar village in Sohag Governorate resulted in at least one death and six injuries that required hospitalization. A July report by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Coptic Solidarity stated that out of 141 athletes on the

national Olympic team that competed in the 2020 Tokyo games (held in 2021), only one was a Copt. Reuters reported that the country's first all-female Muslim recitation choir, al-Hour, is challenging "deep-rooted taboos about women singing in public or reciting from the Quran."

The Ambassador, other embassy representatives, and senior U.S. government officials met with government officials and religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with the Grand Mufti, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, bishops, and senior pastors of the Coptic Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican churches, and the Jewish community. In these meetings, embassy officers emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised concerns, including reports of harassment of religious converts, prospective changes to the country's personal status law, lack of recognition for Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, and the continued use of religious designations on national identity cards.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 106.4 million (midyear 2021). Most experts and media sources estimate that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and 10 percent is Christian. Approximately 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders.

Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population. These include Anglican/Episcopalian, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Latin, and Syrian), and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) Churches. Most Protestant denominations are members of the umbrella group known as the Protestant Churches of Egypt, also known as the General Evangelical Council. These include the Apostolic Grace, Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Baptists, Brethren, Christian Model Church (al-Mithaal al-Masihi), Church of Christ, Faith (al-Eyman), Gospel Missionary (al-Kiraaza bil-Ingil), First Grace (al-Ni'ma al-Oula), Second Grace (al-Ni'ma al-Thaneya), Independent Baptist, Message Church of Holland (ar-Risaala), Open Brethren, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), and Seventh-day Adventists. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and fewer than 100 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the vast majority of whom are expatriates. Christians reside throughout the country.

Scholars estimate that Shia Muslims comprise approximately 1 percent of the population. Baha'i representatives estimate the size of their community to be between 1,000 and 2,000 persons. There are very small numbers of Dawoodi Bohra Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims as well as expatriate members of various other religious groups.

According to a local Jewish NGO, there are six to 10 Jews in the country.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists; in 2020, local media sources quoted a former Minister of Culture and a scholar at al-Azhar University estimating numbers of atheists at "several million" and "four million," respectively.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation. The constitution states that "freedom of belief is absolute" and "the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of divine [Abrahamic] religions is a right regulated by law." The constitution also states citizens "are equal before the law," prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, and makes "incitement to hatred" based upon "religion, belief, sex, origin, race...or any other reason" a crime. The constitution prohibits political activity or the formation of political parties based on religion. The constitution also states, "No political activity may be engaged in, or political parties formed, on the basis of religion, or discrimination [be permitted] based on sex, origin, sect, or geographic location."

The government officially recognizes Sunni Islam, Christianity, and Judaism and allows only their adherents as defined by the government to publicly practice their religion and build houses of worship. The constitution defines al-Azhar, the main authority on theology and Islamic affairs, as "an independent scientific Islamic institution with exclusive competence over its own affairs... It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language" worldwide. Al-Azhar's Grand Imam is elected by al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars and is officially

appointed by the President for a life term. The President does not have the authority to dismiss him. The constitution declares al-Azhar to be an independent institution and requires the government to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes.”

According to the law, capital sentences must be referred to the Grand Mufti, the country's highest Islamic legal official, for consultation before they can be carried out. The Grand Mufti's decision in these cases is consultative and nonbinding on the court that handed down the sentence.

The constitution stipulates the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. Individuals are subject to different sets of personal status laws (regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) depending upon their official religious designation. The Ministry of Interior issues national identity cards that include official religious designations. Designations are limited to Muslim, Christian, or Jewish citizens. Although the government designates Jehovah's Witnesses as “Christian” on identity cards, a presidential decree bans their religious activities. Since a 2009 court order, Baha'is' religious affiliation is denoted by a dash (“-”) on national identity cards. The Minister of Interior has the authority to issue executive regulations determining what data national identity cards must list.

Neither the constitution nor the civil or penal codes prohibit apostasy from Islam, nor efforts to proselytize. The law states individuals may change their religion. However, the government recognizes conversion to Islam, but generally not from Islam to any other religion. The government recognizes conversion from Islam for individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam, according to a Ministry of Interior decree pursuant to a court order. Reverting to Christianity requires presentation of a document from the receiving church, an identity card, and fingerprints. After a determination is made that the intent of the change – which often also entails a name change – is not to evade prosecution for a crime committed under the Muslim name, a new identity document is issued with the Christian name and religious designation. In cases in which Muslims not born Muslim convert from Islam, their minor children, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, remain classified as Muslims. When these children reach the age of 18, they have the option of converting to Christianity and having that reflected on their identity cards.

The law stipulates Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslim men who wish to marry Muslim women must convert to Islam. Christian and Jewish women are not required to convert to Islam in order to marry Muslim men. A married non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce her husband if he is not Muslim and is unwilling to convert. If a married man is discovered to have left Islam, his marriage to a woman whose official religious designation is Muslim is dissolved.

A divorced mother is entitled to custody of her son until the age of 15 and her daughter until she marries. The children's father has the right to petition the court to ask the children to choose between staying with their mother or father, unless one parent is Muslim and the other is not, in which case the Muslim parent is awarded custody.

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim citizens, with documentation from a cleric, and does not recognize civil marriage between Egyptian citizens. Marriages of Shia are recognized as Muslim. The government recognizes civil marriages of Baha'is, as well as of individuals from other unrecognized religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, if one or both are foreigners. Authorities deny Baha'is the rights of married couples pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse. In practice, however, Baha'is have reported occasional success in filing individual petitions for recognition of their marriages in civil court.

The law generally follows sharia in matters of inheritance. In 2017, however, an appellate court ruled applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that personal status matters for Christian and Jewish communities are governed by their respective religious doctrine.

According to the penal code, using religion to promote extremist thought with the aim of inciting strife; demeaning or denigrating Islam, Christianity, or Judaism; or harming national unity carries penalties ranging from six months to five years' imprisonment.

There are four entities currently authorized to issue fatwas (religious rulings binding on Muslims): the al-Azhar Council of Senior Scholars, the al-Azhar Islamic Research Academy, the Dar al-Iftaa (House of Religious Edicts), and the Ministry of Awqaf's (Islamic endowments) General Fatwa Directorate. While a part of the Ministry of Justice, Dar al-Iftaa has been an independent organization since 2007.

Islamic, Christian, and Jewish denominations may request official recognition from the government, which gives previously unrecognized religious groups the right to be governed by their own canonical laws, practice religious rituals, establish houses of worship, and import religious literature.

To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the Ministry of the Interior's Administrative Affairs Department. The department then determines whether the group poses a threat to national unity or social peace. As part of this determination, the department consults leading religious institutions, including the Coptic Orthodox Church and al-Azhar. The President then reviews and adjudicates the registration application.

The law does not recognize the Baha'i Faith or its religious laws, and it bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. The law does not stipulate any penalties for banned religious groups or their members who engage in religious practices, but these groups are barred from rights granted to recognized groups, such as having their own houses of worship or other property, holding bank accounts, or importing religious literature.

The government, through the Ministry of Awqaf, appoints, pays the salaries of, and monitors imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques. According to the law, penalties for preaching or giving religious lessons without a license from the Ministry of Awqaf or al-Azhar include a prison term of up to one year, a fine of up to 50,000 pounds (\$3,200), or both. The penalty doubles for repeat offenders. Ministry of Awqaf inspectors also have judicial authority to arrest imams violating this law. A ministry decree prevents unlicensed imams from preaching in any mosque, prohibits holding Friday prayers in mosques smaller than 80 square meters (860 square feet), bans unlicensed mosques from holding Friday prayer services (other prayer services are permitted), and pays bonuses to imams who deliver Friday sermons written and disseminated by the Ministry of Awqaf. Ministry personnel monitor Friday sermons in major mosques and an imam who fails to follow the guidelines for ministry sermons may lose the bonus and be subject to disciplinary measures, including potentially losing his preaching license.

The Prime Minister has the authority to stop the circulation of books that "denigrate religions." Ministries may obtain court orders to ban or confiscate books and works of art. The cabinet may ban works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Academy of al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and confiscate any publications dealing with the Quran and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*sunnah*) and to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law.

A 2016 law delegates the power to issue legal permits and to authorize church construction or renovation to governors of the country's 27 governorates. The governor is to respond within four months of receipt of an application for legalization; any refusal must include a written justification. The law does not provide for review or appeal of a refusal, nor does it specify recourse if a governor fails to respond within the required timeframe. The law also includes provisions to legalize existing unlicensed churches. It stipulates that while a request to license an existing building for use as a church is pending, the use of the building to conduct church services and rites may not be prevented. Under the law, the size of new churches continues to depend on a government determination of the "number and need" of Christians in the area. Construction of new churches must meet specific land registration procedures and building codes and is subject to greater government scrutiny than that applied to the construction of new mosques.

Under a separate law governing the construction of mosques, the Ministry of Awqaf reviews and approves building permits. A 2001 cabinet decree includes a list of 10 provisions requiring that new mosques built after that date must, among other conditions, be a minimum of 500 meters (1,640 feet) from the nearest other mosque, have a ground surface of at least 175 square meters (1,900 square feet), and be built only in areas where "the existing mosques do not accommodate the number of residents in the area." The law does not require Ministry of Awqaf approval for mosque renovations.

In public schools, Muslim students are required to take courses on "principles of Islam" and Christian students are required to take courses on "principles of Christianity" in all grades. Schools determine the religious identity of students, and the religious studies courses they should take is based on official identity card designations, not personal or parental decisions. Students who are neither Muslim nor Christian must choose one or the other course; they may not opt out or change from one to the other once selected. A common set of textbooks for these two courses is mandated for both public and private schools, including parochial schools. Al-Azhar maintains a separate school system that serves an estimated two million students from kindergarten through secondary school using its own curriculum.

The penal code criminalizes discrimination based on religion and defines it as including "any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to... religion or belief." The law stipulates imprisonment, a fine of no less than 30,000 pounds (\$1,900) and no more than 50,000 pounds (\$3,200), or both, as penalties for discrimination. If the perpetrator is a public servant, the law states that the imprisonment should be no less than three months and the fine no less than 50,000 pounds (\$3,200) and no more than 100,000 pounds (\$6,400).

Customary reconciliation is a form of dispute resolution that predates the country's modern judicial and legal systems and is recognized in the law in instances that do not involve serious crimes (i.e., homicide, serious injury, or theft). Customary reconciliation sessions rely on the accumulation of a set of customary rules to address conflicts between individuals, families, households, or workers and employees of certain professions. Parties to disputes agree upon a resolution that typically contains stipulations to pay an agreed-upon amount of money for breaching the terms of the agreement.

In matters of family law, when spouses are members of the same religious denomination, courts apply that denomination's canonical laws. In cases where one spouse is Muslim and the other a member of a different religion, both are Christians but members of different denominations, or the individuals are not clearly a part of a religious group, the courts apply sharia.

Sharia provisions forbidding adoption apply to all citizens. The Ministry of Social Solidarity, however, manages a program called "Alternative Family" which recognizes permanent legal guardianship if certain conditions are met, including requirements that the guardians share the same religion as the child and have been married to one another for a minimum of five years.

The quasigovernmental National Council for Human Rights, whose members are appointed by parliament under a 2016 law, is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It also is charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements pertaining to human rights. The council's mandate includes investigating reports of alleged violations of religious freedom.

The 2014 constitution mandates that the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by parliament, but the parliament has not yet established such a commission.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights but declared in a reservation that it became a party considering that the provisions of the covenant do not conflict with sharia.

Government Practices

Authorities executed Ahmad Saeed Ibrahim al-Sonbati on June 21 for the 2017 killing of Coptic priest Father Samaan Shehata, of the church of Yulius al-Aqfahsi, in the village of Ezbet Girgis in Beni Suef Governorate. Sonbati's 2017 death sentence was confirmed by the court of appeals in 2018 and received final approval on November 9, 2020 from the Court of Cassation, the country's highest court.

In October, the Alexandria Criminal Court sentenced to life in prison brothers Nasser and Ali al-Sambo for the December 2020 killing of Coptic Christian Ramsis Boulos Hermina in Alexandria. Hermina was attacked in his plastics and household goods shop. According to press reporting, Nasser and Ali Sambo and their brother Anwar had a reputation in their neighborhood for harassment of Coptic shop owners.

On February 10, the Court of Cassation upheld a 15-year prison sentence for 10 defendants who participated in a 2013 church burning in Kafr Hakim, Giza Governorate.

On October 11, the Court of Cassation dismissed the first appeal submitted by the defendants convicted of the 2013 arson attack on Mar Girgis Church in Sohag city and originally sentenced in 2015 and 2020 by the Criminal Court to 3 to 15 years' imprisonment. Authorities charged the defendants with assaulting Christian places of worship, destroying and burning police cars, possession of firearms and ammunition without a license, attempted theft, assaulting public and private property and shops, inciting violence, vandalism, and intimidating citizens.

According to press reporting, the Minya Criminal Court on June 15 sentenced 10 defendants to five-year prison terms on charges of "vandalism, violence, and burning the homes of Coptic citizens" during a 2016 sectarian riot in the village of Karm in Minya Governorate, and acquitted 14 others, citing lack of evidence. The June 15 court verdicts were linked to a separate attack on Souad Thabet, an elderly Christian woman whom attackers stripped and dragged through the village of Karm during 2016 rioting. Authorities originally charged four persons with attacking Thabet, and another 25 with attacking Thabet's home and six other Christian-owned homes in response to rumors that her son had an affair with the wife of a Muslim business partner. In January 2020, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced three defendants in absentia to ten years' imprisonment for the attack on Thabet. After the men surrendered, the Minya court returned the case to the Beni Suef Criminal Court for retrial. When that court acquitted the three defendants in December 2020, the Prosecutor General subsequently filed an appeal with the Court of Cassation in January. At year's end, no session had been called to examine the appeal.

BBC Arabic aired an interview on November 25 with Ahmed Abdou Maher, described as a “lawyer, researcher, and writer,” whom a court sentenced on November 17 to five years in prison with hard labor for defaming Islam in his book, *How the Imams’ Jurisprudence Is Leading the Nation Astray*. Maher told the interviewer that his book did not include a word of extremism, blasphemy, or incitement against Islam; rather, it only criticized what he called Islam’s “blood-soaked ideology.” In a separate interview, Abdou told al-Mayadeen TV that the Islamic “nation” was “static,” and that “enlightenment” required courage. According to media reports, “liberals” defended him and insisted that his prosecution was “a disgrace” and “an assault on freedom of thought and expressions.” Activists and NGOs responded to the case by calling for the abolition of the country’s blasphemy law, with some estimating there had been 130 cases of blasphemy during the last 10 years, with penalties ranging from six months to five years in prison.

On June 21, the Economic Misdemeanor Appeals Court in Alexandria rejected an appeal submitted on behalf of atheist activist and blogger Anas Hassan of a February 27 verdict sentencing him to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 300,000 pounds (\$19,100) for managing “The Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page. Authorities originally arrested Hassan in 2019 for publishing atheist ideas and criticizing the “divinely revealed religions.” According to a local civil society group, Hassan’s next court session was set for February 2022.

The detention of human rights advocate Ramy Kamel Saied Salib (commonly known solely as Ramy Kamel) continued. Authorities originally arrested Salib in November 2019 following his application for a Swiss visa to speak at a UN forum in Geneva, where he had previously presented issues affecting the Coptic community. The government charged him with joining a banned group and spreading false news. On October 10 and again on November 27, a Cairo court renewed his detention for 45 days. Kamel’s defense team said he was subjected to harsh conditions of imprisonment, including solitary confinement, that may have endangered his health.

On October 12 and again on November 27, authorities renewed Quranist Reda Abdel Rahman’s detention. During the year, the courts heard several appeals submitted by Abdel Rahman’s defense team to release him. Quranists (*Quraniyyun*) believe the Quran is the sole source of Islamic law and reject the authenticity and authority of the *hadith* (the body of sayings and traditions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed). The NGO EIPR called for Abdel-Rahman’s release and for dropping the charges against him.

In September, the government released four prominent Salafi preachers who were members of a political group arrested in 2019. Authorities had charged Mahmoud Shaaban, Ashraf Abdel Moneim, Hisham Mashali, and Saad Fayyad with “inciting violence and joining a terrorist group.” Shortly after their release, the government rearrested Shaaban and charged him with inciting violence, joining a group seeking to disrupt the country’s constitution and laws, and harming social peace. His case remained pending at year’s end.

On September 8, social media activists posted videos of the demolition of a 4,300-square-foot unlicensed church building in the village of Bastra, Beheira Governorate. As reported by the Coptic newspaper *Watani*, the city council in Beheira’s capital Damanhour implemented the removal order in cooperation with local security forces. Clashes between parishioners and security forces as the demolition order was carried out resulted in at least four injuries and the arrest of 21 Coptic protestors, who were subsequently released; no interreligious community violence was reported because of the building’s demolition. Observers, including Coptic Church officials, and administrators blamed local clergy for not having gone through official registration channels to erect the building.

On November 8, al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb and Coptic Pope Tawadros II hosted a celebration marking the 10th anniversary of the government-sponsored Family House (*Beit al-Aila*), a foundation established after the 2011 suicide bombing at Alexandria’s All Saints Church. Family House’s mission is “preserving the fabric of Muslim-Christian unity within Egyptian society and upholding the principles of coexistence and tolerance,” principally through communal reconciliation efforts. Former president Adly Mansour attended, as did the Minister of Justice, who delivered a speech on behalf of the Prime Minister. In remarks at the event, al-Tayyeb said that freedom of religion was “one of the most precious human rights.” According to press reporting, Tawadros II said at the event, “God did not grant religion to man for the sake of rivalry, but rather for the sake of cooperation.” Muslim and Christian religious leaders said Family House was very active in some areas, such as Assiut Governorate, while in others, such as Cairo and Alexandria, it was much less engaged.

While the Coptic Orthodox Church did not bar participation in government-sponsored customary reconciliation sessions, a Church spokesperson said reconciliation sessions should not be used in lieu of the application of the law and should be restricted to “clearing the air and making amends” following sectarian disputes or violence. At least one Coptic Orthodox diocese in Upper Egypt continued to refuse to participate in reconciliation sessions, criticizing them as substitutes for criminal proceedings rather than a means of addressing attacks on Christians and their churches.

Other Christian denominations continued to participate in customary reconciliation sessions. Human rights groups and some Christian community representatives characterized reconciliation sessions as encroachment on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship, and that Christian participants were regularly pressured to retract their statements and deny facts, leading in some cases to the dropping of criminal charges.

Some Christians expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly did not declare Easter, May 2, as an official holiday for state workers. Instead, he announced it would be a day off from work in order to prevent overcrowding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Citing the article (No. 53) in the constitution that says that the state shall take all necessary measures to eliminate discrimination, human rights activists said that basic religious holidays should be official ones for all citizens and should be referred to as such. The government had not previously designated Easter as a holiday.

Efforts to combat atheism received official support. In 2019, al-Azhar founded a Bayan (Declaration) Unit in its Center for Electronic Fatwa to “counter atheism” and prevent youth from “falling into disbelief.” As of the end of the year, the unit remained active. During the year, its activities included posting more than 15,000 social media comments intended to refute atheist opinions.

On October 18, the Supreme Administrative Court postponed hearing an appeal filed by the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) against an administrative court’s 2020 ruling that obligated the NTRA to block Shia websites in general, and the *Ibn al-Nafis* news website in particular, from the internet, until a November 15 hearing. The case was pending at year’s end.

In August, a religious leader in the Presbyterian community said police stopped dozens of converts on their way to a church retreat, confiscated IDs, and detained and interrogated some parishioners. While all detainees were ultimately released, the leader said many continued to be subject to harassment and occasional detention.

EIPR called on September 9 for the release of Coptic Christian Gerges Samih Zaki Ebeid and the dropping of charges against him for having written a post on his personal Facebook account described by villagers, social media commenters, and prosecutors as offensive to Islam. On September 7 and again on November 24, a court renewed Samih’s detention for 45 days, pending an investigation into allegations he had joined a terrorist group, spread false news with the aim of disturbing the public peace, and used an online account with the intention of committing a crime. Authorities arrested Samih in Delta Governorate in November 2020 following sectarian violence in the village of al-Barsha, in Mallawy District of southern Minya Governorate that had resulted from the Facebook post. Following interreligious clashes, the Minya Public Prosecutor detained 35 defendants, including 15 Copts and 20 Muslims, for 15 days pending investigations, releasing them on January 12, pending further questioning.

Members of the country’s Shia community said that they risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing their religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought.

The government has designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization (the government in 2013 banned the Muslim Brotherhood’s political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party). On June 14, the Court of Cassation upheld death sentences for 12 senior Muslim Brotherhood leaders including Mohamed al-Beltagy, Safwat Hegazy, and Abdel-Rahman al-Bar, following a mass trial of 739 persons for their participation in large-scale antigovernment sit-ins in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in July and August 2013. On July 11, the Cassation Court upheld the 2019 sentencing of 10 Muslim Brotherhood leaders, including the group’s Supreme Guide, Mohammed Badie, to life imprisonment on charges of “killing policemen, organizing mass jail breaks, and undermining national security by conspiring with foreign militant groups, including Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah” during unrest in 2011. On April 8, a court sentenced Mahmoud Ezzat, former acting Supreme Guide, to life in prison. Media reported the court convicted Ezzat on terrorism-related charges stemming from 2013 clashes between Brotherhood supporters and their opponents in Cairo. In an April 8 statement, the Brotherhood denounced the verdict as politicized and based upon fabrications and described Ezzat as a “devoted religious leader.”

On July 12, the parliament passed legislation, signed into law by the President on August 1, that allowed the dismissal of any public employee found to have undermined national security, or whom the government has listed as a member of a terrorist organization. Press and NGOs said the new law targeted the Muslim Brotherhood. On July 26, the Supreme Council of Universities directed university presidents in the country to prepare and submit lists of employees covered by the new law, for submission after the law took effect. In September, press reported the country’s railway authority had removed approximately 190 employees for alleged Muslim Brotherhood ties.

In August, the Ministry of Awqaf issued an order banning books relating to extremism and the Muslim Brotherhood from all mosque libraries. The director of the religious sector at the ministry alerted its directorates in all governorates to review books, magazines and publications in mosque

libraries and remove any items that were found to include “extremist ideology.” In a statement, Minister of Awqaf Mokhtar Gomaa directed the punishment of any official neglecting these orders. The ministry's order also warned imams to not include any books in mosque libraries without permission from the ministry's office responsible for religious guidance.

In November 2020, the Supreme Administrative Court added Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, leader of the Strong Egypt Party, to a list of designated terrorists, based on a charge that the party was affiliated with an Islamist group. The court dismissed an appeal submitted by Aboul Fotouh on November 18.

In December, authorities banned Shia activist Haidar Kanil, a reporter for *al-Dustour* newspaper, from travelling to Moscow where he said he planned to seek employment. Kandil told the news website *The New Arab* that police required him to check in on a weekly basis in his hometown, Tanta city. He said officials accused him of contempt of religion, spreading Shiism and anti-state ideas, and establishing a group in violation of the law. Minister of Awqaf Gomaa directed the punishment of any official neglecting these orders. The ministry's order also warned imams to not include any books in mosque libraries without permission from the ministry's office responsible for religious guidance.

At year's end, authorities continued to detain Ahmed Sebaie, who was arrested in 2020 after posting a video on his YouTube channel that discussed the Bible and Christian doctrine. More than 400,000 subscribers followed Sebaie's YouTube account, which focuses on religion. In the past, he produced videos in which he discussed Christian doctrinal issues, commented on social media posts of atheists, and promoted Islam.

On June 28, the Ministry of Awqaf banned Alaa Mohammed Hussein Yaqoub, son of a prominent Salafi imam and preacher, from preaching at mosques, ostensibly for having failed to adhere to sermon length and content guidelines. The ban came after Alaa Yaqoub's father, Mohammed Hussein Yaqoub, testified for the government in a terrorism case before a Cairo court, denying that he was a religious scholar and criticizing Salafism. The press said that Mohammed Yaqoub's testimony, which appeared to contradict many years of preaching, resulted in “widescale controversy.” *Al Masry al-Youm* reported that, as a result of the testimony, a member of parliament introduced legislation to prevent nonspecialists from speaking in religious matters or issuing fatwas. Alaa Yaqoub said he would comply fully with the government's order banning him from preaching.

On January 17, the Court of Urgent Matters in Egypt accepted a lawsuit filed by the head of the Judiciary's Committee for Inventory, Seizure, and Management of Terrorist Funds aimed at seizing assets belonging to 89 members and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood – including family members of the late former president Mohammed Morsi – and transfer them to the state treasury.

On September 18, the Awqaf Minister ordered the dismissal of the undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf in Ismailia after a quarrel with worshipers at al-Matafy Mosque. The undersecretary reportedly angered some of the worshipers by describing them as extremists during a sermon, leading to an altercation with worshipers following his address.

On September 25, local media reported the Supreme Administrative Court issued a final verdict that banned the use of mosques for political purposes and upheld the state's right to supervise them. This ruling upheld a previous decision by the Minister of Awqaf to place 42 mosques in Beheira Governorate under the ministry's supervision.

Local media reported in October that a new prison complex at Wadi al-Natroun included a church, making it the first in the country to include church facilities. Media reported Christian clergy previously had to conduct prison services in multipurpose rooms. The government said publicly that clergy were allowed inside prisons to perform services for inmates during Copts' celebration of Christmas on January 8. According to the NGO Arab Network for Human Rights Information, on January 1, imprisoned labor activist Khalil Rizk asked a warden of Tora Prison for permission to attend upcoming Coptic Christmas services. Although authorities told Rizk his request had been approved, they did not allow him to attend Christmas prayers or allow a priest to visit him.

The government largely continued to allow Baha'is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Shia Muslims to worship privately in small numbers, but it continued to deny requests for public religious gatherings by unregistered religious groups.

Baha'is were subject to inconsistent application of administrative court rulings recognizing marriages. Members of the community reported that members whose marriages the state formally recognized were occasionally subject to government appeals seeking to overturn that recognition.

Shia community sources and religious freedom observers stated that information contained in a 2019 report by Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), an international NGO, on challenges facing the country's Shia community remained valid in 2021. The MRGI report stated that there continued to be no Shia congregational halls (*huseiniyas*) in the country and Shia Muslims remained

unable to establish public places of worship. Members of the Shia community risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing their religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought.

Based on 2020 Supreme Administrative Court verdicts banning faculty and teaching staff at Cairo and Ain Shams Universities from wearing the niqab in class, a lawyer filed an October 5 lawsuit before an administrative court to obligate the Minister of Education to issue a decision banning the wearing of the niqab for teachers, students, workers, and administrators in public, private, and international schools. According to the memo submitted to the court in support of the suit, criminals wearing the niqab had taken advantage of the anonymity it affords to commit crimes, including terrorist attacks. The case remained pending at year's end.

According to analysis by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, an international NGO focused on human rights, the government continued to ban the importation and sale of Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses literature and authorized customs officials to confiscate religious materials from these groups' adherents.

On July 9, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that a broad array of antisemitic books continued to be exhibited among the materials hosted at the state-run book fair, "including the notorious antisemitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*." The ADL noted that it had raised the Cairo Book Fair's sale of antisemitic titles with government representatives in previous years. The NGO said that the 2021 book fair, which began on June 30, continued to sell every problematic book sold at the 2020 fair that the ADL had identified in its earlier communications with the government.

The Mansoura Emergency State Security Misdemeanors Court ordered on December 7 the release of EIPR researcher Patrick George Zaki after 22 months of pretrial detention, pending an investigation on charges of "spreading false news" following a 2019 article Zaki wrote on anti-Coptic discrimination. The court set February 1, 2022 as the next hearing date in Zaki's case.

The Coptic Papal Office, local bishoprics, and Coptic media expressed positive views about the pace of church registration and construction five years after passage of the 2016 Church Construction Law. EIPR, however, listed 25 cases in which churches and worship places had been closed after the passage of the 2016 law, and called for new legislation guaranteeing freedom of religious practice and the building of places of worship for all citizens.

In a November 7 statement, a cabinet committee tasked with registering unlicensed churches approved the legalization of 63 churches and church facilities that had been operating without a permit, bringing the total number of churches and service buildings granted legal status since 2017 to 2,021. In November, the Prime Minister ordered governorates to accelerate permits and to send him periodic reports on their progress.

In August, the Ministry of Awqaf said that 1,650 mosques had been opened since September 2020, including 1,510 new mosques, while 140 underwent maintenance or restoration. The construction and renovation work, implemented under the supervision of the regional directorates, brought the number of new or refurbished mosques between September 7, 2020 and August 27 to 1,810.

Local media reported pharaonic inscriptions on the facade of the Ibrahim Abdel Latif Mosque, located in the Youssef al-Siddiq Center in village of Nazla, Fayoum Governorate, sparked controversy in September. Local media said the community had paid to construct the mosque, but the inscriptions had escaped the notice of the Awqaf Ministry's engineering department (which limits mosque inscriptions to Islamic themes or text). An engineer in the engineering department of the Fayoum Awqaf Directorate was being investigated.

On January 5, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities opened the first stop on the 2,100-mile Holy Family Trail – marking the route believers hold was taken by Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – in Samannoud, Gharbeya Governorate. Development projects in Samannoud included the conservation and restoration of St. Abba Noub Church and the surrounding area. The ministry announced the project in 2020, stating the trail would run from Sinai to Assiut, including stops at churches, monasteries, and water wells.

On July 24, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi directed the renovation of the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet Muhammad) across the country, particularly the tombs of Sayyida Nafisa (Muhammad's great-granddaughter), Sayyida Zeinab (Muhammad's granddaughter), and Sayyid al-Hussein (Muhammad's grandson), including the restoration of the interior halls of mosques at these sites and their architectural details.

In November, the Ministry of Awqaf issued a decision that banned the use of collection boxes in mosques. The boxes often are used for donations for mosque repair and upkeep, provision of social services, and charitable endeavors. Authorities said the decision was driven by security and

transparency concerns. After the government's initial announcement, the ministry stated an exception would be made for mosques belonging to Sufi orders, which have "vows" collection boxes, used for donations made if a worshiper believes God has answered a prayer.

On February 14, Deputy Minister of Education Reda Hegazy announced in parliament that the ministry supported a proposal by Member of Parliament Freddy al-Bayadi advancing school curriculum that highlighted the common values shared by Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and the principles of tolerance, citizenship, and coexistence. Sources in parliament stated that schools were gradually updating curricula to include messages of interreligious tolerance, although al-Bayadi's proposal progressed no further in the chamber by year's end. According to news websites, Hegazy also said that there were new government instructions to remove Quranic verses from the general curriculum and restrict them to religious courses. He explained that including religious texts in courses such as Arabic, history, and geography allowed unqualified teachers to provide "an extremist and destructive" interpretation of the texts. A former senior Ministry of Awqaf official responded that the measure represented "a plan to alter Egypt's Islamic identity" and that President Sisi "has used all his media outlets to attack al-Azhar, its grand sheikh, and Islam." The Salafist al-Nour Party said that the removal of Quranic texts from the general curriculum was "unacceptable."

In December, parliament debated a bill intended to support the use of Standard Arabic, the Quranic form of the language. During the debate, a representative of al-Azhar expressed support for the proposed legislation's requirement that elementary school students memorize Quranic verses. Yousef al-Husseini, a member of the House of Representatives, said, "There are non-Muslim students like Copts who should not be forced to memorize the Quran." In a statement, al-Azhar said, "The call to remove Quranic texts from the Arabic language subject is an explicit call to distance students from their religion and values and to cut them off from their language, culture, and identity, as it opens the door to destructive ideas and interpretations."

The Ministry of Education and Technical Education continued to develop a new curriculum that included increased coverage of respect for human rights and religious tolerance. In 2020, third grade students began using revised textbooks, including the book *Values and Respect for Others*, an ethics text drawn from Islamic and Christian religious traditions. For the 2021/2022 academic year, use of the text expanded to first and second grade classes.

On March 9, the *Jerusalem Post* reported the Ministry of Education for the first time approved a measure that allowed Egyptian children to study verses from Jewish scripture.

On January 2, TV anchor and journalist Ibrahim Issa cited a lack of "adequate references" to Christian history in educational curricula, except for material dealing with monasticism, monasteries, and participation in the 1919 Revolution. In June, Pope Tawadros II called on the Ministry of Education to include information on the route of the Holy Family in its curricula, calling the history of the flight to Egypt a source of "pride for any Egyptian." The Minister of Education pledged to study the Pope's proposal "within the general framework of the new curricula in the ministry."

In early September, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MOSS) released a statement reinforcing a Dar al-Iftaa fatwa calling on preschools to stop posting verses from the Quran or the Bible over their entrances. The fatwa and statement followed the viral spread via social media of a photo of a nursery gate that featured a Quranic verse that had been taken out of context and contained grammatical errors. MOSS's statement stressed, moreover, "Egypt is a home for everyone," and said that the inclusion of religious verses could be construed to indicate that specific schools or nurseries only catered to Muslims or Christians, respectively.

Christians reported being underrepresented in the military and security services, and they stated that those admitted at entry levels of government face limited opportunities for promotion to the upper ranks.

No Christians served as presidents of the country's 27 public universities. The government barred non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers, stating as its reason that the curriculum involved study of the Quran.

The Minister of Immigration and Expatriate Affairs was the only Christian in the cabinet, which consists of 32 ministers. Among the 27 governorates, only Damietta and Ismailia had Christian governors. The governor of Damietta was the country's first female Christian governor. The electoral laws reserve 24 seats for Christian candidates in the House of Representatives. During the year, the House of Representatives exceeded the quota, with 31 Christians, out of a total of 596 representatives. There were a total of 24 Christian senators – 17 elected, and seven appointed by President Sisi – out of 300 seats in that chamber, including the Deputy Speaker. Observers stated that President Sisi also had several senior Christian advisors.

Some Shia stated they were excluded from service in the armed services, and from employment in the security and intelligence services.

The government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country. Sources continued to report, however, that some religious workers were denied visas or refused entry upon arrival without explanation.

On March 1, the President issued a decree forming Boards of Directors of endowment bodies for the Catholic Church and Protestant churches of Egypt. The decree followed passage of a law in parliament intended to give the Catholic and Protestant communities equal status to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

On August 22, local NGOs reported that the Supreme Judicial Council – the highest administrative body for the country's judiciary and headed by the President of the Court of Cassation – approved a request by the Prosecutor General to transfer 11 female judges, including one Copt, to work in the public prosecutor's office for the judicial year beginning in September. On August 5, the Official Gazette published two presidential decisions appointing assistant delegates to the State Council – an independent body that rules on mainly administrative matters involving the country's judiciary – from among 2016 and 2017 law school graduates. According to EIPR researchers, the first decision included three Copts out of 204 delegates, or 1.5 percent. The second decision included three Copts out of 207 delegates, or 1.4 percent.

Grand Imam al-Tayyeb made multiple public references to the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence*, which he signed with Pope Francis in 2019, as a framework for “a world full of prosperity, tolerance, peace, and love.” Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis met in person and discussed the initiatives resulting from the document on October 4 following a Vatican-hosted summit entitled “Faith and Science: Towards COP26,” alongside other world faith leaders.

Al-Azhar continued tracking and countering online statements by ISIS and other extremist groups through the al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism. The observatory's staff of approximately 100 individuals monitored and offered counterarguments to religious statements on jihadi websites. The center's website and social media employed numerous languages to reach foreign audiences, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, and Farsi. Al-Azhar, through the al-Azhar International Academy, also continued to offer courses to imams and preachers in 20 countries on a wide range of subjects related to Islam. Al-Azhar largely curtailed travel and in-person training during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic but continued to offer training virtually.

In May, the government announced it would include all civilians who lost their lives to terrorist operations since January 2014 among those eligible for government aid via the 2018 official Fund for Honoring Martyrs, Victims, Missing Persons, and Injured in Terror and Security Operations, and their Families. The list of those eligible for aid included the families of 1,260 civilians killed and 1,804 civilians injured in terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities.

During an August 3 meeting with participants in a conference organized by Dar al-Iftaa, “Fatwa Institutions in the Digital Age,” President Sisi said that scholars needed to confront electronic platforms spreading false ideas that distorted the essence of Islam and exploited religion to achieve political goals through terrorism. During an August 24 television interview, the President said, “We are all born Muslim and non-Muslim according to our ID cards, but we realize that we have to reformulate our understanding of the belief that we follow.” On September 11, during the launch ceremony of the National Human Rights Strategy, President Sisi asked, “Why are you upset to see a church or a synagogue? The state has moved to face this matter effectively and ensures the respect of all religions through laws.” He added, “I respect nonbelievers. If someone tells me [he or she is] neither Muslim nor Christian nor a Jew or that he or she does not believe in religion, I would tell them, you are free to choose.” Sisi also said, “And it is not because I am not protective of my religion. I am. And that is why I respect the will of nonbelievers, which is based on freedom of belief – a God-given right.” On social media, some users criticized Sisi for normalizing the acceptance of individuals who do not believe in God, saying this attitude was unacceptable to much of the Muslim majority in the country. On October 17, marking the celebration of Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), Sisi urged religious institutions and scholars to intensify their efforts to spread values of tolerance, intellectual diversity, and acceptance of others.

The National Strategy for Human Rights contained a section dedicated to “Freedom of Religion and Belief” that noted several steps the government had taken in recent years, including the establishment of a National Council for Combating Terrorism and Extremism and the Supreme Committee for Combating Sectarian Incidents as well as the Ministry of Higher Education's strategy against extremism and *takfiri* (declaring someone a nonbeliever) ideology at the country's universities. It stated that the Ministry of Awqaf dedicated some Friday sermons to promote tolerance and combat violence and hatred. The document also noted efforts by al-Azhar, the Dar al-Iftaa, and Christian churches to promote intercommunal understanding. The strategy stated the government frequently promoted interfaith dialogue.

On January 24, the Grand Mufti issued a fatwa permitting Muslims to work in church construction in exchange for a salary, a ruling that sparked controversy on social media. Activists recalled previous 2013 fatwas on Salafist websites prohibiting such employment. Dar al-Iftaa based the more recent decision on an earlier ruling by Imam Abu Hanifa in which he stated that such work was permissible and was an obligation unless it involves the humiliation of a Muslim or required him to consent to anything that contradicted Islamic theology. Some media interpreted the fatwa as giving Muslims permission to contribute to the ongoing or planned construction/restoration of churches throughout the country.

On October 13, while addressing a workshop that trained religious leaders to raise awareness of women's issues, Minister of Awqaf Gomaa said a pilot program involving female preachers and nuns set an outstanding model of national action, which, he added, was an approach adopted by the ministry in partnership with churches and the National Council for Women. Gomaa said that women's equality was a religious, national, and humanitarian obligation. According to local press, in September, the number of female preachers was 304, including 251 female volunteers and 53 female mentors appointed by the ministry.

The cabinet's media center released a documentary that promoted the values of citizenship, loyalty, nondiscrimination, and equality between Muslims and Christians. The documentary highlighted the importance of strengthening these values in preserving the country's security and stability, as well as of countering attempts to sow sedition within communities, according to a statement released by the center on January 7.

On January 9, the al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism issued a report in 12 languages under the title *Religious Freedom: An Authentic Islamic Principle*. The observatory stated in the report that religious freedom was one of the most important principles of Islam. On May 5, the Grand Imam said, "Congratulating non-Muslims on their holidays and their joys and comforting them in their misfortune...[is] the righteousness that Islam command[s]."

On August 11, President Sisi extended the term of Grand Mufti Shawky Allam by a year by presidential decree. The President issued a separate but related decree the same week that designated the Dar al-Iftaa as a "special entity" not subject to the provisions of the civil service law. Some observers said that these decrees redistributed power traditionally vested in the Council of Islamic Scholars to the President. In July, a proposed law sought to make Dar al-Iftaa and the Grand Mufti independent of al-Azhar. Sources told the press that the main objective of the proposed law was to create a parallel entity to al-Azhar under the direct control of the government. Under its terms, the President would have had the right to appoint the Grand Mufti. The State Council ruled the draft law unconstitutional, after which it was withdrawn by the government.

On September 14, after the launch of the National Strategy on Human Rights, the Minister of Awqaf announced his intention to establish a human rights unit to enact provisions of the strategy. The unit, according to the statement, will work to promote the values of citizenship and religious tolerance, contribute to social protection and community service programs, and fulfill the rights of people with disabilities (for example, incorporating sign language during weekly sermons).

On March 7, EIPR filed a lawsuit on behalf of a Coptic woman with the Supreme Constitutional Court regarding the constitutionality of requiring Christian citizens to apply the rules of sharia in inheritance matters. The lawsuit maintained that this requirement violated Article 3 of the constitution, which permits the canonical laws of religious minorities to prevail in civil matters. Defendants in the lawsuit included the President, Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, and Speaker of Parliament. On September 12, the court's board of commissioners examined the case and on November 14, the court referred the case to the Constitutional Court to set a date for further review. The case remained pending at year's end.

On December 4, the news website Cairo 24.com reported that the Ministry of Justice completed drafting the Family Law (Personal Status for Christians) after representatives of Christian denominations agreed on its text during meetings earlier in the year. On July 4, a representative of the Coptic Orthodox Church announced completion of a review of the draft law in the Ministry of Justice after 16 sessions that brought together ministry officials with representatives of Christian denominations to agree on its articles. In September, the newspaper *Al-Dustour* reported the draft law would be introduced in parliament, after other Christian churches expressed support. In December, the ministry sent the draft law to the cabinet for approval. At year's end, the cabinet had not submitted the draft legislation to the House of Representatives.

There was public debate and court challenges on the issue of listing religions on the national ID. Coptic human rights attorneys filed a lawsuit on August 25 demanding the Civil Status Department of the Ministry of Interior remove the "religion" field from the national ID card. Referring to what it said was the positive atmosphere of religious unity promoted by the Sisi government, the lawsuit stated that some persons still used the religious designator on ID cards to discriminate against religious minorities. During a panel discussion in September, journalist Ibrahim Eissa called for religion to be

removed from citizens' ID cards. Justice Minister Omar Marwan responded that "there must be some form of official documentation of citizens' religion" to ensure laws and services that were specific to one's religion were properly provided.

On December 27, the Alexandria Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit brought in January by EIPR on behalf of a group of Baha'i citizens in Alexandria seeking to have the government designate a cemetery for those whose national ID cards showed a "-" (meaning no selection) under religious affiliation. The government cited opinions from al-Azhar that, despite earlier rulings and practices, said it was impermissible to allocate a plot of land for individuals who were not Muslims, Christians, or Jews. Bassatine Cemetery in Cairo, which members of the Baha'i community described as overcrowded and inconveniently distant for Baha'is living outside Cairo, remained the only cemetery in the country where Baha'is could be buried. EIPR said it planned to appeal the decision.

In June, the ADL reported that it had completed a review of elementary, middle, and high school textbooks as part of an examination of antisemitic content in state-published curricula. The ADL stated that although the country's most recent textbooks contained some positive material about the Jewish people, that content was "directly contradicted by other, much more problematic lessons in the curriculum." The report cited one fifth grade textbook that teaches taught students that "the treachery of the Jews" was "one of their traits" and that Jews "betrayed God and his Prophet."

The press reported that on June 29 the al-Azhar International Center for Electronic Fatwas warned against the online video game Fortnite, saying it contained a portrayal of the destruction of the Kaaba, the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca. The game's designers posted a statement on Facebook that said they respected all religious faiths and that the problematic content was made by an independent player in "creative mode."

On June 20, President Sisi met with Sultan Mufadal Saifuddin, head of the Bohra branch of Ismaili Shia Islam. According to press reporting, the President noted the country's close ties with Bohra Ismailis and thanked the group for its help in restoring several historic mosques and shrines in the country.

On March 16, Minister of Awqaf Gomaa said that the President and government had always called for the export of moderate Islam to Africa. Gomaa said that the government had regularly sent imams and preachers to many African countries, stressing that the government placed great importance on countering extremism. On August 2, al-Azhar announced a training course on countering extremism for 23 imams and preachers from Mali. On August 10 after a meeting with the ambassador from Senegal, Grand Imam al-Tayyeb, said that al-Azhar was ready to establish a similar institution in Senegal, while confirming that 350 Senegalese students were currently studying at al-Azhar, which had sent 41 teachers to Senegal. In separate statements in June and August, al-Azhar said it would step up efforts to train imams in Pakistan and Russia.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Terrorist groups, including Islamic State-Sinai Peninsula (or ISIS-SP, formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), continued sporadic attacks on government, civilian, and security targets in the North Sinai Governorate. According to an international NGO, at least 26 civilian deaths, 51 security force deaths, and 31 terrorist deaths occurred in the conflict in Sinai between January and July. According to an ISIS media affiliate, ISIS-SP claimed 101 attacks resulting in 206 casualties during the year.

In April, ISIS-SP released a video that documented the killing of Nabil Habashi, a local Coptic Christian and cofounder of the only church in the district of Bir al-Abd, one of the focal points of ISIS-SP operations. ISIS-SP kidnapped Habashi in November 2020, using the justification of "Christian support for the Egyptian military and state" and held him for ransom until killing him in February. Pope Tawadros II released a statement mourning the "faithful son and servant" Habashi, offering condolences to his family and church, and "saluting the heroes of the Egyptian military and police." EIPR characterized the killing as a "murder based on religious identity."

On July 27, Shenouda Salah Asaad, a Copt, was stabbed to death, allegedly by a Salafist neighbor, in al-Qusiyah, Assiut Governorate. Salah's wife was injured and hospitalized. The investigative police in al-Qusiyah reportedly intensified efforts to arrest the perpetrator. At year's end, there had been no official confirmation of his apprehension.

In April, sectarian clashes in al-Mudmar village in Sohag Governorate resulted in at least one death and six injuries that required hospitalization. Witnesses in al-Mudmar said that the events began with a dispute between two Copts, and later drew in a Muslim would-be mediator. Following the violence, security forces moved into the village. Eyewitness residents said the village generally experienced amicable relations between Muslims and Christians.

On October 11, local media reported that a female pharmacist working in Sharqia Governorate accused her coworkers of assaulting, harassing, and persecuting her for her decision not to wear a hijab. The pharmacist filed a report with the Zagazig District police department against her colleagues, prompting the Governor of Sharqia to offer support, pending investigation by the prosecution. The pharmacist also appealed to the Pharmacists Syndicate to intervene, and one of her colleagues documented the alleged assault in her workplace with a video that was widely circulated on Facebook. One week after the pharmacist's complaint, the Supreme State Security Prosecution ordered her detained for 15 days pending investigation on charges of "joining a terrorist group and spreading false news." In November and again on December 21, the State Security Prosecution Office extended the pharmacist's detention by 15 days. The pharmacist remained in detention at year's end.

In September, the press reported that two doctors and another employee at a Cairo hospital had anonymously posted a video to social media of them bullying a nurse and demanding that he kneel and pray to a dog. The nurse stated that it would be a sin for all of them if he complied. The press reported that there was a "wave of indignation on social media." The Ministry of Health later said that it fired the senior doctor; the country's Prosecutor General ordered the three men detained, pending an investigation on charges of bullying, abuse of power, and contempt of religion. The case was referred to a criminal court, which sentenced the three to two years in prison in October.

Religious discrimination in private sector hiring continued, according to human rights groups and religious communities.

A July report by the NGO Coptic Solidarity stated that out of 141 athletes on the national Olympic team that competed in the 2020 Tokyo games (held in 2021), only one was a Copt. The Olympic teams in 2012 and 2016 had similar breakdowns, which the NGO stated was due to "entrenched, deep-rooted, systematic, and systemic discrimination against the Copts."

In February, *Al-Monitor*, a news website, reported that Christian soccer players formed a team, Je Suis Club, in 2016 to provide Christians playing opportunities. The report stated that the main Egyptian teams, including Zamalek, Ahli, Ismaili, and the Alexandria Union, had only Muslim players on their rosters.

During a nationally broadcast television program, an al-Azhar University professor responded to the beating of a woman by her husband by saying that women tended to exaggerate when complaining, that no man would resort to this degree of violence unless strongly provoked, and that wives were guilty of bringing domestic violence upon themselves. A local advocacy group for battered spouses posted the video on social media, criticizing the downplaying of spousal abuse by a member of the country's religious establishment. One of the professor's female colleagues at al-Azhar's Tadwein Center for Gender Studies denounced the professor's televised statements and said Islam did not justify violence against women under any circumstances.

Reuters reported the country's first all-female Muslim recitation choir, al-Hour, was challenging "deep-rooted taboos about women singing in public or reciting from the Quran." Al-Hour founder Nema Fathi said, "Having women in the Muslim religious chanting field not only breaks social stereotypes about female chanters. It also gives a new, distinctive style to an art that has long been dominated by only men."

The press reported that a video of a girls' choir singing Christian hymns on the Cairo Metro was extensively reposted after initially having been posted by Nabila Makram, a Copt and Minister of Emigration and Expatriate Affairs. One human rights lawyer characterized the singing as courageous, adding, "The reality is that Egyptian society is intolerant of Christians' public expression of faith."

In June, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar welcomed a proposal to establish a center in Egypt for Islamic studies, presented to him by a delegation from the Anglican Episcopal Church. The proposal was the first of its kind in the history of relations between al-Azhar and the Church. Also included in the proposal were the establishment of an Islamic library, in cooperation with al-Azhar University.

In November, Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria and All Africa inaugurated the Patriarchal Center for Studies and Dialogue in the Holy Monastery of St. Georgios in Cairo as a new center for interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

In October, the Syndicate of Musical Professions in Egypt issued a decision banning its members from dealing with Egyptian rapper Marwan Pablo due to his having "defiled a religious invocation" during a concert in New Cairo. In a statement, the syndicate said that Marwan "repeated a well-known religious invocation but that he replaced its words with vulgarity and emptied it of its moral content."

According to a January 8 report on *Al-Monitor*, following a decision by the Government of Pakistan to ban the release of a British film, *The Lady of Heaven*, a number of social media activists, Islamic scholars, and Salafist imams called for a ban on screening the film in Egypt. They urged the issuance of fatwas prohibiting the viewing of the film and sent demands to the United Kingdom to stop the international distribution of the movie. According to press, the film portrayed the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima, who also was the wife of Ali, fourth caliph of Sunni Muslims and first imam of Shia Muslims. Several newspapers reported that the film featured the voice of the Prophet Muhammad as a narrator in the film.

On April 3, 22 royal mummies and 17 sarcophagi were transferred from the Egyptian Museum, in Tahrir Square, Cairo, to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilizations, also in Cairo. During the transfer, prominent actors and actresses portrayed figures from the history of Egyptian civilizations, including the centuries-long coexistence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – including prominent scenes within churches and synagogues.

The research and consulting firm PSB took a June poll of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in 17 Arab states and reported 24 percent of Egyptian respondents said that their religion was the most important factor in their personal identity, which was lower than the regionwide result of 34 percent. Other choices offered by the poll as possible responses included family/tribe, nationality, Arabic heritage, political beliefs, language, and gender.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Ambassador, other embassy officials, and other senior Administration officials, regularly raised religious freedom concerns with senior government officials. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives discussed church legalization and construction, preservation of Jewish cultural heritage and sites, interfaith dialogue, and countering religious extremism with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, regional governors, senior religious leaders, and civil society and minority religious groups. In these meetings, embassy officers emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised issues including alleged harassment of religious converts; prospective changes to Egypt's Personal Status Law; recognition of Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ; access to Jewish communal archives; and the use of religious designations on national identity cards.

Throughout the year, embassy representatives met with senior officials in the offices of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar; Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II; bishops and senior pastors of Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican Churches; and members of the Jewish community. In these meetings, embassy staff members discussed cases in which administrative courts applied inconsistent or discriminatory standards to members of unrecognized religious minorities; prosecuted individuals for religious defamation; and enabled religious discrimination via the continued inclusion of religious designations on national identity cards. They also discussed progress on religious freedom issues such as continued issuance of permits for and new construction of churches, political support for Christian and Jewish communities, and the protection and restoration of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious sites.

U.S. officials met with human rights activists and religious and community leaders to discuss contemporary incidents of sectarian conflict and gather information to raise in meetings with government officials. Embassy officials on several occasions attended court hearings or submitted letters to court officials expressing official interest in cases of Egyptians held in pretrial confinement based on religious statements or writings.

On April 18, following a five-year restoration project implemented through U.S. funding, the Ambassador attended the reopening of the country's largest mausoleum dome: the tomb of Imam Abu Abdullah Mohammed bin Idris al-Shafie, the founder of the Shafie school of Islamic jurisprudence. On August 28, the Ambassador toured Sohag Governorate's Red and White Monasteries – 3rd Century monastic churches that are among the best preserved of their kind in the country – where he met with church officials, observed more than five million dollars worth of U.S.-funded preservation work, and emphasized the U.S. commitment to preserving the country's religious and cultural heritage. On September 15, the Ambassador opened a U.S.-government-supported academic conference on the 12th-century Jewish rabbi and scholar Maimonides, reminding attendees in his remarks of the centrality of religious freedom to the founding principles of the United States and the longstanding history of pluralism in Egypt. On October 20, the embassy held the public launch of a girls' empowerment event in Upper Egypt. The three million dollar program, with a strong emphasis on religious tolerance, was being implemented in the governorates of Qena and Minya, two areas historically characterized by higher levels of interreligious discord between Muslims and Copts. In the second half of the year, the embassy conducted a six-month virtual interfaith dialogue program with U.S. and Egyptian Muslim and Christian religious influencers

focused on conflict resolution and peace building. The embassy facilitated a 12-week professional development course for more than 70 English language instructors at al-Azhar University, allowing for broader U.S. government engagement with al-Azhar and, according to al-Azhar staff members, allowing the institution to better engage with the outside world.

ecoi.net summary:



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