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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt

Executive Summary

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 (i.e. Abrahamic) religions is a right regulated by law.” The constitution states that 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. In February authorities launched a military campaign, “Sinai 2018,” in the Sinai Peninsula against ISIS in part to respond to the November 2017 attack on a mosque in North Sinai that killed over 300 individuals; the mosque was reportedly targeted because it was frequented by Sufis. In November a court sentenced an alleged supporter of ISIS to death for the fatal stabbing of an 82-year-old Christian doctor in September 2017. In April a military court sentenced 36 people to death for Coptic church bombings in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta in 2016 and 2017 that killed more than 80 persons. According to multiple sources, prosecutors employed charges of denigrating religion to arrest anyone who appeared to criticize Islam or Christianity, with a disproportionate number of all blasphemy charges brought against the country’s Christian population. Under a 2016 law issued to legalize unlicensed churches and facilitate the construction of new churches, the government reported having issued 783 licenses to existing but previously unlicensed churches and related support buildings out of 5,415 applications for licensure, and authorized the building of 14 new churches since September 2017. Local authorities frequently responded to sectarian attacks against Christians through binding arbitration sessions rather than prosecuting perpetrators of violence, leading to complaints by members of the Coptic community. In December President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued a decree creating the Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents, tasked with devising a strategy to prevent sectarian incidents and to address them as they occur, applying all relevant laws. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) continued to issue required certifications to imams, and register and license all mosques. In May, based upon a 2015 policy, the ministry announced a ban on imams from Friday preaching at 20,000 small prayer rooms (*zawiyas*) used as mosques. In October the ministry announced the government had successfully “regained” control over 95 percent of public Islamic discourse. In January Minister of Awqaf Mokhtar Gomaa

affirmed the protection of churches was “as legitimate as defending mosques,” and said that those who died in the defense of a church are “martyrs.” On August 30, as part of a nationwide governors’ reshuffle, President al-Sisi appointed two Christian governors, including the country’s first-ever female Christian to hold the position, the first such appointments since April 2011.

On November 2, armed assailants attacked three buses carrying Christian pilgrims to a monastery in Minya in Upper Egypt, killing seven and wounding 19. Attacks continued on Christians and Christian-owned property, as well as on churches in the Upper Egypt region. On May 26, seven Christians were injured in the village of Shoqaf while attempting to defend a church from an attack by Muslim villagers. Reports of anti-Semitic remarks on state-owned media, as well as sectarian and defamatory speech against minority religious groups, continued during the year. Al-Azhar, the country’s primary institution for spreading Islam and defending Islamic doctrine, held conferences on interfaith dialogue, and gave statements condemning extremism and supporting improved relations between Muslims and Christians.

The President discussed religious freedom and the treatment of the Coptic community during his meeting with President al-Sisi during the UN General Assembly meetings in September. U.S. officials, including the Vice President, the Secretary of State, Charge d’Affaires, visiting senior-level delegations from Washington, and embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials to underscore the importance of religious freedom and equal protection of all citizens before the law. In meetings with high-level officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Justice, Awqaf, and Interior, embassy and consulate general officers and visiting U.S. officials emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of key issues, including attacks on Christians, recognition of Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, the rights of Shia Muslims to perform religious rituals publicly, and the discrimination and religious freedom abuses resulting from official religious designations on national identity and other official documents.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 99.4 million (July 2018 estimate). Most experts and media sources state that approximately 90 percent of the population is officially designated as Sunni Muslims and approximately 10 percent is recognized as Christian (estimates range from 5 to 15 percent). 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 and include Anglican/Episcopalian and other Protestant denominations, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, Latin, and Syrian), and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) Churches. The Protestant community includes 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), Grace (An-Ni’ma), Independent Apostolic, Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala), Open Brethren, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), and

Seventh-day Adventist. Jehovah’s Witnesses account for 1,000-1,500 people, according to media estimates, and there are also an estimated 150 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, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria, according to religious and civil society groups.

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

According to a local Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO), there are seven Jews. There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists or religious converts.

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 Abrahamic religions is a right regulated by law.” The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and makes “incitement to hate” a crime. It describes freedom of belief as absolute. The constitution limits the freedom to practice religious rituals and establish places of worship to adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The constitution prohibits the exercise of political activity or the formation of political parties on the basis of religion.

The constitution states that Al-Azhar is “the main authority in theology and Islamic affairs” and is responsible for spreading Islam, Islamic doctrine, and the Arabic language in the country and throughout the world. The 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. While the constitution declares Al-Azhar an independent institution, its 2018 budgetary allocation from the government, which is required by the constitution to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes,” was almost 13 billion Egyptian pounds (\$726.66 million).

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 mufti’s decision in these cases is consultative and nonbinding on the court that handed down the death sentence.

The constitution also stipulates that 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 (MOI) issues national identity cards that include

official religious designations. Designations are limited to Muslim, Christian, or Jewish citizens. Since a 2009 court order, Baha'is are identified by a dash. The minister of interior has the authority to issue executive regulations determining what data should be provided on the card.

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 not from Islam to any other religion. In a 2008 ruling on a lawsuit against the government for not recognizing a Muslim's conversion to Christianity, the Administrative Court ruled in favor of the government asserting its duty to “protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam.” The government recognizes conversion from Islam for individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam, according to an MOI 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 should be issued with the Christian name and religious designation. In those 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.

Consistent with sharia, the law stipulates that 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 need not convert 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. Children from any unrecognized marriage are considered illegitimate.

A divorced mother is entitled to custody of her son until the age of 10 and her daughter until age 12, unless one parent is Muslim and the other is not, in which case the Muslim parent is awarded custody.

The law generally follows sharia in matters of inheritance. In 2017, however, an appellate court ruled that applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that the rules of the Christians and Jewish communities govern in personal status matters.

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

Islamic, Christian, and Jewish denominations may request official recognition from the government, which gives a denomination the right to be governed by its 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 Interior Religious 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 decides on the registration application.

The law does not recognize the Baha'i Faith or its religious laws and bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. Although the government lists “Christian” on the identity cards of Jehovah's Witnesses, a presidential decree bans all Jehovah's Witnesses' 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 appoints and monitors imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and pays their salaries. 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 and/or a fine of up to 50,000 pounds (\$2,800). 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 consistent with Ministry of Awqaf guidelines. Any imam who fails to follow the guidelines loses the bonus and may be subject to disciplinary measures, including potentially losing his preaching license. The ministry also issues prewritten sermons, and ministry personnel monitor Friday sermons in major mosques. Imams are subject to disciplinary action including dismissal for ignoring the ministry's guidelines.

The prime minister has 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 Center of Al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and confiscate any publications dealing with the Quran and the authoritative Islamic traditions (*hadith*), 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 rather than the president. The governor is to respond within four months; 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 depends on a government determination of the “number and need” of Christians in the area. Construction of new

churches must meet stringent 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 approves permits to build mosques. A 2001 cabinet decree includes a provision requiring that new mosques built after that date must be a minimum distance of 500 meters (1600 feet) from the nearest other mosque, 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. Determinations of religious identity are based on official 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. A common set of textbooks for these two courses is mandated for both public and private schools, including Christian-owned schools. Al-Azhar maintains a separate school system which serves some two million students from elementary through secondary school using its own separate 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 and/or a fine of no less than 30,000 pounds (\$1,700) and no more than 50,000 pounds (\$2,800) 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 (\$2,800) and no more than 100,000 pounds (\$5,600).

The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims with documentation from a cleric. Since the state does not recognize Baha’i marriage, married Baha’is are denied the legal rights of married couples of other religious beliefs, including those pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and sponsoring a foreign spouse’s permanent residence. Baha’is, in practice, file individual demands for recognition of marriages in civil court.

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 entitled “Alternative Family” which recognizes permanent legal guardianship if certain requirements are met.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights, whose members are appointed by parliament, 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.

According to the constitution, “no political activity may be exercised or political parties formed on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect, or geographic location, nor may any activity be practiced that is hostile to democracy, secretive, or which possesses a military or quasi-military nature.”

The constitution mandates that the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by parliament. However, by year's end, parliament had 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

In February security forces launched a military campaign, “Sinai 2018,” in the Sinai Peninsula against ISIS, in part to respond to a November 2017 attack on a mosque in Al-Rawda village in North Sinai that killed over 300 individuals at worship; the mosque was reportedly attacked because it was frequented by Sufis. Although the government reported significant successes in the campaign, ISIS attacks continued in North Sinai.

In November a court sentenced an alleged ISIS supporter to death for the fatal stabbing of an 82-year-old Christian doctor in September 2017. Authorities did not identify the defendant.

On July 12, police thwarted an attempted suicide bombing at the Church of the Holy Virgin in Qalioubiya, near Cairo. After encountering security forces, the attacker detonated an explosive vest in the vicinity of the church, killing a police officer and civilian. On August 11, security forces foiled a suicide bombing at the Coptic Virgin Mary Church in the Cairo suburb of Mostorod. After being denied entry to the church, the bomber died when he exploded his suicide belt; no one else was injured.

During the year, courts imposed death sentences on several people convicted of killing Christians. On February 12, a court confirmed a death sentence against the killer of Semaan Shehata, a Coptic Orthodox priest from Beni Suef. The killer stabbed Shehata to death in the Cairo suburb of El-Salaam City in 2017 and carved a cross on his forehead. On April 1, the Cassation Court upheld the death sentence of the killer of liquor storeowner Youssef Lamei, who had confessed to slitting Lamei's throat outside his store for selling alcohol in January 2017. In April a military court sentenced 36 people to death for Coptic church bombings between 2016 and 2017 in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta, resulting in the deaths of more than 80 people. ISIS claimed

responsibility. International human rights organizations expressed concern about these mass convictions and asserted the proceedings did not meet international fair trial standards.

In March media reported that Matthew Habib, a Christian military conscript who had complained to his family of persecution from superiors due to his religion, committed suicide while on duty. Although the official cause of death was determined to be multiple self-inflicted gunshot wounds, the family alleged that Habib had been killed by a more senior officer.

On January 31, the Giza misdemeanor court sentenced 20 individuals to one-year suspended jail sentences for an attack on an unlicensed Coptic church in Kafr al-Waslin village south of Cairo, carried out on December 22, 2017. Each was fined 500 pounds (\$28) on charges of inciting sectarian strife, harming national unity, and vandalizing private property. The court also fined the owner of the unlicensed church 360,000 pounds (\$20,100) for building without a permit. The Archdiocese of Atfih has reportedly applied for the Kafr al-Waslin Church to be legalized.

On January 2, press reported that the public prosecutor filed murder charges against an individual accused of killing 11 people on December 29, 2017, in an attack on a Coptic church and Christian-owned shop in Helwan, a suburb south of Cairo. On December 1, the prosecutor general referred 11 additional suspects to trial for forming a terrorist group, murder, attempted murder, and other charges related to the attack.

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, citing its 2016 report, reported in October that 41 percent of all blasphemy charges had been brought by authorities against the country's Christian population

March 14, police in Beni Suef Governorate arrested social studies teacher Magdy Farag Samir on charges of denigrating Islam after he included wordplays in a set of questions for students about the Prophet Muhammad. Samir was detained for 15 days while police investigated the charges. A court acquitted him on April 19.

In December a court in Upper Egypt upheld a three-year prison sentence for blasphemy against Christian Abd Adel Bebawy for a Facebook post that allegedly insulted Islam. Authorities arrested Bebawy in his home village of Minbal on July 6 and the original court passed the prison sentence in November. Bebawy's lawyers stated that he reported the hacking of his Facebook account in July and that the post was immediately deleted. On July 9, reportedly in response to Bebawy's social media posts, a crowd of Muslims attacked Christian-owned homes in Minbal. Police arrested over 90 Muslim attackers, charging 39 with a variety of crimes related to the attack.

On May 3, police arrested atheist blogger Sherif Gaber and detained him for four days. Authorities accused Gaber of insulting Islam and sharia, disrupting communal peace, and other charges stemming from a series of videos he posted on YouTube. Police had earlier arrested Gaber on similar charges in 2015 and 2013. In October Gaber tweeted that he had been prevented from leaving the country and that

authorities had charged him with three additional felonies and that the charges now included blasphemy, contempt of religion, supporting homosexuality, and religious extremism.

According to the NGO International Christian Concern (ICC), during several incidents of interreligious violence between Muslims and Christians in Upper Egypt from August 22 to 25, security forces delayed providing protection to Christians. On August 22, in the village of Esna in Luxor Governorate, a crowd of Muslims gathered to protest Christian worship in a church that was seeking legalization. Following Friday prayers on August 24, the crowd gathered a second time. While the police prevented this second gathering from escalating, local sources report that authorities arrested five Christians, who were charged with conducting religious rituals in an unlicensed church and incitement, and 15 Muslims. All those arrested were released in September. Also on August 24, a crowd gathered in the village of Sultan in Minya Governorate to protest efforts by a local church to seek official legalization.

Security forces arrested members of what they described as a terrorist cell in Nag' Hammadi in Qena Governorate during Coptic celebrations for Easter in April. Security forces increased their presence in Coptic institutions and communities around Christmas, Easter, and other Christian holidays.

Religious freedom and human rights activists said government officials sometimes did not extend procedural safeguards or rights of due process to members of minority faiths, including by closing churches in violation of the 2016 church construction law. On April 14, a group of Muslim villagers hurled stones and bricks, breaking the windows of a building used as a church in Beni Meinin in Beni Suef Governorate. The attack followed a government inspection of the building, a step toward legalizing the church. Authorities arrested 45 Muslim and Christian residents of the village, and, following an agreement according to customary reconciliation procedures (a binding arbitration process, often criticized by Christians as discriminatory), all arrestees were released and the church remained unlicensed and closed.

The government prosecuted some perpetrators of sectarian violence committed in previous years. Authorities transferred to a court in Beni Suef for prosecution the 2016 case against the attackers of Souad Thabet, a Christian who was paraded naked through her village of Karm in Minya in response to rumors that her son had an affair with the wife of a Muslim business partner. Authorities charged four people with attacking Thabet, and another 25 with attacking Thabet's home and six others owned by Christians.

There were multiple reports of the government closing unlicensed churches following protests, particularly in Upper Egypt. In November the NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) reported that from September 28, 2016, when the church construction law was issued, to October, authorities shuttered nine churches that hosted religious services prior to the closure orders. Four of these churches were closed during the year, with Copts denied access and religious services in them

prohibited. In July media reported that police closed a church in Ezbet Sultan after a series of protests and the destruction of Christian-owned property. During one protest, Muslims reportedly chanted, “We don’t want a church.”

In a November report, EIPR documented 15 instances of sectarian violence related to the legalization of 15 previously unlicensed churches from September 2017 to October 2018. The churches had been functioning for several years and were well known to both state institutions and local residents. EIPR’s report also documented 35 cases of violence since the church construction law was issued, not including incidents associated with the construction of new churches.

On August 22, in Zeneiqa village in Upper Egypt, police closed a church following protests by local Muslims against legalization of the church. They arrested five Copts and five Muslims, plus an additional 10 Muslim residents during protests held a week later. In March local mosque personnel in Al-Tod village near Luxor encouraged Muslims to protest the licensing of a church that had been in use for a decade. Protestors built a wall to block access to the church. Christians and Muslims took part in a customary reconciliation session led by Muslim elders and, reportedly under pressure, the Christians agreed to abandon their application for a church license.

According to official statistics, from September 2017 the government approved 783 of the 5,415 applications for licensure of churches. According to a local human rights organization, the increased pace of legalization and construction of churches was causing sectarian tensions in some communities where Muslim citizens did not want a legal church in their village.

As it did in recent years, the government in October closed the room containing the tomb of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Al-Hussein, located inside Al-Hussein Mosque in Old Cairo, during the three-day commemoration of Ashura. The government explained the closure was due to construction, but multiple news reports described it as an attempt to discourage the celebration of Shia religious rituals. The main area of the mosque remained open; only the room containing the shrine was closed.

In September the Ministry of Awqaf cancelled the preaching permit of prominent Salafi cleric Mohamed Raslan and banned him from delivering sermons for refusing to recite the official sermon written by the ministry. The ministry reinstated his license after he apologized publicly and committed to follow the government’s weekly sermon.

There were reports of government actions targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government had designated as a terrorist organization, and individuals associated with the group.

In May the government announced a policy to ban imams from preaching on Fridays at 20,000 small prayer rooms (*zawiyas*) used as mosques and restricted their use to daily prayers. In a statement, the Ministry of Awqaf said the measure would prevent “fundamentalist” preaching during Ramadan. The May announcement repeated a

policy first announced in 2015 that resulted in the closure of 27,000 *zawiyas* and forbade preaching in them. Authorities also increased the penalties for mosques using their loudspeakers for anything other than the traditional call to prayer.

In October the Ministry of Awqaf announced that the government had successfully “regained” control over 95 percent of public Islamic discourse in the country and cited the ministry’s “complete” control of Islam as expressed through “the media, lessons, seminars and [public] forums.” Public issuances of fatwas were, according to a senior advisor at the Dar al-Iftaa, the country’s fatwa issuing authority, restricted to Muslim clerics from Al-Azhar University, 40 clerics from Dar al-Iftaa, and a small number of clerics affiliated with the Ministry of Awqaf. The ministry announced that any unauthorized cleric offering religious sermons or issuing fatwas would be subject to criminal investigation and prosecution for “carrying out a job without a license.”

In September the Court of Urgent Matters suspended a July ruling by an administrative court that had allowed policemen with long beards to return to work. The court upheld MOI regulations on facial hair and stated the government had an obligation to keep the police force a “secular organizational entity.”

During Ramadan in May the government put in place regulations governing the practice of reclusion (*itikaaf*), a Sunni Muslim religious ritual requiring adherents spend 10 days of prayer in mosques during Ramadan. Authorization required an application to the Ministry of Awqaf, registration of national identification cards, a residence in the same neighborhood of the requested mosque, and personal knowledge of the applicant by the mosque administrator.

On June 22, a video showing adherents performing Sufi religious rituals in a mosque sparked demands on social media to ban Sufi rituals inside mosques. In response, the Ministry of Awqaf suspended the mosque attendant for participating in the incident, and announced a public campaign to raise awareness of “correct Islam.”

The government did not prevent Baha’is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and Jehovah’s Witnesses from worshiping privately in small numbers. However, Baha’i sources said the government refused requests for public religious gatherings. According to members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, security officials engaged in surveillance and frequent home visits during which adherents were interrogated and sometimes threatened. The National Security Services (NSS) also summoned members to their offices for interrogations. The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that on April 3, a security officer who has interrogated and threatened its members in the past questioned a male Witness at length, asking numerous probing questions about the operations and activities of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The government continued to ban the importation and sale of Baha’i and Jehovah’s Witnesses literature and to authorize customs officials to confiscate their personally owned religious materials. In July NSS officers stopped two Jehovah’s Witnesses members in Beni Suef and confiscated their religious materials. NSS officers did the same with two other Jehovah’s Witnesses who arrived later.

Twelve Baha'i couples filed lawsuits requesting recognition of their civil marriages, four of which were approved by October. While Baha'i sources hailed the first issuance of a civil marriage license that took place in 2017, they reported that courts remained inconsistent in their rulings on the matter. By year's end, standardized procedures for issuing civil marriage licenses to couples with no religious affiliation designated had not been developed.

In May the country's Supreme Administrative Court ruled that regulators must block the YouTube service for one month because of the availability of a video, "The Innocence of Muslims," that denigrated the Prophet Muhammad. A lower court had ordered in 2013 the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to block YouTube because of the video, but the decision had been appealed and the court's ruling has not been implemented.

The minister of immigration and expatriate affairs was the only Christian in the cabinet. On August 30, as part of a nationwide governors' reshuffle, President al-Sisi appointed Christian governors to the Damietta and Dakahliya governorates, the first such appointments since April 2011 when the government suspended the appointment of a Copt to Qena in Upper Egypt following protests. The new Governor of Damietta was the country's first-ever female Christian governor.

Christians remained underrepresented in the military and security services. Christians admitted at the entry-level of government institutions were rarely promoted to the upper ranks of government entities, according to sources. According to a press report, a senior Christian judge in line for promotion to the leadership of the Administrative Prosecution was reportedly denied the position in May due to her religion. When a Muslim judge challenged the failure to promote her, he was dismissed.

No Christians served as presidents of the country's 25 public universities. In January for the first time, a Christian was appointed as dean of the dental school of Cairo University. 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 government generally permitted foreign religious workers in the country. Sources reported, however, some religious workers were denied visas or refused entry upon arrival without explanation.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) stated that it continued to develop a new curriculum that included increased coverage of respect for human rights and religious tolerance. In the fall, kindergarten and first grade students began instruction under the new curriculum. According to the MOE, the new curriculum for subsequent grade levels would be introduced yearly. Local English-language press reported in May that curriculum reform plans, aimed at encouraging tolerance, included a textbook for use in religious studies classes to be attended jointly by Muslim and Coptic Christian students. Muslim and Christian students previously attended separate religion

classes. Minister of Awqaf Gomaa, whose ministry oversees Islamic studies courses in the country's schools, announced the plan. The press reported that the planned textbook drew criticism from conservative Muslims.

In January the grand mufti issued a fatwa that defined greeting Christians on Coptic Christmas as an act of righteousness. During the same month, Minister of Awqaf Gomaa affirmed the protection of churches “as legitimate as defending mosques,” and said that those who died in the defense of a church were “martyrs.”

In August Al-Azhar issued a statement criticizing ISIS for issuing fatwas justifying the killing of non-Muslims and stressed its prohibition.

In June the Ministry of Awqaf completed training in Quranic interpretation and other Islamic texts for 300 female preachers (*wa'ezat*). In July the government published an action plan for “renewing religious discourse” that included hiring and training imams and expanding the role of women in religious preaching. The ministry opened a new training academy for preachers in October and announced that women could begin to serve as preachers in mosques and schools, serve on governing boards of mosques, and sing in choirs dedicated to liturgical music.

In December President al-Sisi decreed that the government create an agency tasked with countering sectarian strife. The new Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents would be headed by the president's advisor for security and counter terrorism affairs and composed of members from the Military Operations Authority, the Military and General Intelligence Services, the NSS, and the Administrative Oversight Agency. The new committee was charged with devising a strategy to prevent sectarian incidents, address them as they occur, and apply all antidiscrimination and antihate laws in carrying out these responsibilities. The committee had the authority to invite ministers, their representatives, or representatives of concerned bodies to meetings. The government stated that the strategy would include awareness-raising campaigns, promotion of religious tolerance, and possible mechanisms for dealing with individual incidents.

Al-Azhar continued to host events to promote religious tolerance. In February the grand imam received a delegation from the Anglican Communion and stressed the importance of dialogue between religions. In July the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Archbishop of Canterbury organized an interfaith conference in London for young Muslims and Christians. In October Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb visited Pope Francis in the Vatican, where they stressed their commitment to religious dialogue.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 2, armed assailants attacked three buses carrying Christian pilgrims to a monastery in Minya in Upper Egypt, killing seven and wounding 19. Media reported the attackers used automatic weapons to spray the buses indiscriminately, targeting men, women, and children. The local ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement. Media reported that ISIS repeatedly vowed to attack the country's Christians

as punishment for their support of the government. Following the attack, authorities stated they killed 19 individuals suspected of involvement in the assault in a shootout west of Minya. The government did not present evidence to link these individuals to the attack, and a local human rights activist argued these shootings might have constituted extrajudicial killings.

On January 14, armed assailants killed a man in North Sinai upon discovering he was Christian, according to press. Following a series of attacks against Christians in North Sinai that began in January 2017, more than 250 Christian families left the region, according to EIPR. Displaced families reported they remained unable to return to their homes.

On May 26, seven Christians were injured in the village of Shoqaf in Beheira while attempting to defend a church from an attack by Muslim villagers. The church had been used for religious services for three years, and had applied for a license in January 2017. According to the press, calls to attack the church had come from a nearby mosque. Police arrested 11 Muslims and nine Christians. All of those arrested were released following a customary reconciliation session, and the church remained open.

There were reported incidents of mob action against, and collective punishment of, Christians.

On January 17, Muslim villagers attacked the houses of three Christian families in the village of Al-Dawar in Beheira after a Christian man was accused of attempting to sexually assault a Muslim woman, according to press. Muslim villagers used stones and Molotov cocktails to attack local Christian property. Police arrested the Christian accused of sexual assault and two of his relatives, but none of the Muslim attackers. Following a customary reconciliation session attended by a number of parliamentarians, the village mayor and elders, it was agreed that the accused Christian would pay a fine and be expelled from the village.

In late August and early September local press reported Muslim residents of the village of Dimshaw Hashem in Minya Governorate in Upper Egypt protested Christian religious services held in an unlicensed church, and looted four Christian-owned houses before setting them on fire. The attack injured two Coptic villagers and a firefighter. Coptic Orthodox Bishop Macarius told the press numerous Christian villagers had informed local police about an imminent attack and that the police failed to take action. After the attack, police arrested and criminally charged multiple protesters, releasing them on September 27. EIPR subsequently criticized authorities for pressuring Copts to accept customary reconciliation in addressing the attacks. Referring to this case, Human Rights Watch stated that customary reconciliation “allows perpetrators to evade prosecution, while authorities offered no concrete future protections to the worshippers and their families.”

Similar to the previous year, the Coptic Orthodox Church refused to participate in government-sponsored customary reconciliation as a substitute to criminal proceedings to address attacks on Christians and their churches. However, customary reconciliation continued to take place without its participation. Human rights groups and Christian

community representatives said that the practice constituted an encroachment on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship, and effectively precluded recourse to the judicial system. Human rights activists said that, as part of the process, Christians were regularly pressured to retract their statements and deny facts, leading to the dropping of charges.

Discrimination in private sector hiring continued, including in professional sports, according to human rights groups and religious communities. According to the press, the country's participation in the World Cup highlighted the absence of Christian players from the national team and major club teams. The Christian community told the press clubs excluded Christian players from tryouts. Press reported there were no Christian players on the national soccer team for more than 15 years. A single Christian player played for one of the 18 top clubs the previous season. Coptic Pope Tawadros II told the press that the lack of Christians in Egyptian soccer was “extraordinary.”

Some religious leaders and media personalities continued to employ discriminatory language against Christians. In March exiled Salafi cleric Wagdi Ghoneim told the press senior officials who maintained good relations with Christians were *kafirs* (infidels). Dar Al-Iftaa condemned the statement, and said Ghoneim wrongly interpreted Islamic texts. Television preacher Abdullah Roshdi said that “It is prohibited for Muslims to congratulate non-Muslims on their religious occasions because it expresses support for practices that Islam considers to be acts of unbelief.” Dar al Iftaa and Al Azhar issued several fatwas permitting and encouraging Muslims to congratulate Christians on their holidays.

Reports of societal anti-Semitism continued. Journalists and academics made statements on state-owned TV endorsing conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of world media and the economy, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). In a June interview on a state-owned channel, law professor Nabil Hilmi said, “Jews control the money and the media,” adding that they have a 50-year plan to reach Mecca and Medina.

In May Chair of the Hebrew Language Department at Menoufia University, Professor Amr Allam, said on a weekly show on a state-owned channel that “Israeli violence...is embedded in the Jewish genes.”

Anti-Israel and anti-Semitic statements continued in the wake of the December 2017 U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the subsequent move of the embassy to Jerusalem. According to a MEMRI report, Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayyeb blamed Israel for terrorism in the Middle East in a January interview on a state-owned channel. He described Israel as a “dagger plunged into the body of the Arab world,” and said that were it not for “Zionist entity abuse...the Middle East would have progressed.” He said Arab infighting worked to the advantage of Israel, which he claimed would “march on the Kaaba and on the Prophet's Mosque [in Medina].”

In January Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church co-sponsored a conference addressing terrorism. Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqqouq, secretary general of the Egyptian Family House, an Al-Azhar and Coptic Orthodox Church initiative created to send religious leaders to

defuse community tensions following sectarian violence, called for religious scholars to challenge terrorism and include education to protect future generations from what he termed the mistaken ideas of extremism. He stated that all Muslims suffered from the consequences of terrorism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The President discussed religious freedom and the treatment of Egypt’s Coptic community during his meeting with President al-Sisi during the UN General Assembly session in September. The Vice President discussed religious freedom issues during his visit to Cairo in January. Other U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Charge d’Affaires, and other Department of State, embassy, and consulate general officials, raised religious freedom concerns with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Awqaf, as well as with members of parliament, governors, and representatives of Islamic institutions, church communities, religious minority groups, and civil society groups. In their meetings with government officials, the Charge and other embassy and consulate general officers emphasized the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and raised a number of key issues, including attacks on Christians, recognition of Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, the rights of Shia Muslims to perform religious rituals publicly, and the discrimination and religious freedom abuses resulting from official religious designations on national identity and other official documents.

Throughout the year, embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with senior officials in the offices of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and bishops and senior pastors of Protestant churches. Issues raised included cases in which the government failed to hold the perpetrators of sectarian violence accountable and failed to protect victims of sectarian attacks; prosecuted individuals for religious defamation; and enabled religious discrimination by means of official religious designations including on national identity cards.

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 government engagements. Embassy representatives also met with leading religious figures, including the Grand Mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa, the chairman of the Sufi Council, leading Christian clergy, and representatives of the Jewish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Baha’i communities. The embassy also promoted religious freedom on social media throughout the year, including three posts on the 2017 International Religious Freedom Report that reached 30,000 people and four on the 2018 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom that reached 20,000 people.

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