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2019 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 (i.e. Abrahamic) religions 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. In December the Prisons Authority carried out the death sentence of Ibrahim Ismail who was convicted in April of killing eight Christians and a policeman in 2017. In May the Supreme Court of Military Appeals upheld 17 of 36 death sentences that an Alexandria military court issued for church bombings between 2016 and 2017 in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks. In May the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced two defendants to death, two to life imprisonment, and six others to prisons terms ranging from three to six years for killing 11 persons in December 2017, in an attack on a Coptic church and Christian-owned shop in a suburb south of Cairo. On February 9, authorities arrested Muslim students at Al-Azhar for posting video footage mocking Christian religious practices. Under a 2016 law issued to legalize unlicensed churches and facilitate the construction of new churches, the government reported having issued 814 licenses to existing but previously unlicensed churches and related support buildings, bringing the cumulative total to 1412 of 5,415 applications for licensure. In April the NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) condemned the involvement of the security services in the closure of the Anba Karas Church and called for the reopening of churches closed since the implementation of the 2016 church construction law. Local authorities continued to periodically rely on customary reconciliation sessions instead of the official judicial system to resolve sectarian disputes. In April security officials closed a church in the Upper Egyptian village of Nagib in response to threats of an attack by Muslim villagers. In November Christians in the Upper Egyptian village of Hgara were directed to rebuild their church three kilometers (1.9 miles) outside the village following a customary reconciliation session related to a dispute with the local Muslim population. According to an international NGO, there were no Shia congregational halls (*housseiniyahs*) or houses of worship in the country. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) continued to issue required certifications for Sunni imams and to register and license all mosques. On February 4, Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb and Pope Francis signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together during their visit to Abu Dhabi.

On January 3, ISIS released a video statement threatening “bloody attacks during the upcoming (Orthodox) Christmas celebrations,” and to “take revenge on Egypt’s Christians.” The statement included a threat to the life of Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II. According to press reports, unidentified men suspected to be members of ISIS abducted a Christian based on his religious affiliation at a checkpoint near Al-Arish in Northern Sinai on January 17. His fate was unknown at year’s end. In January a religious sheikh at a mosque alerted security at the Church of the Virgin Mary in Nasr City, Cairo, to possible explosives in the vicinity of the church, where police later discovered an improvised explosive device (IED). One police officer died and two others were injured as they attempted to defuse the bomb. Eshad, a website that records sectarian attacks, documented a 29 percent reduction in intercommunal violence between 2018 and 2019. According to human rights groups and religious communities, discrimination in private sector hiring continued, including in professional sports. Of the 540 players in the top-tier professional soccer clubs, only one was Christian. Some religious leaders and media personalities continued to employ discriminatory language against Christians.

U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, Ambassador, and former Charge d’Affaires, as well as visiting senior-level delegations from Washington and embassy representatives and officials of the former consulate general in Alexandria 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 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 101.8 million (midyear 2019 estimate). Most experts and media sources state that approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and approximately 10 percent is 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 persons, 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. 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 six to 10 Jews. There are no reliable estimates of the number of atheists.

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 budgetary allocation from the government, which is required by the constitution to provide “sufficient funding for it to achieve its purposes,” was almost 16 billion Egyptian pounds (\$1 billion).

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 the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their respective 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, stating 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 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. A woman in this situation can continue to live with her husband until she has a legal need to prove her marriage, at which time the marriage may be considered void. 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 applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating 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.

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 Center, the Dar Al Iftaa (House of Religious Edicts), and the Ministry of Awqaf’s General Fatwa Directorate. Previously 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 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 MOI’s 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 (\$3,100). 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 does not follow the guidelines loses the bonus and may be subject to disciplinary measures, including losing his preaching license. The ministry also issues prewritten sermons as an obligatory guide for imams to draw from, 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 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 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 required to respond within four months of receipt of the 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 does not 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 list of 10 provisions requiring that new mosques built after that date must, among other conditions, be a minimum distance of 500 meters (1600 feet) from the nearest other mosque, have

a ground surface of at least 175 square meters (1900 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. 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 that serves approximately two million students from elementary 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 and/or a fine of no less than 30,000 pounds (\$1,900) and no more than 50,000 pounds (\$3,100) 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 (\$3,100) and no more than 100,000 pounds (\$6,300).

Customary reconciliation is a form of dispute resolution that predates modern judicial and legal systems. 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.

Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church formed the Family House (Beit Al-A’ila) in 2011 to address sectarian disputes through communal reconciliation. With Family House branches throughout the country, Al-Azhar, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and other Christian denominations convene opposing parties to a sectarian dispute with the goal of restoring communal peace through dialogue. The Family House, however, is not uniformly active. Sources say in some areas, such as Assiut, the Family House is quite active, while in others, such as Cairo, it has become inactive.

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 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 the state eliminate all forms of discrimination through an independent commission to be established by parliament. However, by year’s end, parliament still had not yet established such a commission.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 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 December the Prisons Authority carried out the death sentence of Ibrahim Ismail, who was convicted in April of killing eight Christians and a policeman in December 2017.

In May the Supreme Court of Military Appeals upheld 17 of 36 death sentences that an Alexandria military court issued for the bombings of Coptic churches between 2016 and 2017 in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta, resulting in the deaths of more than 80 persons. The court commuted the sentences of 19 other defendants to life imprisonment, eight to 15 years, and another to 10 years. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks. International human rights organizations expressed concern about these mass convictions and said the proceedings did not meet international fair trial standards.

In May the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced two defendants to death, two to life imprisonment, and six others to prison terms ranging from three to six years for killing 11 persons in December 2017 in an attack on a Coptic church and Christian-owned shop in Helwan, a suburb south of Cairo.

On July 1, the Court of Cassation upheld a death sentence issued against a suspect convicted of killing two Copts, terrorizing the Christian community of Shamiya village in Assiut, and imposing taxes on the village in 2013-14.

On March 30, a Cairo court sentenced 30 men to prison terms of 10 years to life for planning a suicide bombing of a church in Alexandria as well as other charges, including the bombing of a liquor store in Damietta. Eighteen defendants received life terms, eight received 15 years in prison, and four received 10 years. Ten of those convicted remained at large, and the court sentenced them in absentia. Authorities said the defendants had embraced ISIS ideology.

On December 11, a group of UN special rapporteurs publicly called on the government to end the detention and ill treatment of Ramy Kamel Saied Salid, who worked to defend the rights of the country’s Coptic Christian minority. According to a December press release issued by the UN Human Rights Council, as well as NGO and media sources, authorities arrested, questioned, and tortured Kamel on November 4 and November 23. They charged him with joining a banned group and spreading false news. His arrest coincided with his application for a Swiss visa to speak at a Geneva UN forum on November 28 and 29, where, in the past, he discussed issues relating to the Coptic community. According to the statement, police broke into Kamel’s home on November 23 and confiscated personal documents, a laptop, camera, and mobile phone before taking him to an unknown location.

On February 7, Christian activists circulated a video depicting a group of Al-Azhar students mocking Christian religious practices. Al-Azhar University referred the students to a disciplinary board at the university and in a statement said Al-Azhar strongly condemned such actions. On February 9, authorities arrested the students for “inciting sectarian strife” and subsequently released them on bail on February 27. At year’s end the case was still pending.

In January atheist blogger Sherif Gaber launched a crowdfunding page called “Help Me Escape Egypt” to purchase another nationality so he could leave the country. Authorities banned Gaber from travel abroad in 2018 and accused him of insulting Islam and sharia, disrupting communal peace, and other charges stemming from a series of videos he posted on YouTube. On September 16, Gaber posted on his Facebook page that he was sentenced to three years in prison for contempt of religions and disturbing the public peace.

Efforts to combat atheism sometimes received official support, including from multiple members of parliament, although in late 2018 President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi stated individuals have the “right to worship God” as they see fit or “even worship nothing.” On March 22, Al-Azhar announced the formation of a “Bayan” (Declaration) Unit in its Center for Electronic Fatwa that would focus on “counter(ing) atheism” and preventing youth from “falling into disbelief.”

The government prosecuted some perpetrators of crimes targeting Christians and instances of sectarian violence. 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 individuals with attacking Thabet and another 25 with attacking Thabet’s home and six other homes owned by Christians. In June, after the court in Beni Suef referred the case to the Minya Criminal Court, the Minya court postponed hearing the case, which was still pending at year’s end. On February 17, the Ain Shams Misdemeanors Court sentenced a man who had stormed a church and attacked security officers in November 2018 to three years’ imprisonment.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, authorities interrogated several of their members due to their status as a “banned group” during the year. In February security officials twice “violently interrogated” a Jehovah’s Witness in Upper Egypt, threatening, blindfolding, and beating him and confiscating his cell phone and personal identification. In April, October, and November, police officials in Cairo summoned individual Jehovah’s Witnesses to their office for questioning. In April officials summoned a Jehovah’s Witness in Minya for interrogation. In September security officials allowed more than 200 Jehovah’s Witnesses to hold a religious meeting in a private home.

There were multiple reports of the government closing unlicensed churches following protests and sometimes failing to extend procedural safeguards or rights of due process to members of minority faiths, particularly in Upper Egypt. On January 7, following a Mass celebrating Coptic Christmas, a crowd of Muslims protested the presence of the unlicensed Mar Girgis Church in the village of Manshiyet Zaafarana in Minya in Upper Egypt. On January 11, a crowd reportedly gathered again and chanted anti-Christian slogans until police and security forces intervened to disperse the crowd and closed the church. The Coptic Diocese of Minya subsequently released a video and statement that indicated security forces aided Muslim residents seeking to close the church. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted the Coptic Diocese of Minya, “Every time, the extremists are able to impose their demands.”

In February press reported local Christians had conducted three funerals of church congregants in the streets of Kom el-Raheb due to their continued denial of access to the church, which authorities closed in 2018. In July press reported Copts from Kom el-Raheb stormed into the closed church and staged a sit-in protesting the church’s

continued closure. According to press reports, unknown persons burned down three Christian-owned properties following the sit-in. According to press reports, the church and individual church members blamed local government authorities and security forces for siding with anti-Christian “hard-liners.”

On April 12, a mob protesting the unlicensed expansion of the Anba Karas Church in the village of Nagaa el-Ghafir in Sohag Governorate attacked the church with rocks and wounded two Christians. Security forces intervened to stop the attack and ordered the church closed. In April EIPR condemned the involvement of the security services in the closure of the church and called for the reopening of churches closed since the implementation of the 2016 church construction law. EIPR reported there had been 32 sectarian incidents between 2016 and April 2019 and stated security forces were responsible for the closure of 22 unlicensed churches, with up to four closed during the year.

According to official statistics, the government approved 814 applications to license churches and related buildings during the year, and, since September 2017, approved 1,412 of the 5,415 pending applications to license of churches and related buildings. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) quoted Coptic Orthodox Bishop Makarios of Minya as saying his diocese had approximately 150 villages and neighborhoods in need of a church or other religious buildings.

As it did in previous years, the government in September 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 Shia commemoration of Ashura. Although in previous years the government explained the closure was due to construction, reports in media stated the Ministry of Al-Awqaf circulated internal correspondence affirming the ministry would not allow any “sectarian practices,” and any attempts of sectarian “parades,” especially around the mosques of the Prophet’s family, would be confronted.

According to Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), an international NGO, there continued to be no *huseiniyahs* in the country and Shia Muslims remained unable to establish public places of worship. MRGI reported in January, “The state has failed to respect the right of the Shia to practice their religious rituals” and that security services often subjected Shia citizens traveling on religious pilgrimages to interrogations, sometimes including torture. According to MRGI, Shia risked accusations of blasphemy for publicly voicing their religious opinions, praying in public, or owning books promoting Shia thought. Shia Muslims said they were excluded from service in the armed services and security and intelligence services.

In July the Ministry of Awqaf announced a 12-day closure of the Imam Al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo for maintenance. Community members said the actual reason for the closure was a call from Sufi groups to gather in the mosque square in response to an *Al-Doustour* newspaper article critical of Imam Hussein, entitled “Hussein Unjust,” that Sufi adherents deemed insulting to religion.

There were reports of government actions targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government designated as a terrorist organization, and individuals associated with the group. The government in 2013 banned the Brotherhood’s political party, the Freedom and Justice Party. In an October 7 press conference, Minister of Education Tarek Shawki announced the government was dismissing 1,070 public school teachers because of “extremist ideas.” A former senior official in the Ministry of Education (MOE) told the press the Muslim Brotherhood was targeting primary school students to continue to propagate its ideology.

According to June press reports, a mob attacked the homes of a Christian and his two relatives in the village of Ashnin in Upper Egypt. The mob forced its way into the homes and destroyed furniture and appliances before being dispersed by local police. Following an investigation, police arrested three Christians but none of the attackers. After a customary reconciliation session, the Christians were released and charges were dropped. According to the NGO International Christian Concern, on April 30, a customary reconciliation meeting was held in the Upper Egypt village of Nagib after threats of a potential mob attack by Muslim villagers led security officials to close the village’s church. The NGO also stated that a November customary reconciliation session in Hgara village, located in Upper Egypt, resulted in local Christians being told that they must rebuild their church three kilometers (1.9 miles) outside the village.

While the Coptic Orthodox Church does not bar participation in government-sponsored customary reconciliation sessions, according to its spokesman, reconciliation sessions should not be used in lieu of application of the law and should be restricted to “clearing the air and making amends” following sectarian disputes or violence. While at least one Coptic Orthodox diocese in Upper Egypt refused to participate in reconciliation sessions due to criticism that they frequently were substitutes for criminal proceedings to address attacks on Christians and their churches, Orthodox Church leaders took part in two customary reconciliation sessions in other dioceses, according to EIPR. Although other Christian denominations continued to participate in customary reconciliation sessions, human rights groups and many Christian community representatives said the practice constituted an encroachment on the principles of nondiscrimination and citizenship and pressured Christians to retract their statements and deny facts, leading to the dropping of formal criminal charges.

On January 25, MRGI released a report, *Justice Denied, Promises Broken: The Situation of Egypt’s Minorities Since 2014*, which stated, “A key factor in the prevalence of sectarian attacks against Christian communities is the continued practice of ‘reconciliation sessions’ between communities, often with the active encouragement of police and officials. This reliance on informal justice approaches that are usually weighted heavily in favor of the Muslim majority is further entrenched by the failure of security forces and the formal judiciary to discharge their

responsibilities to prevent and punish targeted attacks on Christians...The dominance of this partial system of informal justice is accompanied by the failure of the formal justice system to protect Christian and other minority victims.”

As it has in previous years prior to Ramadan, the Ministry of Awqaf in April announced restrictions on the practice of reclusion (*itikaaf*), a Sunni Muslim religious ritual requiring adherents to spend 10 days of prayer in mosques during Ramadan. As in previous years, 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.

In May the Ministry of Awqaf ordered imams limit the length of Ramadan night prayers (*tarawih*) to 10 minutes, and banned mention of political topics, the government, or political figures in prayers. At the start of Ramadan in May, Minister of Awqaf Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa announced the ministry had decided to close *zawiyas* (small prayer rooms used as mosques) during Ramadan and to restrict the use of loudspeakers.

In April the Ministry of Awqaf announced its intention to permanently close unauthorized mosques. There was no coordinated implementation of a policy of closures during the year.

The government did not prevent Baha’is, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Shia Muslims from worshiping privately in small numbers, according to community representatives. The government, however, continued to refuse their requests for public religious gatherings.

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. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, on March 23, the High Administrative Court rejected an appeal by the Witnesses to overturn a 1985 law that prevents their members from registering property ownership and marriages. The court ruled the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses contradict the public order and morals in the country.

In August the Ministry of Awqaf gave Yasser Borhami, the deputy head of the Salafist Call, the umbrella organization of the country’s Salafi movements, approval to deliver sermons during Friday prayers at an Alexandria mosque. Borhami had previously stated Muslims should not send holiday greetings to Christians or watch soccer games and had described Christianity as polytheism, said churches should not be allowed in the country, and Muslim taxi and bus drivers should not transport Christian clergy. Critics said Borhami’s past comments reflected hostility towards Christians and non-Salafi Muslims; they condemned the ministry’s decision allowing him to return to preaching.

On August 29, the Anti-Defamation League published a report, *Anti-Semitic Show Does Not Belong on Egyptian State Television*, detailing how a program, *Blue Line*, which aired on the government-run Channel Two, propagated a broad range of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The claims included Holocaust denial, Jewish control of U.S. banking, media, and government, and blood libel.

The UN Human Rights Council began its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the country’s commitments under the ICCPR in November. Previous UPRs took place in 2010 and 2014. In submissions for the UPR, NGOs stated discrimination and sectarian violence against Copts persisted at the local level, often with inadequate intervention from security services to prevent it; many religious minorities lived in fear of societal persecution; Christians still faced discrimination in education and workplaces, and the law on the Construction and Reparation of Churches placed many restrictions on Christians attempting to restore or build new churches, while defining them as a “sect,” contrary to their right to equal citizenship. In its submission, the government stated, “certain practical steps have been taken to combat intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, and incitement to violence on the basis of religion or belief.” The government cited several initiatives that it had undertaken in this regard, including the circulation of pamphlets and brochures, changes to the educational system, new classes, and employing the authority and expertise of Al-Azhar and other Islamic institutions to promote tolerance, moderation, and a culture of dialogue.

The minister of immigration and expatriate affairs was the only Christian in the cabinet. In 2018, 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, according to sources.

No Christians served as presidents of the country’s 25 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 government generally permitted foreign religious workers to enter the country. Sources continued to report, however, that some religious workers were denied visas or refused entry upon arrival without explanation.

The MOE continued to develop a new curriculum that included increased coverage of respect for human rights and religious tolerance. In the fall, second grade students began instruction using revised textbooks under the new curriculum after it was introduced in first grade and kindergarten in 2018.

The president established a Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents in 2018, tasked with devising a strategy to prevent such incidents, addressing them as they occur, and applying the rule of law. The committee, headed by the president’s advisor for security and counter terrorism affairs, is composed of members from the Military Operations Authority, the Military and General Intelligence Services, the National Security Sector (NSS), and the Administrative Oversight Agency. TIMEP said the committee did not include representatives of the judiciary, legislature, human rights groups, or of any minority communities. According to press, however, the committee is entitled to invite ministers, officials, and religious leaders to its meetings when considering topics relevant to them. The committee held its inaugural meeting on January 16 to look into a January 11 attack by a crowd of approximately 1,000 Muslim villagers on Coptic villagers of Manshiyet Zaafarana in Minya. Coptic parliamentarian Emad Gad observed the committee did not issue any statement on the incident, even though it was formed to combat sectarian violence. Since the inaugural meeting, EIPR reported the committee had not announced any subsequent meetings.

Al-Azhar continued to host events to promote religious tolerance. On March 10, the Al-Azhar Center for Interfaith Dialogue and the Episcopal Church co-organized a conference on equal citizenship to promote interreligious tolerance and a shared sense of belonging, according to media reports. In May the Center for Interfaith Dialogue launched a new campaign entitled “God Hears Your Dialogue” to increase awareness among youth of the importance and necessity of dialogue to promote peaceful coexistence. In September Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Awqaf participated in the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.

In a January 7 statement, the Al-Azhar Curricula Development Committee announced its introduction of new primary, secondary, and university textbooks that promote religious tolerance in the 11,000 schools under its purview. The statement read that the new texts would focus on unity between Muslims and Christians and would stress the concept of citizenship without distinction on the basis of religious belief.

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 grew to approximately 100 employees, who monitored and offered counterarguments to religious statements on jihadi websites. The center’s website and social media employed several languages to reach foreign audiences, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, and Farsi. Al-Azhar, through the Al-Azhar International Academy, also began offering courses on a wide range of subjects related to Islam to imams and preachers in 20 countries. Prominent members of parliament strongly criticized Al-Azhar for failing to rapidly institute the president’s directive to launch a renewal of religious discourse as a means to combat extremism, and for exercising excessive independence from the government. An EIPR analyst reported that President al-Sisi insisted Al-Azhar exert greater efforts to combat extremist ideas. Another EIPR analyst said Al-Azhar’s overseas programs were part of “Al-Azhar’s vision of itself as the guardian of Islam around the world and as a partner – rather than an affiliated institution – to the Egyptian state.”

On February 4, Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb and Pope Francis signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* during their visit to Abu Dhabi. The document condemned practices “detrimental to human life and freedom,” and pledged cooperation to combat extremism and promote peace.

In June President al-Sisi delivered a speech during a ceremony in Cairo for *Laylat al-Qadr* (the 27th day of Ramadan that commemorates the first revelation of the Quran) in which he said, “When we wish our Christian brothers a happy feast and (congratulate them) on building new churches, we represent our religion.” President al-Sisi added that the country’s main goal was to preserve the essence of religion, to raise religious awareness, and combat extremist threats among youth.

Dar al-Iftaa and Al-Azhar issued several fatwas permitting and encouraging Muslims to congratulate Christians on their holidays. At the January 7 inauguration of the Cathedral of the Nativity, the largest church in the region, and the Al-Fattah Al-Aleem Mosque in the New Administrative Capital, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar said Islam obliged Muslims to safeguard houses of worship for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. President al-Sisi also attended the opening of the newly built mosque and the cathedral, where for the fifth consecutive year he celebrated Christmas services with Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros.

In February the *Jerusalem Post* reported President al-Sisi met with a visiting delegation of private U.S. citizens and told them the government would welcome a resurgence of the Jewish community in the country and that it would support such a resurgence with the construction of synagogues and help with related services. According to the report, the president also promised to address concerns about the ancient Jewish Bassatine Cemetery, which had fallen into disrepair. Following the meeting, the government facilitated a brief trash cleanup effort of the cemetery involving work crews from multiple municipalities; however, NGO representatives said the government did not contribute to the rehabilitation of the cemetery.

The Ministry of Antiquities (MOA) engaged in a multimillion dollar effort to restore the Eliyahu HaNevi synagogue, one of two remaining in the greater Alexandria area. Authorities stated progress at the synagogue underscored the government’s commitment to preserve the country’s Jewish heritage and very small remaining community, and that this was a reflection of a broader policy of stressing the government’s commitment to safeguarding religious diversity and freedom.

On February 7, the Ministry of Awqaf announced it would prepare a “unique and distinctive architectural style” for all new mosques in the country. The ministry said it would conduct a design competition to decide on details and that only mosques designed in accordance with the new guidance would be granted construction permits in the future.

In July the state-run University of Alexandria and state-run University of Damanhour announced the establishment of centers of Coptic studies, in collaboration with the Coptic Orthodox Church. The institutes will include courses in the study of Coptic language, literature, history, and art.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 3, ISIS released a video statement threatening “bloody attacks during the upcoming (Orthodox) Christmas celebrations,” and to “take revenge on Egypt’s Christians.” The statement included a threat on the life of Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II. According to press reports, unidentified men suspected to be members of ISIS abducted a Christian at a checkpoint near Al-Arish in northern Sinai on January 17 based on his religious affiliation. The men had been checking the identification of motorists and abducted the man after learning he was Christian. On January 25, ISIS released a statement that read, “the soldiers of the Islamic State in Sinai set up an ambush to target the apostates.” According to media reports, the man had still not been located at the end of the year and his fate was unknown.

On January 5, a sheikh at a neighboring mosque alerted security at the Church of the Virgin Mary in Nasr City to possible explosives in the vicinity of the church, where police discovered an IED. One police officer died and two others were injured when the IED exploded while it was being defused. While there were no immediate claims of responsibility, in December the NSS arrested three students of Al Azhar University and accused them of planting the explosives. The investigation continued through year’s end.

Esshad, a website that records sectarian attacks, documented a 29 percent reduction in intercommunal violence between 2018 and 2019.

Discrimination in private sector hiring continued, including in professional sports, according to human rights groups and religious communities. According to a Coptic Christian advocacy group, of the 540 players in the top-tier professional soccer clubs, only one was Christian.

In May EIPR called on authorities to provide followers of unrecognized religions the right to obtain identity cards, marriage certificates, and private burials and to sue in accordance with their own personal status laws.

Some religious leaders and media personalities continued to employ discriminatory language against Christians. In January Salafi cleric Wagdi Ghoneim posted a video in which he criticized Al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb for participating in the opening ceremony of the cathedral in the New Administrative Capital. Ghoneim said Islam considers Copts infidels, and that those who accept the Christian religion or assist them in practicing it are nonbelievers.

Reports of societal anti-Semitism continued. Journalists and academics made statements on state-owned television endorsing conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of world media and the economy. In May Egyptian-born Canadian actor Mena Massoud received heavy criticism in the press and on various social media platforms for his interview with a prominent Israeli online news site. In August commentators and local anti-Zionist organizations strongly criticized a theatre performance on the Holocaust performed by university students and accused members of the cast of glorifying Zionism and insulting Muslims.

On January 28, attorney and activist Samir Sabri brought suit on behalf of a group of Muslim scholars seeking to ban the movie, *The Guest*, for misrepresenting Islam. The Cairo Court of Urgent Cases scheduled a hearing for February 23, and then postponed it until April 6. The case remained open through year’s end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials at multiple levels, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and the then-Charge d’Affaires, 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, embassy 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 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. They also discussed progress on religious freedom issues, such as issuance of permits for, and new construction of, churches, political support for

Christian and Jewish communities, and the restoration of Jewish religious sites. The then-Charge visited Alexandria’s Eliyahu HaNevi Synagogue in October and met with MOA officials to discuss the ministry’s ongoing efforts to restore the synagogue, part of a public effort by the government to preserve the legacy of the Jewish community and to support religious diversity.

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 Imam of Al-Azhar, the Grand Mufti of Dar Al-Iftaa, leading Christian clergy, and representatives of the Jewish, Baha’i, and Shia communities. The embassy also promoted religious freedom on social media during the year, including two posts on the 2018 International Religious Freedom Report that reached 20,000 persons and five posts on the 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom that reached 65,000 readers.

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