



# 2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Egypt

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## Executive Summary

The Constitutional Declaration of March 2011 and the new constitution ratified on December 22 provide for some freedom of religion, but certain constitutional provisions, laws, and government policies and practices limit that freedom. The government's respect for religious freedom remained poor during the year. While the 2012 constitution stipulates that "freedom of belief is an inviolable right," some provisions provide less protection than the previous constitution. The 2012 constitution requires that the government protect the right to practice religious rituals and establish places of worship only for adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It also makes these rights conditional by adding the ambiguous clause, "as regulated by the law." Like previous constitutions, it stipulates that Islam is the official religion of the state and the principles of Sharia (Islamic law) are the primary sources of legislation. Some interpret Article 4 of the new constitution as granting Al Azhar, the country's preeminent center of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, the authority to define and interpret Sharia; others believe the constitution leaves this authority primarily with the courts. The new constitution explicitly prohibits offending or criticizing religious prophets and messengers, whereas in the past demeaning or defaming Islam, Christianity, or Judaism was prohibited only by law. Prosecutors actively pursued criminal cases against those whose statements or actions were alleged to be blasphemous or denigrating of religion.

While recognized and unrecognized religious minorities mostly worshiped without harassment, the government generally failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes against members of religious minority groups, especially Coptic Christians, which fostered a climate of impunity. In some cases, government authorities reacted slowly or with insufficient resolve while mobs attacked Christians and their property, or encouraged Christians to leave their homes. Christians, Shiites, Bahais, and other minorities faced personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and the ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government also sometimes arrested, detained, or harassed members of minority Muslim sects. The government routinely failed to condemn incendiary speech, including anti-Semitic and anti-Christian speech.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although lethal sectarian attacks decreased markedly during the year, compelled

expulsions and collective punishment increased. Local Islamists also carried out isolated acts of intimidation against some Christians in Upper Egypt, likely leading to fewer Christians voting in some villages in the constitutional referendum in December 2012. Some members of the Muslim Brotherhood suggested that Christians were the only people protesting against President Morsy's constitutional decree. Citizens also filed more cases than in previous years against Christians, accusing them of blasphemy or denigrating Islam.

The president, the secretary of state, the ambassador, and other senior administration officials have made clear that the Egyptian government has the responsibility to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion, and have raised strong U.S. concerns about religious violence and discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the public. Specifically, Secretary Clinton met in July with Christian religious and lay leaders to better understand their concerns and convey U.S. support for religious freedom. She spoke publicly in the country about protecting individual and minority rights. The deputy secretary of state met earlier the same month with acting Coptic Orthodox Pope Bakhoumious. Embassy officers and other Department of State officials raised concerns about the government's failure to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence, discriminatory prosecution and sentencing of Christians, ongoing discrimination against Christians in building and maintaining church properties, and the government's treatment of Muslim citizens who hold heterodox beliefs or convert to other religions. The Department of State continued to sponsor programs in Egypt to promote religious tolerance and freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to a July 2012 U.S. government estimate, Egypt's population is 83 million. Approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and about 10 percent is Christian. The majority of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Other Christian communities together constitute less than 2 percent of the population and include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian), Maronite, Orthodox (Greek and Syrian), and Anglican/Episcopalian churches, which range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. A Protestant community, established in the mid-19th century, includes the following churches: Presbyterian, Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Shia Muslims constitute less than 1 percent of the population. There are also small groups of Quranists and Ahmadi Muslims. The country's Jewish community numbers fewer than 70 persons, mostly senior citizens. There are 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and 1,500 to 2,000 Bahais; however, the government does not recognize these groups.

Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

Many foreign religious groups, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, have been present in the country for more than a century. These groups are engaged in education, social, and development work. Some foreigners are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), a group the government does not recognize but allows to meet in private residences.

In a March 2011 report, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics states 108,395 mosques and 2,869 churches exist in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitutional Declaration of March 2011 and the new constitution ratified on December 22 provide for some freedom of religion, but certain constitutional provisions, laws, and government policies limit that freedom. The new constitution states that "freedom of belief is an inviolable right," but requires the government to protect the right to practice religious rites and establish places of worship only for adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It also makes these rights conditional by adding the ambiguous clause, "as regulated by law." By implication, followers of other religious groups, including Bahais and Christian churches the government does not recognize, are precluded from applying their own religious laws and restricted from building places of worship. Critics also claim that some provisions of the new constitution are ambiguous about the interpretation and application of Sharia, and could be used to limit religious freedom. Some laws, policies, and court rulings also limit freedom of religion. Discrimination in government and private hiring remains widespread, even though the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a decree in 2011 to amend provisions of the penal code to explicitly prohibit religious and other forms of discrimination.

Like the 1971 constitution and 2011 Constitutional Declaration, Article 2 of the new constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion and the principles of Sharia are the primary source of legislation. Article 219 of the new constitution broadly defines the principles of Sharia to encompass all attestations and precepts found within Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and Article 4 states that the opinion of Al Azhar University's Senior Scholars Committee "shall be taken on matters pertaining to Islamic Sharia." Liberals and Christians criticize these provisions for being overly vague, leaving room for future interpretation that could be either benign or harmful to religious freedom, depending on the views of those leading the government or Al Azhar.

The 2012 constitution stipulates that the country's political system is based on the principles of democracy, shura (consultation), and citizenship, and prohibits the formation of political parties that discriminate on the basis of gender, origin, or religion.

Article 44 of the 2012 constitution prohibits offending or criticizing prophets and messengers, and the penal code sets out the associated criminal penalties, including a minimum of six months and a maximum of five years' imprisonment for citizens who promulgate "extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning or defaming any of the heavenly religions, or inflicting damage to the national unity."

The government interprets Sharia as forbidding Muslims from converting to another religion despite there being no statutory prohibitions on conversion. This policy, along with the refusal of local officials to recognize such conversions legally, constitutes a prohibition in practice.

Neither the constitution nor the civil and penal codes prohibit proselytizing, and the government generally tolerates foreign religious workers on condition that they do not proselytize Muslims. Non-Muslim minorities and foreign religious workers generally refrain from proselytizing to avoid legal penalties, such as for disrupting social cohesion, and extra-legal repercussions from authorities and local Islamists.

The constitution permits Christians and Jews to refer to their religious laws in matters pertaining to personal status issues, religious practices, and the selection of their spiritual leaders. In family law, the government only recognizes the legal principles of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. When family law disputes involve a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, courts apply Islamic law. The government recognizes only the marriages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Non-Muslim men must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. A non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam, however, must divorce if her husband is not Muslim and he is unwilling to convert. Custody of children is then awarded to the mother.

Both Islamic and Coptic Orthodox religious laws prevent Coptic men and Muslim women from marrying each other and prevent a marriage outside the country between such individuals from being legally recognized.

The law provides for "khul" divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent provided that she is willing to forgo all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits.

Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights, but may be provided for in testamentary documents. Converts from Islam to Christianity lose all rights of inheritance. Because the government offers no legal means for such converts to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, apart from the recent exception for reconverts, a convert's loss of inheritance rights may not be indicated on civil documents.

The minor children of Muslim converts to Christianity, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, may automatically remain classified as Muslims because the government does not recognize conversion from Islam. This is true irrespective of the religion of the other parent.

The Ministry of Education bans the hijab (Islamic headscarf) in primary schools and only allows it in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

Various ministries may obtain court orders to ban or confiscate books and works of art. The Council of Ministers 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.

The Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) is required to license all mosques; however, many operate without licenses. The government in theory appoints and pays the salaries of all the imams who lead prayers in licensed mosques and monitors their sermons, but government control over mosques decreased after the 2011 revolution. The government does not compensate Christian clergy.

The constitution guarantees the freedom to establish places of worship for the "three divine religions," – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – but subjects that right to unspecified regulation by stating "in accordance with the law." Non-Muslims must obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues, but can undertake basic repairs and maintenance with written notification to local authorities. The president delegated the authority to permit Christian denominations to expand or rebuild existing churches to the country's 26 governors. Governors must examine all applications and their supporting documentation within 30 days. A Ministry of Interior (MOI) decree issued in the 1930s and still generally followed specifies a set of 10 conditions that the government must consider, including that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from an existing mosque and that churches in Muslim-majority neighborhoods need local approval, before forwarding an application to the president for a decree for construction of a new church.

To obtain official recognition a religious group must submit a request to the MOI's Religious Affairs Department. The department then determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset 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 registration is then referred to the president for decision. If a religious group fails to obtain official

registration, its members potentially face detention and prosecution for harming social cohesion or, under article 98(f) of the Penal Code, for denigrating religions.

Only Islam, Christianity, or Judaism may be indicated in the religion field of government-issued national identity cards. However, Muslim-born citizens who convert from Islam may not change that field. After a lengthy court battle in 2009, members of the Bahai community are able to obtain identity cards with a "dash" in the religion field, but their marriages are not recognized or listed on the identity cards. Since 2011 Christians who convert to Islam and then back to Christianity may amend their national identification cards to reflect their chosen faith.

The law does not recognize the Bahai Faith and bans Bahai institutions and community activities. Bahais are able, however, to privately worship and engage in celebrations such as Naw-Ruz, the Bahai New Year. The lack of formal recognition for the Bahai Faith is an obstacle in registering marriages and inheritance. Whereas Muslims and Christians follow Sharia or their respective church laws for personal status issues, including marriage, the state does not recognize Bahai religious law, and there is no recourse to civil law for personal status issues. Married Bahais who choose not to accept identity cards showing their marital status as single report difficulty opening bank accounts and establishing businesses.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Mawlid al-Nabi (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, and Coptic Christmas (January 7).

### *Government Practices*

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of imprisonment and detention. The government failed to protect Christians and their property effectively when they were attacked in Dahshour, Alexandria, and Rafah, and often failed to investigate and prosecute crimes against Christians and other religious minorities, most notably in the cases of violence in October 2011 against Copts in Maspairo that killed 25 and the September kidnapping of a Coptic girl, Sarah Ishaq. In many cases the government continued to sponsor or permit informal "reconciliation sessions," which generally precluded criminal prosecution for crimes against Copts and contributed to a climate of impunity. The government continued to harass Shiites and prohibit conversion from Islam. Some other minority religious groups reported a decline in government harassment. Discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities, including in government hiring, persisted. The government also failed to redress laws that prevented Copts and other minorities from building and repairing places of worship.

The government enforced laws against "insulting" or "denigrating" religion in a number of cases. For instance, authorities arrested Coptic activist Alber Saber Ayad in Cairo on September 13, a day after neighbors accused him of heresy, atheism, and defaming Islam for posting an anti-Islamic amateur video on his Facebook account, and for previous online blog entries that were critical of religion. Saber claimed that his account had been hacked. According to an Amnesty International statement in El Marg Prison, which quoted Saber's lawyer, Saber lacked "clean drinking water and lighting ... [and was] located near a collapsed sewer." Saber also informed his lawyers that a "police officer incited other detainees to attack him." On December 12, the Marg Misdemeanor Court sentenced Saber to three years in prison and a fine of EGP 1,000 (\$170), after finding him guilty of defaming Islam. After posting bail, Saber was released on December 17 and at the end of the year remained free pending appeal.

Courts sometimes sentenced Christians to prison terms that exceeded those given to Muslims accused of the same crime. On April 19, a dispute over a speed bump outside the residence of Alaa Reda Roshdy, a local Christian politician, led to confrontations between Muslims and Christians in Abu Qurqas resulting in two deaths and at least four injuries. After the funerals of the two Muslim villagers, clashes escalated and mobs attacked Coptic residences and properties. The Egyptian armed forces intervened and imposed a curfew. Security forces arrested eight Muslims and 12 Christians, including Alaa Reda Roushdy, who was reportedly in Cairo when the clashes began. In May the Higher State Security Court sentenced the 12 Copts to life in prison after finding two of them guilty of premeditated murder and the others guilty of rioting, destruction of property, and/or possessing weapons, crimes that carry maximum penalties of a few years in prison. The court acquitted all eight Muslim suspects. Rights activists and families of the accused reported that the prosecution did not present evidence, such as weapons, but only the vaguely written testimony of police officers. Only the president had the power to annul the sentence, call for a retrial, or authenticate the ruling. On December 26, the 12 Christians were released after 20 months in prison. Reportedly the 12 men are to be retried. The Minya Criminal Court set January 20, 2013 as the date for the first new trial.

On November 28, the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced in absentia seven Christians to death for their alleged connection to the production of an inflammatory and anti-Islamic amateur video. According to local media, the prosecution claimed the suspects used religion to spread extremist ideas, with the aim of inciting sectarianism and defaming one of the heavenly religions, and damaging national unity and societal peace. The case moved to the Grand Mufti for his non-binding opinion.

The government did not investigate and prosecute any military or police commanders responsible for ordering or failing to prevent violence against the mostly Coptic demonstrators at the Maspiro radio and television building in Cairo in October 2011 in which 25 persons were killed and over 300 were injured. In September a military court sentenced two low-ranking soldiers to two years in prison and handed down a three-year sentence to a third soldier for their involvement in the incident. The three soldiers, who drove vehicles that ran over demonstrators, were found guilty of wrongfully killing 14 civilians. A state media television announcer publicly called on Egyptians to "protect" the army from Christians. Two Copts accused of stealing weapons during the Maspiro incident were awaiting trial at year's end.

Media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that in October 2010 the Supreme State Security Prosecutor detained 12 Shia on accusations of violating article 98(f) of the penal code by showing "contempt of religion," forming an underground organization to overthrow the ruling regime, receiving foreign funds, and other crimes. The 12 were among a group of approximately 100 Shia who were detained and released in 2010. According to a member of the Shia community, the 12 were never tried and were released in late October.

The government often sponsored or permitted "reconciliation sessions" following communal violence and sectarian attacks instead of prosecuting perpetrators of crimes. In August the NCHR, claiming that impunity is a major reason for sectarian clashes and violates the law, called on state authorities to cease the use of "reconciliation sessions." The lack of prosecutions contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults. On January 27, security and police forces stood by as a mob of Muslim villagers in Alexandria's impoverished Kobry El Sharbat village attacked, looted, and burned residences and stores belonging to Coptic villagers, following accusations that a Coptic man carried illicit photos of a Muslim woman on his mobile phone. The accused Copt surrendered to the police, who removed him and his family from the village. Instead of prosecuting members of the mob, the government convened an informal "reconciliation session" between Copts and Muslims. The participants in the session decided to evict eight Coptic families from the area.

Some Coptic Orthodox Church and Protestant officials indicated they were better able to build and repair churches in the aftermath of the revolution than in previous years, although they did so without official permission. The government failed to pass a law eliminating the discriminatory permit process by which Christians build and repair places of worship, despite the NCHR urgently calling on it to do so. The government promised to consider such a law after both the Imbaba riots in May 2011 and the Maspairo violence in October 2011. The Coptic Orthodox Church and Al Azhar, along with some Protestant churches, reportedly agreed to draft legislation in late October 2011, but the government took no further action. Moreover, neither the SCAF nor President Morsy issued decrees authorizing construction of churches during the year, according to the Official Gazette.

Some church and human rights leaders also voiced concern that local officials abused their authority to issue repair permits or forward building petitions. They claimed local officials delayed the permits or required formal permits for matters that should have required a simple notification only, such as routine repairs and maintenance. In March a court in Edfu sentenced Father Macarius Boules, pastor of the Marinab Coptic Orthodox Church in Aswan Governorate, to six months in prison and an EGP 300 (\$45) fine for violating a repair permit. Authorities accused the priest of building a steeple taller than one permitted by the license. Boules won on appeal and never served jail time.

There have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years; however, anti-Semitic sentiments routinely appeared in both government-owned and private media, and the government made few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and opposition to Israeli policies and practices. Media sometimes published cartoons demonizing Jews and accusing them of seeking to subvert Egypt and Islam and take over the world. Private Salafi media sometimes included anti-Semitic programming that glorified or denied the Holocaust, including in interviews with academics and clerics. Privately owned Al-Tahrir TV re-aired the 2002 anti-Semitic TV series "Horseman Without a Horse" in March, which includes a story line around the Tsarist forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." There were reports of imams using anti-Semitic rhetoric in their sermons, including allegations of blood libel.

On October 19, President Morsy said "Amen" during televised prayers in Mansour after an imam stated, "Oh Allah ... grant us victory over the infidels. Oh Allah, destroy the Jews and their supporters." This is a common prayer in Egyptian mosques and came in a litany of other prayers.

For the second consecutive year, authorities cancelled the Abu Hassira celebrations that were slated for January, preventing the annual pilgrimage by non-Egyptian Jews to the shrine of 19th-century scholar Rabbi Yaakov Abu Hassira.

Government and official Islamic institutions also used anti-Shiite rhetoric. In July Al Azhar, Egypt's leading Sunni religious authority, issued a statement condemning the building of Shiite places of worship and describing such efforts as attempts to create fractures in the society that threatened the social and spiritual unity of the Egyptian people. According to *Al Shorouk* newspaper, Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, speaking at an Al Azhar lecture in October, called for dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites, but warned against the spread of Shiism in Egypt. He claimed that spreading Shia beliefs could lead to strife, instability, and the shaking of societal peace.

Christians were discriminated against in government hiring and under-represented in senior government leadership positions, both elected and appointed. In the parliament seated in February and dissolved in June, there were 11 Christians (five appointed, six elected) in the 518-seat People's Assembly and three Christians (all elected) in the Shura Council. Christians constitute approximately 10 percent of the population but held fewer than 2 percent of the seats in parliament, and political parties nominated relatively few Christians to run in elections as candidates.

There were no Christian members of the SCAF. Two Christian cabinet members, among a total of 35 ministers, served during the first half of the year. President Morsy appointed one Christian to his cabinet in July. The sole Christian among President Morsy's four senior aides resigned on November 23 in protest over the president's Constitutional Declaration. There were no Christians among the 27 governors. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces.

The government discriminated against religious minorities in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities. There were no Christians serving as presidents or deans of the country's 17 public universities. Of nearly 700 president, dean, or vice dean positions in the country's public university system, Christians rarely fill more than one or two. Only Muslims may study at Al Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. Additionally, the government bars non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Quran.

Egypt's new constitution does not prohibit parties based on religion, but rather only those that discriminate based on religion, gender, or origin. Laws remain in effect prohibiting religion-based political parties or political activities. However, political parties of the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafi groups registered in 2011 were allowed to operate and participate fully in elections during the year. On the other hand, in March, prior to the passage of the new constitution, the State Council's Political Parties Committee reaffirmed the denial of registration to the Shia-oriented Tahrir Party on the grounds that the party was based on religious principles.

#### *Government Inaction*

The government often failed to prevent societal violence and assaults against Christians and their property. On July 26, a Coptic-owned laundry in Dahshour accidentally scorched a Muslim man's shirt, leading to violent clashes in which one Muslim bystander was killed, nine police were injured, and one vehicle destroyed. Villagers told the NCHR that the police were unable to stop the violence, and encouraged Copts to leave town to avoid further violence against them. The NCHR noted that while the police protected the church and lives, they "didn't perform at the required level." The government arrested nine suspects, including two Copts, for taking part in the violence but none were tried. Most of the 110 Coptic families who evacuated returned when additional governmental security was in place. However, many homes were uninhabitable and the government's offer of EGP 10,000 (USD 1,500) per family was inadequate for the repairs.

In the North Sinai city of Rafah, the government failed to prevent attacks on Copts and did not identify or prosecute the perpetrators. On September 15, three Coptic store owners received pamphlets warning Rafah's small Christian community to leave within 48 hours. Copts reported the threats to local authorities, but claimed they were ignored. On September 25, masked men fired shots at the store of a Coptic merchant. Copts then wanted to move to the relatively more secure city of Al Arish, which the governor supported, but their government jobs could not be relocated.

The government failed to condemn or counter incendiary speech. During the political crisis that followed President Morsy's November 22 Constitutional Declaration, members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) negatively referred to Copts in public. Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat Al Shater, in an effort to delegitimize anti-Morsy protests, stated at a press conference that 80 percent of the demonstrators in front of the presidential palace were Copts while FJP Secretary General Mohamed El Beltagui stated that "50-60 percent of the demonstrators in front of the palace are Copts." Speaking at a Muslim Brotherhood rally, Safwat Hegazy, a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamist preacher, warned Copts and other Christian figures against "ever allying with remnants of the former regime against legitimacy." He accused Christian politician George Ishaq of participating in secret meetings with the opposition. On

November 4, the Al-Hafiz satellite television station broadcast Salafist Sheikh Abdallah Badr overtly threatening harm to Copts should their protests negatively affect the status of President Morsy. The government did not condemn the threat.

The government failed to return to her family a child who had been kidnapped and forced to convert, or to bring to justice the known perpetrators of the crime. On September 30, Sarah Ishaq Abdelmalek, a 14-year-old Coptic girl, was kidnapped in Al Dab'a. Her family filed a "missing persons" report at Al Dab'a police station. Days later, Sarah's family learned she had converted to Islam and gotten married, despite laws criminalizing child marriage and prohibiting the conversion of minors. The National Council for Women condemned the kidnapping and called on the government to take action. The Salafi Front and its associated National Center for Defending Freedoms issued a statement claiming that Sarah married willingly and was "mature enough" to bear the responsibilities. The family's lawyer claimed the interior ministry knew of Sarah's whereabouts. Sarah remained missing at year's end, and there was no indication that Egyptian authorities took any steps to investigate this case.

Some activists and religious leaders allege that there were additional instances of kidnapping for forced conversion. However, other human rights groups and religious leaders believe that kidnapping for forced conversion is rare. Families sometimes claimed kidnapping when women or girls ran away for reasons ranging from abuse to voluntary conversion or elopement.

During the year, the government did not effectively investigate and prosecute cases of sectarian violence that occurred in 2011, including the New Year's bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria, the Muqattum/Mansheit Nasr riots and the destruction of a Coptic Orthodox church in Atfeh/Sol village in March, and the May Imbaba riots. The government began to prosecute perpetrators of the Imbaba riots, but dropped the cases and released the suspects. The government brought no perpetrators to justice in any of these cases.

There were no indications in the media that the government enforced the 2011 amendments to the penal code that make discrimination a crime. The penal code defines discrimination as "any action, or lack of action, that leads to discrimination between people or against a sect due to gender, origin, language, religion, or belief." The new amendments established higher penalties for government officials than for other offenders.

### *Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

The government sometimes sent extra security forces to protect churches and prevent the escalation of conflict. For instance, President Morsy traveled to Rafah in the Sinai Peninsula after Christians were threatened there; he ordered increased security and spoke about Muslims and Christians standing together against extremism. On October 5, President Morsy visited the city of Al Arish after threats against Copts in that area; he issued orders to increase security. He spoke about Muslims and Christians standing together against violent extremism and told the Copts, "your security is our security."

After initially failing to protect Christians and their property when they were attacked in Dahshour, the government protected the Coptic Orthodox Church and provided extra security and some compensation to displaced Christian families. This allowed the large majority of the displaced Christians to return. Then-Minister of Interior Ahmed Gamal Eddin, along with the Giza governor, visited Dahshour where they met with Christian families.

On May 14, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced police cadet Amer Ashour to death for murdering one Copt and injuring five more on board a train en route to Cairo in January 2011. According to eyewitnesses, Ashour boarded the train and opened fire.

In October the Ministry of Education deducted one month's salary and transferred Eman Al Kelany, a school teacher, after she cut the hair of two young students for not wearing a veil. The

National Council for Women filed a lawsuit against the teacher, and on November 6, the Misdemeanor Court of Luxor issued a 6- month suspended sentence.

President Morsy met twice during his first months in office with senior representatives of Egypt's Christian churches, something neither President Mubarak nor the SCAF had done in decades.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, lethal sectarian attacks decreased during the year. Communal tensions remained high, although Christians and Muslims share a common culture and in most cases continued to live peacefully as neighbors throughout the country.

In October Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badei made several anti-Semitic statements. In a sermon that was also published online, he called for Muslims to unite and be willing to shed their own blood against "Jews (who) have increased the corruption in the world." He added that "Zionists only know the way of force."

Fayza Abul Naga, former Minister of International Cooperation, referred to a U.S. NGO as "a tool of the Jewish lobby."

Citizens filed more cases against Christian and secular-oriented Muslim public figures, accusing them of blasphemy or denigrating Islam. The state prosecutor sent cases to trial and courts convicted and sentenced the accused. During the Mubarak era, the state prosecutor rarely forwarded such cases to trial.

On October 28, Muslim villagers in Marco village, Beni Suef Governorate, injured at least 10 Copts after surrounding an "unlicensed" church, throwing stones, and blocking the exit. In an informal "reconciliation session" between church officials and the heads of village families at the start of Ramadan in July, the church's leaders had agreed to suspend sermons at the church until a permit was obtained, to avoid escalating tensions. The resumption of services without a permit reportedly sparked the October conflict.

On November 5, a group of Salafis attempted to seize an empty plot of land belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Shubra Al Kheima. They placed a sign on the land reading "Al Rahma Mosque" and conducted prayers. Bishop Morcos of the Shubra Al Kheima Diocese identified the trespassers and filed lawsuits.

In May *Al Watan* newspaper published the location of a house near the Nile Delta city of Tanta that Shias used for worship. The resulting pressure from the media and local Sunni Muslims compelled the Shia house owners to close the place of worship.

There were reports of isolated but increasing land thefts from Christians, especially in Upper Egypt. In some cases informal "reconciliation sessions" were used to justify stealing, or forcing the sale at low prices, of small parcels of Christian-owned land. Some Christians also reportedly decided to move from Muslim-majority villages to towns where they believed they would be more secure.

There were reports of isolated cases of Christians being disenfranchised during elections. These occurred mostly in poorer and rural areas, where local extremists attempted to intimidate inhabitants of Copt-majority villages to stay away from the polls.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Officials at all levels of the U.S. government, including the president, the secretary of state, the deputy secretary, the ambassador, the assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, the assistant

secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, and other Department of State and U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with the government. These included cases in which the government did not protect religious minorities and their property or arrest and prosecute perpetrators of violence, as well as cases in which Christians received disproportionately severe sentences. Officials also raised the ongoing discrimination that Christians face in building and maintaining church properties; official discrimination against Bahais; arrests and harassment of Muslim citizens whose religious views differ from the majority; anti-Semitism; and the government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert.

In July the secretary of state met with government officials and religious and lay Christian leaders in Cairo. Secretary Clinton listened to their concerns about the political transition and assured them that the United States is committed to supporting universal human rights, including religious freedom. In Alexandria, the secretary publicly said that "real democracy means that every citizen has the right to live, work, and worship as they choose, whether they are man or woman, Muslim or Christian, or from any other background. Real democracy means that no group or faction or leader can impose their will, their ideology, their religion, their desires on anyone else. Democracy is not just about reflecting the will of the majority; it is also about protecting the rights of the minority."

The deputy secretary of state visited the country separately in July and met with then Acting Coptic Orthodox Pope Bakhoumious, who shared concerns about protecting minority rights. The deputy secretary also stressed to government officials the importance of religious freedom, including with government officials.

The ambassador made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. During a November trip to Minya Governorate, which has proportionately the largest Christian population in the country, the ambassador met with a local Coptic Orthodox Bishop, visited a religious site, and met with a group of approximately 40 Muslim and Christian leaders to discuss ways to improve interfaith dialogue. In August, the ambassador visited Mama Maggie, the leader of an NGO providing services to Cairo's Christian trash collectors and recyclers. The ambassador also met with poor children and families at a school in the mostly Christian Muqattam neighborhood.

The embassy maintained formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The embassy also regularly discussed religious freedom matters with other government officials, including governors and members of parliament.

U.S. embassy officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahai religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. U.S. embassy officials investigated complaints of official religious discrimination brought to the embassy's attention. They also discussed religious freedom matters with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenged anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

In August and December the embassy hosted visits by prestigious U.S. imams to promote interfaith and cross-cultural toleration and understanding. They met with religious leaders, civil society representatives, and youth. The ambassador hosted events bringing together Christians and Muslims, liberals and Islamists, and a range of other guests to engage the visitors on how to improve interfaith dialogue and protect their rights.

U.S. programs and activities supported initiatives in several areas related to religious freedom, including promoting political participation by marginalized youth to foster peaceful coexistence, religious tolerance, and human rights. One program promoted interfaith understanding and sense

of community in areas that recently suffered from religious strife. U.S. programs also supported NGOs that monitored the country's media for sectarian bias.

The embassy supported the development of Arabic-language and English-language educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others. The embassy also supported programs that promoted tolerance among young religious leaders, interfaith understanding in communities that recently suffered from religious strife, and civic and political participation by marginalized youth.

Embassy officials worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

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