



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Egypt

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The year 2014 began with a referendum in January on a new Constitution that prohibits political parties based on religion, with 98 per cent of participants voting in approval, though opposition groups complained of intimidation and partisan media coverage. For the country's most vulnerable social groups, however, the drafting process at least provided an opportunity to promote a more inclusive environment for Egypt's diverse religious and ethnic population. In the preceding months, representatives of long-marginalized communities such as Amazigh and Nubians were able to meet with members of the drafting committee to advocate for various amendments to the text.

The approved version was generally regarded as an improvement on the 2012 Constitution, passed under former President Mohamed Morsi and widely criticized by rights groups for its lack of protections for many minorities. Among other achievements, the 'right to return' of Egyptian Nubians whose lands were flooded during the government-led construction of the Aswan dam in the 1960s, without prior consultation or consent, was recognized for the first time. Furthermore, the 2014 Constitution finally recognized 'incitement to hatred' as a crime, tasking the future legislative body with the creation of a special commission to implement the provision. This is a significant milestone for Egypt's minorities, as in recent years hate speech has been linked with outbreaks of violence against Bahá'í, Copts and Shi'a.

However, the Constitution has also been criticized for perpetuating many of the shortcomings of its predecessor. While Article 64 on religious freedom has been strengthened, its provision on religious practice and places of worship still refers specifically to the 'Abrahamic' religions – a term that includes Christianity, Islam and Judaism, but potentially excludes Bahá'í and other faiths that are discriminated against. More generally, there is continued scepticism about the government's willingness and ability to tackle the broader context of discrimination towards minorities in the country. Despite some positive signs during the year – culminating in President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's attendance of a Coptic Christmas mass in January 2015, an unprecedented gesture by an Egyptian head of state – many challenges remain. This is particularly the case for Copts and other religious minorities in a country where Islam is still elevated as the state religion and Sharia principles form the main source of legislation.

For example, the fraught issue of regulations on church construction, despite apparently receiving legal approval through the new Constitution – Article 64 stipulates 'the freedom of practising

religious rituals and establishing worship places for the followers of Abrahamic religions' – has not yet been resolved. Though steps were taken later in the year to address the existing restrictions on church building, with the Coptic Church and other Christian organizations drafting a proposed law, at the end of the year the restrictions remained in place. The regulations, rooted in Ottoman law, have for decades been used to obstruct the development or renovation of Christian places of worship, and have contributed to the wave of attacks in recent years against Coptic buildings. Though authorities have reportedly been more accommodating in approving church construction since Sisi took power, Coptic communities continue to be targeted by militant groups. In January 2015, for example, two policemen were killed outside a church in Minya, followed by further attacks three months later in Alexandria and Cairo.

Another source of deep concern is the Sisi government's ongoing human rights abuses and repression of civil freedoms. Shortly after staging a coup against Morsi in June 2013, the military were responsible for the killing of more than 1,000 protesters. This served to deepen divisions within the country which Sisi, since securing democratic election in May 2014, has failed to resolve. In particular, the government's crackdown on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, involving arbitrary arrests, indefinite detention and killings, has alienated a significant portion of the population and, by extension, may have put Copts and other religious minorities at increasing risk of attack. While minorities have long been targeted by militants, the mass execution of 21 Coptic Egyptians in neighbouring Libya in February 2015 by ISIS was a painful reminder of the community's continued vulnerability. Media investigations revealed that many of the victims came from Upper Egypt villages and had left their homes to financially support their families. The government was criticized by some activists for its failure to ensure their protection.

Whether they are in search of economic opportunities or displaced due to violence or disruptive development such as the Aswan dam, many members of Egypt's minorities have relocated to towns and cities within Egypt as well. Urban development is therefore a key area of concern for these communities, reflected in the inclusion of Article 235 in the 2014 Constitution, which stipulates that 'the state shall guarantee setting and implementing a plan for the comprehensive economic and urban development of border and underprivileged areas, including Upper Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, Matrouh and Nubia'. It is hoped that this text will lead to support for Nubians who wish to return to their area of origin.

Cairo is not only Egypt's capital, but also the largest megacity in the MENA region. Rapid and largely unmanaged urban growth has led to large swathes of informal settlements across the city, with many sheltering in makeshift housing and unsanitary living conditions. These issues are especially pronounced, however, for the city's '*Zabbalin*' – the Arabic word for garbage collectors – a large community whose livelihood is based on the collection and recycling of solid waste. Operating in the informal sector, the majority are Coptic and originally migrated from Upper Egypt with their families in search of a source of income. Though their activities provided Cairo with a highly efficient system of waste collection, in 2004 the community was dealt a blow when authorities contracted their work out to corporations. While in practice they continued to earn a living informally from this activity, their income was greatly reduced. However, authorities have now officially reinstituted the involvement of the community in waste collection and, despite continued discrimination, the community has developed strong solidarity networks to support each other.

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