

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Egypt

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Events of 2015

Following the military-backed ousting of former President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, subsequent elections in 2014 handed Sisi a landslide victory. While he enjoyed support among many Egyptians, including minorities, following the suppression of religious freedoms and civil rights during Morsi's presidency, Sisi's rule has itself been characterized by authoritarianism and widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture and forced disappearances, particularly of perceived supporters of the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. While Sisi has publicly stated his commitment to combating religious extremism, throughout the year the government continued to restrict the beliefs and practices of many minorities. Though military operations against ISIS-affiliated insurgents in Sinai were escalated, the risk of targeted violence against religious minorities from other Egyptians – a threat long pre-dating the recent rise of the extremist group – remains high. Sisi's draconian policies have done little to resolve the underlying problem of inter-communal conflict and have arguably deepened divisions within Egyptian society.

This lack of progress is reflected in the situation of Egypt's sizeable Coptic Christian minority, long victims of discrimination and persecution, who to some extent have benefited from recent political reforms under Sisi. For example, Egypt's national elections in October 2015 saw Coptic Christians win 36 parliamentary seats, 6 per cent of the total – an unprecedented achievement that represents an important milestone for the community. This has been accompanied by Sisi's apparent efforts to engage the Coptic church leadership, highlighted by his historic attendance of Coptic Christmas Eve mass in January 2015 – the first time a head of state has done so – as well as his offering of personal condolences to Pope Tawadros II in February after 21 Egyptian Copts were killed by ISIS militants in Libya. Yet despite these conciliatory gestures, Coptic Egyptians remain marginalized by state institutions and face ongoing risks of sectarian violence.

One area where the state has failed in its protection of the community is the continued barriers to constructing houses of worship for non-Muslims, a legacy of Ottoman era legislation. Particularly in Upper Egypt, this has long contributed to the targeting of Coptic congregations and their religious practices. While authorities have reportedly objected less to church construction and renovations since Sisi took power, the community has still faced tremendous difficulties in securing official approval and support. In the village of al-Galaa, for example, after the reconstruction of a church was blocked by local Muslims, the Coptic community was forced amid rising sectarian tensions to agree to rebuild it without a bell or tower – a typical outcome of coercive reconciliation processes backed by local authorities. In the same week, police raided the Saint Youssef al-Bar prayer house near Maghagha, confiscating religious paraphernalia and accusing occupants of praying in a property illegally without official permission. In Abu Qurqas, police abruptly arrived and shut down reconstruction on part of a village church. These and other incidents have occurred despite Article 235 of the 2014 Constitution requiring the government to draft legislation regulating the building and renovating of churches to ensure that Christians are free to practise their religious rituals. For his part, in a speech in January 2016, Sisi lamented the failure of authorities to repair Coptic properties damaged in violent episodes during 2013, promising that 'by next year there won't be a single church or house that is not restored' – a claim met with scepticism by many.

Copts, their properties and places of worship also remain vulnerable to violent attacks. In January 2015, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders in Minya were forced to cancel Christmas celebrations after two policemen were gunned down while guarding a Coptic church. Later, during Holy Week in April, Easter celebrations were accompanied by heightened sectarian violence in Minya governorate. Copts, their churches and homes in Nasreya were left poorly protected by security personnel – a common occurrence – when attacked by angry villagers after a Coptic teacher and students were accused of insulting Islam after a video was circulated in which they reportedly ridiculed ISIS. Many attacks against the community are enabled by the failure of security forces to provide adequate protection.

While Coptic Christians face these difficulties despite their status as a recognized religion, other minorities lack even legal recognition. Article 64 of the 2014 Constitution, like its predecessors, guarantees freedom of religion only to the three 'Abrahamic faiths' – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – meaning that other groups, such as Bahá'í and Jehovah's Witnesses, are excluded. Bahá'í still face difficulties when seeking government-issued identification cards and are frequently subjected to public vilification. In December 2014, a public workshop was held by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to warn of the dangers of the spread of the Bahá'í faith in Egypt.

Though adherents of Islam, Shi'a Muslims in the Sunni-majority country are also marginalized and face widespread hostility for their beliefs. Their religious practices have often been presented as a threat to national security, leading to public vilification and official crackdowns – tendencies that continued in 2015. On 22 October, for example, the Ministry of Endowments announced the closure of Shi'a mosques to prevent Ashura celebrations. Despite being deemed a legitimate branch of Islam in 1959 by Al-Azhar, the country's most powerful religious institution, Egypt's current religious establishment considers Shi'a rituals to be in violation of the tenets of Islam. In November, for instance, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar used a weekly television appearance to implore his audience to beware of Shi'a proselytizers.

Egypt's Jewish community, long marginalized, faced a further setback when an annual Jewish festival planned for 9–10 January was cancelled due to a ruling by the Alexandria Administrative

Court. Though previously called off in 2012 and regularly opposed by locals, the event commemorated the birthday of the prominent nineteenth-century Rabbi Abu Hasira and attracted hundreds of Jews, including many from Israel, to visit his tomb. The Court's ruling deemed the festival contradictory to Islamic traditions and a violation of public order. Located in the Nile Delta village of Damanhour and added to Egypt's antiquities records by the Minister of Culture in 2001, the tomb was ordered to be struck from the list, obliging the government to notify the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as well. Other sites of important Jewish heritage also struggle with dereliction or disuse, with all of the estimated 12 synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria now reportedly closed or falling into disrepair due to lack of funds. The disappearance of Egypt's Jewish cultural heritage is all the more troubling for the fact that this once sizeable religious community, comprising as many as 80,000 in the late 1940s, now reportedly numbers only seven people, the majority elderly women.

Blasphemy accusations and related attacks remain a serious problem for Egypt's religious minorities, particularly Copts and Shi'a. Following 15 similar blasphemy cases earlier in the year for insulting Islam – a crime under the Egyptian Penal Code outlawing ridicule of the three Abrahamic faiths – in July, three Coptic men were arrested for distributing bags of dates containing messages proclaiming their 'Lord's' beneficence. Earlier, in a Beni Suef village at the end of May, a Coptic man was accused of posting cartoons offensive to the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook, resulting in more than ten Coptic homes being attacked with rocks and Molotov cocktails and the eventual forcible displacement of Coptic families from the village. In May a Shi'a dentist from Daqahlia governorate received a six-month prison sentence for contempt of religion after authorities found in his home books and other items supposedly used to perform Shi'a religious rituals. A week later, Shi'a cleric Taher al-Hashimy was arrested following a raid on his apartment where books and other items were confiscated by security forces. An atheist student was also given a three-year prison sentence in January for 'belittl[ing] the divine' through Facebook postings, an increasingly perilous activity.

Ethnic minorities also shared in a struggle for greater social acceptance and political representation. For Egypt's Nubian community, the October parliamentary elections carried particular significance. Due to a reconfiguration of decades-old electoral constituencies three months prior, New Nubia was assigned its own parliamentary seat, which in October was won by Yassine Abdel Sabour, the first Nubian MP in Egypt's new parliament. While viewed as a positive step, many Nubians expressed scepticism as to whether the most urgent issues facing the community would be addressed. During the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, the government forcibly relocated Egyptian Nubians from their ancestral homeland where, as descendants of one of the world's oldest civilizations, fishing and farming had long been fundamental to their culture. Since displacement, the 'right to return' has remained their cardinal demand, coupled with calls to combat unemployment and improve deteriorating services. Abdel Sabour has stated he will push for the implementation of Articles 47 and 50 of the 2014 Constitution, which affirm the state's commitment to preserve the cultural identities and heritage of different groups.

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