

# State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Egypt

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication  
Date 3 July 2014

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Egypt*, 3 July 2014, available at:  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8df514.html> [accessed 12 August 2014]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

The year 2013 was a pivotal one for Egypt. The ousting of President Mohamed Morsi by the army in July marked a turning point for the country, with significant implications for the country's religious minorities. After taking power, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) introduced in December a new draft Constitution containing a number of new legal guarantees for minorities. At the same time, the anger of Morsi supporters after his ousting, reinforced by the army's violent crackdown on their protests, resulted in an escalation of attacks against Christian Copts, Egypt's largest minority, for their perceived support of the military's actions.

Incidents of sectarian violence against Christians have been a recurring pattern in Egypt for years. Their intensity and frequency have been on the rise, however, since the fall of former President Mubarak following the January 2011 uprising. Despite some signs of political progress, repeated attacks against Copts, Shi'a and Bahá'i minority members occurred under Morsi. This included, in one of the most violent episodes, an outbreak of violence against Copts in April in the village of Al-Khosous, followed by a related incident shortly afterwards outside St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo. These incidents left a number of people dead and over 80 injured. The attack on the cathedral was particularly significant as it is the seat of Coptic Pope Tawadros II; police were accused of standing by as assailants attacked those inside the compound. The congregation had gathered to mourn the five Copts who had died the weekend before in Al-Khosous; a Muslim also died in the earlier incident.

The sectarian violence further intensified after the deposing of Mohamed Morsi. Through inflammatory speeches, flyers and online postings, Muslim Brotherhood supporters alleged that Copts had agitated for Morsi's removal and participated actively in the subsequent crackdown. Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party posted a message on its Facebook page warning: 'Christians in

Egypt ... deserve these attacks on churches and their institutions. For every action, [there is] a reaction.' As a result, the second half of the year saw repeated attacks against priests, abductions of Copts (including women and children) and frequent assaults on Coptic churches, houses and shops. Instances of local imams inciting violence against Coptic inhabitants were also reported. The violence peaked in August, following the dispersal of sit-ins held by pro-Morsi supporters. Mobs then attacked at least 42 churches, as well as Coptic houses, schools and associations, resulting in heavy damage. Reports of the death toll varied from four to seven people killed.

The Coptic minority was not the only victim of sectarian violence. Egyptian Shi'a were also targeted during the year by both Salafi movements and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Anti-Shi'a hatred was aggravated by the increasingly divisive conflict in Syria, as well as frequent inflammatory statements from prominent Sunni clerics and opinion-leaders presenting Shi'a as a threat to Sunni populations. In June, a large crowd violently attacked a group of Shi'a, including women and children, privately celebrating a religious ceremony in the village of Abu Mussalam. Though four men were killed and other Shi'a houses were also set on fire, the police allegedly failed to take action to halt the attacks. The incident reportedly followed weeks of violent rhetoric by Salafi preachers in local mosques. Sufi Muslims have also been targeted, with more than 100 attacks against Sufi places of worship reported since 2011.

The Egyptian state's response to this sectarian violence has been inadequate on a number of levels. Besides not taking sufficient action to prevent or curb violence against minorities, authorities have often failed to hold perpetrators of sectarian violence to account and have favoured 'reconciliation sessions' over the prosecution of offenders and reparation. This has helped create a climate of impunity. Finally, the authorities have failed to prevent these attacks by tackling the root causes of this violence, including the country's discriminatory legislation, and the use of hate speech to incite violence. A report issued by MRG in December 2013 highlights the prevalence of hate speech against religious minorities in the media and political rhetoric. Minority representatives have also denounced the failure of the state to curb anti-Shi'a and anti-Christian sermons in mosques. President Morsi himself failed to condemn violent and hateful rhetoric used by his supporters during a rally he attended in June.

Article 53 of Egypt's new Constitution, presented in December 2013 and passed in January 2014, requires that 'incitement to hate' be punishable by law. However, its effectiveness will depend on subsequent legislation and whether it is specifically used as a basis for tackling hate speech against religious minorities. Indeed, a provision on 'incitement to hatred' already exists in the Penal Code, but has in the past been used to repress religious defamation. A 2013 report from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights shows that this law has been widely used in Egypt, including in 2013, to arrest, detain and prosecute members of religious minorities. The 2014 Constitution also includes other potential improvements for minorities. While *Sharia* remains 'the main source of legislation', the responsibility for its interpretation shifts from Al-Azhar, the Sunni religious institution, to the secular Supreme Constitutional Court. Article 235 provides that the parliament pass a law governing church building and renovation, potentially putting an end to long-standing local restrictions on Christian worship.

Nevertheless, the new Constitution has retained some of the discriminatory aspects of its predecessor. First, the protection of religious freedoms is restricted to the 'heavenly religions', namely Islam, Judaism and Christianity, but continues to exclude other minorities such as those of the Bahá'í faith. The drafting committee expressly rejected proposals to expand the scope of rights

granted to all 'non-Muslim' groups. In addition, despite the change in Constitution, other discriminatory aspects of Egyptian law – such as the prohibition of public worship for Shi'a and the non-recognition of Bahá'is as a religious group – remain in place. This has helped perpetuate the vulnerability of religious minorities in the country. Bahá'is, for example, continue to face difficulties in obtaining identity cards. As a result, they may be barred from setting up a bank account, registering in a school and enjoying other basic rights.

More fundamentally, the entrenched discrimination that minorities face, as well as the role that official policies play in its facilitation, is still largely denied by authorities. This is made worse by the frequent failure of Egyptian media to provide a clear-sighted analysis of the causes of sectarian violence. Constitutional protections are also relatively ineffective without the commitment of the government, security forces and judiciary.

Copyright notice: © Minority Rights Group International. All rights reserved.

### Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

[ClearSearch](#)

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

### Countries

- [Egypt](#)

### Topics

- [Christian](#)
- [Copts](#)
- [Minorities](#)