LEGAL RECOGNITION OF A HISTORIC MINORITY

Christianity has been present in Egypt for nearly two thousand years, and some ten percent of the population is believed to be Christian. (The latest official government estimate, from 1986, is 5.7 percent, but the Coptic Orthodox Church claims the share is at least 15 percent.) Christianity enjoys government recognition as a “heavenly” religion, along with Islam and Judaism, providing constitutional guarantees of freedoms of belief and practice.

THEORETICAL PROTECTIONS IGNORED

Despite these constitutional freedoms, other laws limit Christians’ ability to worship freely. Egypt’s president must approve all new church buildings, a restriction that dates to the Ottoman-era Hamayouni Decree, and Interior Ministry regulations from the 1930s severely restrict church locations. Even when permission for the construction or renovation of a church is secured, local pressure can impede the process. In March 2015, a church was immediately approved for construction in the village of al-‘Our, Minya, after the February 2015 murder of twenty Copts in Libya, 13 of whom were al-‘Our residents. Local Muslims, however, protested outside the construction site, and the town’s other major church was attacked later that evening. After a reconciliation session was held the next day under the supervision of the local security director and the Minya governor’s office, it was decided that the Church of the Martyrs will be built in a less prominent location in the town, despite the fact that it was initially to be built on land donated by a Christian businessman.

Christians have also been subject to blasphemy and other legal charges. Kirollos Shawky, from near Luxor, was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to six years in prison for “liking” a Facebook page that published anti-Islamic cartoons. Demiana Abdel Nour—a teacher from Minya who has since fled Egypt and now lives in self-imposed exile—she was sentenced in June to six months in prison for blasphemy in connection with a comparative religion class she taught. Convert to Christianity Bishoy Armia (born Muhammad Hegazy) was charged with “spreading sectarian strife” and blasphemy for reporting on Christian-Muslim tensions in Upper Egypt; he remains in prison and awaits trial on a number of charges. In April, four students in Minya were charged with blasphemy for making a video mocking the Islamic State and in February 2016, three of the teenagers were sentenced to the maximum five-year sentence, and the fourth was referred to a punitive juvenile institution. The teacher was sentenced to three years. Michael Mounir Bishay was sentenced in May 2015 to a year in prison for republishing a YouTube video on Facebook that offended his Muslim neighbors.

CHURCHES TARGETED BY NON-STATE ACTORS

Radical groups have targeted churches and police have been assigned to guard houses of worship on a regular basis. Since August 2013, at least 119 houses of worship have been targeted to varying degrees. Churches, religious institutions, and
private property were attacked during the upheaval of summer and fall 2013, including 82 instances of church attacks between August 12 and August 17, around the time of the dispersal of pro-Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins. Attacks continue under Abdul Fattah al-Sisi’s presidency. Churches were also targeted—both by radical groups and as local sectarian conflicts escalated into violence—during the rule of Muhammad Morsi, the military transitional government, and late in the rule of Hosni Mubarak.

STATE VIOLENCE TOWARD CHRISTIAN PROTESTERS

Christian protesters demanding government action have been violently dispersed on multiple occasions. In October 2011, civilians and security forces attacked Christians marching peacefully toward the Maspero Building. State television called on Muslims to come defend the army and at least 24 Christians were killed, including several who were killed as the military drove armored personnel carriers through the crowds. Save for three minor convictions, investigations have stalled.

In 2013, residents of Cairo’s Abbasiya district and security forces besieged St. Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo, the seat of the Coptic church, when Christians protested after the funeral of victims of previous sectarian clashes. Copts protesting outside a local police station in Minya were forcibly dispersed in 2014, and Central Security Forces later rampaged through a nearby village, destroying property and arresting Christians at random.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN STATE INSTITUTIONS

Though Christians are not formally excluded from high-ranking government positions, they are underrepresented. There have been no Christian top-level military officials since Fouad Aziz Ghali’s retirement in 1983, and the U.S. Department of State reports that “non-Muslims generally were reportedly selected for retirement before reaching senior active-duty ranks.” Just three of 39 ministers selected in the 2014 Cabinet—appointed by President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi—were Christian. In 2010, the State Department noted that there were no Christian university presidents or deans, and “few” legislators or judges.

Christian candidates performed better in the 2015 parliamentary elections than in any other election in modern Egyptian history, bringing their total of elected and appointed members of parliament to 39.
RESOURCES


State Department’s most recent International Religious Freedom Report for Egypt: http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222287#wrapper


TIMEP has issued statements marking the anniversary of the Maspero massacre, about the violence by police against Copts in Samalout, and on the use of blasphemy charges against religious minorities.

ESHHAD

Eshhad is an online platform that aggregates and collates alleged religious persecution and sectarian attacks in Egypt.

Eshhad, which previously existed as an independent entity and is now an incubated project at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), seeks to encourage transparency and to influence policy by explaining the context in which sectarianism occurs throughout the Middle East.

THE Tahrir INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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