

EGYPT

RELIGION



- Muslims: 91,1%
- Christians: 8,3%
- Others: 0,6%



AREA	POPULATION
1.002.000km ²	93,384.000

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Arab Republic of Egypt has a long tradition as a nation state. Although predominantly Muslim, the country is home to the largest Christian community in the Arab world – the Copts. The proportion of Christians is at its highest in the governorates of Upper Egypt. Many Christians also live in Cairo. There is a tiny Jewish minority of a few members.¹ The numbers of Shia Muslims,² Baha'is and other groups are also very small. In recent years Egypt has suffered from political and economic instability and turmoil. In 2011 long-time President Hosni Mubarak was toppled after mass demonstrations. In 2012 Mohammed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected president by a slim margin. In June and July 2013, the Egyptian military removed him from power following street protests by millions of Egyptians. They accused him of Islamising the country and administering it poorly. Those opposed to Morsi's fall from power and the surrounding events described the development as a coup. Supporters said it was necessary to save democracy. Egypt remains highly divided on the matter. In 2014 General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was elected president of the country; he was then re-elected in April 2018. But economic and security problems continue. Especially on the Sinai Peninsula, the country is facing an Islamist insurgency by groups allied with Daesh (ISIS). Cairo has also been the scene of attacks against state officials.³

In January 2014 the revised constitution of the state was accepted by referendum.⁴ More than 98 percent of those who voted were in favour of the text. The Catholic Church also welcomed the text. Coptic Catholic Bishop Kyrill William of Assiut told Aid to the Church in Need that the revised constitution's retention of Shari'a law as a source of legislation in Egypt was not necessarily problematic. He said: "This has been the case in Egypt for a long time, even before Morsi. It never did us Christians any harm. But what is more important is that the new article three guarantees Christians and Jews autonomy in matters of civil status and internal Church affairs."⁵

The preamble of the 2014 constitution describes Egypt as: "The cradle of religions and the banner of glory of the revealed religions. On its land, Moses grew up, the light of God appeared, and the message descended on Mount Sinai. On its land, Egyptians welcomed the Virgin Mary and her baby and offered up thousands of martyrs in defence of the Church of Jesus. When the Seal of the Messengers Mohamed (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) was sent to

all mankind to perfect the sublime morals, our hearts and minds were opened to the light of Islam. We were the best soldiers on Earth to fight for the cause of God, and we disseminated the message of truth and religious sciences across the world.”

According to article 2, “Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation.” The preamble specifies that “the reference for interpretation thereof is the relevant texts in the collected rulings of the Supreme Constitutional Court.” Article three states: “The principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.”

Article seven protects Al-Azhar University as the most important Sunni institution of Islamic teaching. “Al-Azhar is an independent scientific Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is the main authority for religious sciences, and Islamic affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world.”

Article 53 declares: “Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, colour, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason.” Article 64 states: “Freedom of belief is absolute. The freedom of practising religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers of revealed religions is a right organised by law.” According to article 74, “No political activity may be exercised or political parties formed on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect or geographic location.”

Article 244 states: “The state grants youth, Christians, persons with disability and expatriate Egyptians appropriate representation in the first House of Representatives to be elected after this constitution is adopted, in the manner specified by law.” Under article 98 (f) of the Penal Code, denigrating religions, promoting extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning any of the “divine religions” and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment.⁶

Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, in practice the government does not recognise conversion from Islam, and Muslim-born citizens who leave Islam for another religion may not change the “religion” entry on their identity cards.⁷ The law does not recognise the Baha’i faith or its religious laws and bans Baha’i institutions and community activities. Baha’is do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. The same applies to Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁸

When former Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took his oath of office as Egypt’s new president in June 2014, he paid tribute to the role of the Coptic Church in Egypt both in terms of the past and the present. Reporting on al-Sisi’s speech, Coptic Catholic Bishop Antonios Aziz Mina of Giza, stated: “The new President said the Church has played an important role in Egypt’s history and has made undeniable contributions to safeguard national unity, facing those who fomented conflicts among the Egyptian people. [He] also said that the Church, together with the Sunni University of al-Azhar, can give a valuable contribution to free religious speech from the exploitation it has suffered in recent years.”⁹

EGYPT Incidents

In May 2016 the new text of the law on the construction of places of worship was issued in its pre-definitive form. The draft legislation was delivered to the leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church, so that they could evaluate the text and raise any objections. In autumn 2014, representatives of the main Churches and Christian communities in Egypt had sent a memorandum to the leaders of the Egyptian government with suggestions and proposals. In particular, they had proposed that permits for the construction of places of Christian worship should be granted by the local municipal authorities, as is the case for the construction of private buildings, rather than being granted only after decisions by provincial or national authorities. The bureaucratic constraints that complicate the construction of new churches date back in part to the Ottoman period. In 1934, the Interior Ministry added the so-called "10 rules", which forbid, among other things, the building of new churches near schools, channels, government buildings, railways and residential areas. In many cases, the strict application of these rules has prevented the building of churches in cities and villages inhabited by Christians, especially in the rural areas of Upper Egypt.¹⁰

On 30th August 2016 the Church Construction and Renovation Law was passed by a majority of two thirds. Under the new law, for the first time in Egypt's history, renovation and construction of new churches will depend on permission from provincial governors. Previously, under rules from Ottoman times,¹¹ presidential permission and the security services' agreement had been necessary.¹² The issue of building or restoring churches in the country has always been, and still is, particularly controversial. Although this new law has improved the situation, it is far from solving the problem, and there have been a few episodes of violent Muslim opposition to Copts arising from the issue.

According to the Catholic News Agency, Egypt has about 2,600 churches – one church for every 5,500 Christian citizens – while there is one mosque for every 620 Muslim citizens.¹³

Copts have taken advantage of this new law to legalise and regularise their places of worship. The Egyptian government has already done this for 215 churches, in seven Egyptian governorates, declaring them compliant with the parameters defined by the new legal provisions.¹⁴ According to Fides, this is only the first step. There are thousands more Christian places of worship that will have to be examined in order to be legalised and regularised.¹⁵

On 30th June 2016 in the Northern Sinitic city of Al-Arish, a Coptic Orthodox priest was shot dead. This attack was claimed by the Egyptian branch of the Islamic State.¹⁶

On 11th December 2016 a suicide bomber himself blew up in the Coptic Orthodox Church of St Peter and St Paul, next to St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. At least 29 people, including six children, were killed and dozens were injured. Daesh claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack, stating that the attacks would continue against "every infidel and apostate in Egypt, and everywhere".¹⁷

In February 2017, following the rise of attacks by the Islamic State that targeted Coptic citizens in the Northern Sinitic city of Al-Arish, many families decided to flee to Ismailia, the nearest

city in the Nile Delta.¹⁸ According to official figures, up to 258 Coptic Christian families have left al-Arish city and are now relocated in 13 different governorates.¹⁹

On Palm Sunday, 9th April 2017, there were two suicide attacks in two Coptic Orthodox churches – St George’s in Tanta and St Mark’s in Alexandria – which left 44 people dead and more than 120 wounded. Both attacks were claimed by Daesh.²⁰

On 26th May 2017 at least 28 people were shot dead – several executed with a single shot to the head – and 23 were wounded during a bus trip to the Coptic Orthodox Monastery of St Samuel in Egypt. President al-Sisi repeated his call that countries which finance, train or arm extremists be punished.²¹

Following the April bombings, Egypt imposed a three-month state of emergency. Some voices in the media questioned whether the Copts would continue to trust President al-Sisi, after they had endured these extremist attacks. The Church’s official position has not changed and a majority of the Coptic community still stands with President al-Sisi. One commentator has observed: “While some Copts may question [the Church’s official support for President al-Sisi], like many others who support Sisi they are struggling to see an alternative to the current regime.”²²

Pope Francis made a historic visit to Cairo in January 2017. Father Rafic Greiche, the spokesman for the Egyptian bishops, said: “The Pope’s visit was a big blessing to the Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians. It boosted the morale of the Egyptian people, especially after the Palm Sunday blasts. [The Pope] gave a message of love, peace and hope.”²³

In July 2017 it was reported that, a soldier named Joseph Reda Helmy had been beaten to death after superior officers discovered he was Christian. The official account of the soldier’s death was that he had died of an epileptic seizure. However, an examination of the dead man’s body revealed bruising to his head, shoulders, genitalia, and neck, and also to his back, where the injuries were worst. The three officers suspected of being involved were said to have been taken into custody, after a prosecutor demanded an investigation.²⁴

In January 2018 the Egyptian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee drafted a response to a memorandum on “Coptic issues” written by the US-based organisation Coptic Solidarity.²⁵ The memorandum, which had been made public by some members of the US congress, alleged systematic discrimination against Copts under al-Sisi’s administration. The Foreign Affairs Committee’s response denied the accuracy of these allegations.

Several cases of inter-faith violence and attacks, abduction, forced conversions and marriages have been reported since the start of 2018.²⁶

In May 2018, the bodies of the 20 Coptic Christians killed by the Islamic State in Libya in February 2015 were returned to Egypt.²⁷

Prospects for freedom of religion

The situation concerning religious freedom has improved since an upsurge of anti-Christian violence peaked in August 2013 with attacks on nearly 80 churches and other Coptic centres, including convents, schools and clinics. Father Rafic Greiche, the spokesperson for the Catholic Church, emphasised that the position of Christians in Egypt has improved vastly since Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from the Presidency in July 2013. In May 2016, Father Greiche said: "There is no comparison between the situation today and that during the government of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, we have very good relations between Church leaders and government agencies. However, there are still many problems, of course. But it is my impression that Muslims are growing more aware of our situation."²⁸

President al-Sisi is giving signs which encourage the possibility of greater national unity between Muslims and Christians. His visits to Coptic Christmas services in recent years are testimony to this. Also, the President's call for a reform of Islam has had a positive influence on public opinion. The new constitution of 2014 is a step in the right direction, but other laws and government policies discriminating against non-Muslims remain unchanged. A deeply rooted social intolerance of and discrimination against non-Muslims, especially Christians, remains a serious societal problem, particularly in Upper Egypt. Christians are often victims of crimes such as blackmail and kidnapping, which are encouraged by a climate of impunity. Moreover, those who are altogether outside the traditional monotheistic religions, such as atheists and Baha'is, face daunting challenges in the form of societal attitudes and governmental policies.

There are signs of a change of approach in institutions such as the Sunni Al-Azhar University. But a lot still has to be done. Coptic Catholic Bishop Youssef Aboul-Kheir told Aid to the Church in Need: "The Al-Azhar University is regarded as a moderate force. But in fact there are many things in its teachings and programmes which are anything but moderate. For example, the use of force in cases of apostasy by Muslims is justified. This is in contradiction to moderate views. The Al-Azhar University must correct its programme."²⁹

Although most Copts support President al-Sisi for his efforts to restore security and stability, some of them, especially young urban politicised Copts, tend to criticise the strong links between the Orthodox Coptic Church and the regime.³⁰

Endnotes

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