



# Commentary on the current state of Freedom of Religion or Belief

2018

## Egypt

Egypt is a majority Sunni Muslim country and with around 90% of the population being Sunni, a large proportion of these following Sufism, they are well-established in the social fabric'.<sup>121</sup>

Nearly all Muslims are Sunni, with a large proportion of these following Sufism. Salafi Muslims number c.6 million, with Ahmadis, Shi'ites and Mu'tazilis making up the remaining 91%. Coptic Christians (c.8-9%), other Christian denominations (1%),<sup>122</sup> Baha'is (0.003%), Jehovah's Witnesses (0.002%) and Jews who number fewer than 40, constitute the final 9% of the population. <sup>123</sup>

There are significant human rights abuses in Egypt and the right to freedom of religion or belief continues to be denied.<sup>124</sup>

A growing number of Egypt's citizens are announcing themselves as atheists but sharp responses from the government, meting out prison sentences, is restricting the numbers of those willing to publically declare their beliefs. Egypt has long been divided along sectarian lines, with short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule and the influence of Daesh<sup>125</sup> exacerbating tensions.

President Sisi has spoken about the need for greater tolerance and taken a few symbolic actions, including becoming the first Egyptian leader to attend Coptic Christmas Eve Mass.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, there remains a high level of government restriction on religion. **The government is largely unable to protect Christian places of worship from bomb attacks or Christians themselves from kidnap and extortion.**<sup>127</sup>

Daesh claimed responsibility for three church bombings in 2016 and 2017 in which 70 people were killed and more than 100 injured. This year, <sup>117</sup>

Copts were attacked multiple times and in several places during the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha. One week earlier a suicide attack on a Coptic church in north Cairo was thwarted.

In November 2018 three buses carrying Christian pilgrims on their way to a remote desert monastery south of Cairo were ambushed, killing seven people and wounding 19; the local Daesh affiliate claimed responsibility.<sup>128</sup>

While in this case police killed 19 terrorist suspects,<sup>129</sup> **in general the authorities have failed to prosecute those who attack Christians and have instead enforced state-sponsored reconciliation agreements which provide impunity for the perpetrators and leave Christians vulnerable to future attacks.**<sup>130</sup>

In addition, there remains a high level of social hostility towards different religious groups<sup>131</sup> – mobs regularly attack churches, Shia Muslims experience active discrimination,<sup>132</sup> and Copts are harassed for drinking water during Ramadan fasting hours and gathering to pray in houses; they are at risk of looting.<sup>133</sup> These targeted actions are particularly supported by Salafi militants within the country.

Egypt inflicts severe penalties for declaring oneself to be an atheist, including up to five years' imprisonment. In January 2018 the Head of the Egyptian Parliament's Committee on Religion put forward new legislation to outlaw atheism that was debated in Parliament and considered by the President.<sup>134</sup> That this law was even considered highlights the environment that those with no religious beliefs experience and the risk taken if they publically state them.

It is illegal to register an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist, or other non-religious NGO and those that attempt it face harassment from the authorities.<sup>135</sup>

It remains difficult to open places of worship for recognised faiths, though the Egyptian government has prioritised the reconstruction of several significant non-Muslim places of worship.

**In October 2018 it was reported that only 340 out of 3,730 applications from unlicensed churches seeking legal status and building permits had been granted under the 2016 Church Construction Law,** meant to provide an avenue for Christians to legally build and renovate churches.<sup>136</sup>

Many unregistered churches have waited around 15-20 years already to be registered by the state; meanwhile they remain vulnerable to being shut down or attacked.

The church in Ezbet Sultan Pasha village, Minya, faced concerted mob attacks with police complicity when seeking legalisation in July 2018.<sup>137</sup>

On 2 July 2018, a man's fields were burned days after he was accused of planning to turn his home into a house church.<sup>138</sup> <sup>128</sup>

Blasphemy cases are increasing in Egypt.<sup>139</sup> Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal code criminalises contempt of religion<sup>140</sup> and acts as a blasphemy law.

In December 2017 a 29 year-old man was accused of 'contempt of religion' for running a Facebook page called 'Atheism'.<sup>141</sup>

In July 2018 a mob attacked several Coptic Christian homes in Minbal village, Minya, following the publication of a Facebook post deemed offensive to Islam.<sup>142</sup>

Atheists and adherents of non-recognised religions are barred from registering their chosen belief on ID cards.<sup>143</sup>

Thanks to a 2008 court ruling, official recognition of conversion from Islam is impossible, and those who do in practice face significant social and governmental hostilities.<sup>144</sup>

Conversely, official recognition of conversion to Islam is easy to obtain.

*References:*

*'The World Factbook: Egypt'*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>

122 Delhaye, Gregoire, 'Contemporary Muslim-Christian Relations in Egypt: Local Dynamics and Foreign Influences', Longva, Anh Nga; Roald, Anne (eds.), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p.71

123 USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Egypt', 2018, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2\\_EGYPT.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_EGYPT.pdf)

124 Human Rights Watch, 'Country Chapters: Egypt', 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/egypt>

125 World Watch Monitor, 21 November 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/isis-the-greatest-preacher-forchristianity-in-the-world/>

126 USCIRF, 'Tier 2: Egypt', 2018, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2\\_EGYPT.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_EGYPT.pdf)

127 Pew Research Center, April 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/> 20

128 The Guardian, 3 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/03/egypt-attack-gunmen-kill-copticchristians-bus-ambush>

129 BBC News, 'Coptic Christian Attack', 4 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-46090104>

130 Amnesty International, 'Egypt: Government must protect Coptic Christians targeted in string of deadly attacks in North Sinai', 1 March 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/egypt-government-must-protect-coptic-christians-targeted-in-string-of-deadly-attacks-in-north-sinai/>

131 Pew Research Center, 'Appendix B: Social hostilities Index', <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/11/2018/06/19152147/APPENDIX-B-1.pdf>

132 Minority Rights Group, 'Egypt: Shi'a of Egypt', October 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-of-egypt/>

133 World Watch Monitor, 'Coptic Christians harassed for drinking water during Ramadan fasting hours', 13 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/coptic-christians-harassed-for-drinking-water-during-ramadan-fasting-hours/>

134 Religion News Service, 'Egyptian Parliament considers outlawing atheism', 4 January 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/01/04/egyptian-parliament-considers-outlawing-atheism/>

135 IHEU, 'Freedom of Thought Report 2018', <https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/africa-northern-africa/egypt/>

136 Christian Post, 'Over 3,000 Egyptian churches still waiting for licenses 2 years after landmark law', 5 November 2018, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/over-3000-egyptian-churches-still-waiting-licenses-2-years-after-landmark-law-228357/>

137 World Watch monitor, 'Egypt: Mob attacks prevent Coptic church's recognition for 'security' reasons', 31 August 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/egypt-mob-attacks-prevent-coptic-churchs-recognition-for-security-reasons/>

138 World Watch Monitor, 'Copt's fields torched after rumours he was turning his house into a church', 26 June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/copts-fields-torched-after-rumours-he-was-turning-his-house-into-a-church/> 21 Blasphemy cases are increasing in Egypt.

139 Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal code criminalises contempt of religion

140 and acts as a blasphemy law. In December 2017 a 29 year-old man was accused of 'contempt of religion' for running a Facebook page called 'Atheism'.

141 In July 2018 a mob attacked several Coptic Christian homes in Minbal village, Minya, following the publication of a Facebook post deemed offensive to Islam.

142 Atheists and adherents of non-recognised religions are barred from registering their chosen belief on ID cards.

143 Thanks to a 2008 court ruling, official recognition of conversion from Islam is impossible, and those who do in practice face significant social and governmental hostilities. 144 Conversely, official recognition of conversion to Islam is easy to obtain.