

Freedom of Religion and Belief in Egypt: Official discourse vs. reality on the field

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HRWF (14.07.2017) - In this presentation, regarding FoRB in Egypt, we would like to expose the difference between the official discourse and the reality of everyday life when it comes to Freedom of Religion; Although there are other religious numerical minorities (Baha'is, Shia's, Jews), we will mainly talk about the Coptic community.

About the official discourse

The President

Since December 2014, President El-Sissi has demanded on several occasions Al-Azhar to renew the religious discourse. Al-Azhar, as the world's oldest Sunni institute of Islamic learning, is considered to be responsible for religious discourse in Egypt and part of the Muslim world.

El-Sissi has publicly and explicitly told Sheikh Al-Azhar, at least twice, that he had not responded to his previous calls.

Recently, during an Al-Azhar ceremony celebrating Ramadan's Laylat Al-Qadr, and reiterating his call, President El-Sissi said that four things are needed to be achieved in order to defeat terrorism. The first one was renewing religious discourse.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/271370/Egypt/Politics-/Reforming-religious-discourse-still-essential-to-d.aspx>

Al-Azhar's official discourse

Al-Azhar has repeatedly condemned IS' jihadist attacks against churches, and condemned terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam.

Furthermore, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar's Ahmed El-Tayyeb has recently announced that Al-Azhar will submit a draft law to Parliament criminalising hate speech, particularly against any religious beliefs. If the law is adopted, we'll have to see how it is used; these kinds of condemnations are used to principally tackle critics against Islam, rarely any other revealed Religion is included.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/271368/Egypt/Politics-/Egypths-AlAzhar-to-submit-draft-law-criminalising-h.aspx>

About the reality on the field

We can first of all deplore a lack of protection for Copts.

For decades, the fact that security forces have lacked to intervene in order to defend, or prevent sectarian attacks, has been recurrent. There are unfortunately numerous and reiterated examples of the usual two scenarios:

- * Either local security forces are notified by the potential victims, that they, their families or communities, have been threatened;
- * Or security forces are called for help during sectarian attacks.

In both cases, and according to numerous testimonies, it seems that security forces (police as well as firemen in case of sectarian homes, shops or churches burning), fail to arrive on time.

Recently, in a more tragic example, in El-Arish (Sinai Northern Mediterranean coast city) Coptic families have been threatened by the 'Islamic State's Sinai Province' (Wilayat Sina'). Between 30th of January and 23rd of February, armed men killed seven Christians in el-Arish. *IS, which has been launching attacks in the city, claimed responsibility for the killing of these people, five of whom were shot while another was decapitated and the seventh was set on fire. Meanwhile, on 19th of February, IS published a video of the December attack on St. Peter and St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo, calling for targeting Christians in Egypt.*

According to official estimates by the Egyptian Cabinet operation room, 144 Christian families have left El-Arish since the last killing of a Copt on the 23rd of February.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/egypt-sinai-islamic-state-killing-copts-christians.html#ixzz4l6TIlu5l>

At the beginning of May, Nabil Saber Ayoub, a Copt, returned to El-Arish without his family. He was shot in front of his business.

The message was clearly received by the Coptic community, and since then, El-Arish has *de facto* become a Christian-free city.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/militants-kill-coptic-barber-who-returned-arish-earn-living-after-mass-exodus/>

Then there is the problem of lack of intervention

As I've said, we notice a lack of intervention once the attacks to members of the Coptic community have already started. There is the unfortunate example of last year from the province of Minya that has been very present in the media.

On May 2016, according to an official statement, a number of angry residents from Karm village assaulted and stripped a Coptic woman, Soad Thabet, in a wave of sectarian violence.

This happened after a rumour circulated of a romance between her son, a Christian man, Ashraf Atteya, and a Muslim woman.

Atteya had received a number of threats, leading him to flee the village. And on 19th of May 2016, his parents filed a complaint at the Abu Kourkas Police Station denouncing persistent harassment.

The following day, 300 armed men attacked the homes of seven Coptic families, looting them and causing severe damage and financial losses. Furthermore, Atteya's mother Soad was stripped naked and dragged into the street.

One can easily wonder how in a country where public demonstrations are forbidden, and security forces omnipresent, a mob of 300 armed men managed to gather in a small village without any intervention.

<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/05/26/news/u/coptic-woman-stripped-naked-assaulted-in-minya-sectarian-violence/>

Most recently, at the end of May 2017 Miled Salama, a young lawyer who lost close relatives in the attack on Coptic pilgrims travelling from Minya to Saint Samuel's monastery in Western desert, confirmed the late arrival of the emergency services. Although he had himself informed security forces, he arrived at the place of the incident well before the police.

Another witness, a survivor of the attack, declared that when she called the police asking for help, the officer told her on the phone that it was a false report and asked her to give him her ID card number. Then he hung up.

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/four-years-revolution-egypts-copts-ask-government/>

Reconciliatory sessions

A study by EIPR (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights) estimated that in the last five years, around 45 sectarian incidents ended with customary reconciliation, which often furthers sectarian tension and violates the principles of citizenship and equality.

What usually happens is that Christians are attacked on a religious basis (Christian man accused of loving a Muslim woman, Christian community accused of building or restoring a church, etc.). In order to dissuade the victim to initiate a judiciary process, customary reconciliation sessions are organised between both parties under the supervision of security forces. During these sessions, the victim is persuaded to drop any judiciary case, and to accept reconciliation.

One of the most tragic cases was Ayman Anwar Mitri's who got his ear cut by two Salafists who declared they were applying Islamic Sharia punitive law (*hudud*). Mitri had been accused of having an affair with a Muslim woman. I would like to quote an article published in Al-Ahram Weekly: "In the presence of Muslim and Christian religious leaders the victim and his torturer were brought together to sign a granting pardon accord."

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/archive/2011/1041/eq10.htm>

https://eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/imposing_biased_outcomes.pdf

Judiciary system

Coming back to Soad Thabet's case, in January 2017, Minya prosecution suspended investigations into a case connected to her assault. The prosecution said that the case was closed due to insufficient evidence.

The lawyer representing Thabet told Mada Masr, an Egyptian media, that the prosecution neglected her testimony, that of her husband and police investigations, which proved that the woman was stripped naked and dragged through the streets of Karm village.

This is quite common in Egypt where the judiciary system does not treat equally Muslims and Christians.

Another example: in January 2016, a group of young Copts who made a parody video of ISIS were sentenced to prison. They had to flee the country.

However, after the recent attacks against Coptic pilgrims from Minya, some internet users posted hate messages, celebrating the violence against Christians. Although it is punishable by law, nobody was prosecuted. Such double-standards and impunity weakens the Copts. Some may say that there has been no complaint.

<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/01/15/news/u/prosecution-suspends-investigations-into-assault-of-coptic-woman-in-minya/>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4125276/Charges-dropped-against-Soad-Thabet-s-accused-attackers.html>

New Church construction law

On 30th August 2016, the Egyptian Parliament approved the long-awaited law on the construction and renovation of churches.

Before the current law was issued, the construction and renovation of churches was subject to Hatt-i Humayun, a royal decree of Ottoman times. Istanbul had issued this directive in 1856 in order to guarantee the religious rights of Ottoman subjects of different non-Muslim communities.

After the declaration of the Republic, the decision-making process on whether to give permission to build or renovate a church passed on to the President, who could then rule on the matter. The Ministry of Interior usually intervened in this decision by sending its approval or rejection to the President's Office. Among other things, these conditions stress on the church's distance from the mosque or mausoleum, the faith of the area's inhabitants, the number of Christians in the area, and the existence of another church in the township or the distance to the closest church beyond it. Since mosques are subject to no such condition, these restrictions therefore clearly reflect the discrimination affecting the freedom of Christians to practice their religion and contravene the principles of equality and citizenship stipulated by the Constitution.

But why is this law interesting? Because it clearly reveals the gap between official discourse and reality. The 2014 Constitution decreed in article 235: "The House of Representatives shall issue a law regulating the building and renovation of churches, ensuring that Christians have the freedom to practice their religious rituals." And this was indeed realised just a few days before the deadline given in the Constitution.

However, expediting the process and passing the law three days after it reached Parliament, without real discussion, makes one think on the State's intentions. Here, the title of the Mada Masr's article is quite revealing: "After 150-year wait, Parliament passes church construction law in 3 days".

<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/08/31/feature/politics/after-150-year-wait-parliament-passes-church-construction-law-in-3-days/>

<http://www.legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=3309>

El Tayyeb's perception of Christian religion

In November 2015, Sheikh El-Tayyeb declared in a public conference in Luxor that "The Renaissance in Europe took place at a time when Christians moved away from religion. On the other hand, the "fall", or the collapse of Muslim societies, was due to a departure from religion," meaning that Christianity is a factor of darkness and Islam of Enlightenment. This discourse has not remained unnoticed and has been criticised by several journalists on Egyptian TV, among others Ibrahim Issa. Issa describes El-Tayyeb's message as the most dangerous 2 minutes and 10 seconds of Islamic thought.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQveO_DMTVc#action=share

Freedom of Belief

In May 2016 Al-Azhar said that Cheikh El-Tayyeb had accepted Pope Francis's invitation to the Vatican in order to "explore efforts to spread peace and co-existence". This encounter was very important as it was the first one since the crisis that followed the Regensburg discourse given in 2006 by former Pope Benedict XVI erupted.

Less than a month after the Vatican encounter, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb declared in a TV interview, posted on the official Al-Azhar Youtube channel, in June 2016 that in Islam unrepentant apostates should be killed.

Sheikh Al-Tayyeb said: "The four schools of law all concur that apostasy is a crime, that an apostate should be asked to repent, and that if he does not, he should be killed."

"There are two verses in the Quran that clearly mention apostasy, but they did not define a specific punishment. They left the punishment for the Hereafter, for Allah to punish them as He sees fit. But there are two *hadiths* [on apostasy]. According to the more reliable of the two, **a Muslim can only be killed in one of three cases, one of which is abandoning his religion and leaving the community.**"

<https://www.facebook.com/memri.org/videos/10154241777229717/>

Human rights

He further said that "the concepts of Human Rights are full of ticking time-bombs. [...] The problem is that the [Islamic and Western] civilizations are different. **Our civilization is based on religion and moral values, whereas their civilization is based more on personal liberties and some moral values.**"

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/four-years-revolution-egypts-copts-ask-government/>

Liberal Islam

Dar al-Ifta al-Masriyyah [Egyptian state-run Islamic institution assigned to issue religious edicts] has recently released a statement in which it severely criticised a recently established liberal mosque in Berlin.

Since this is not allowed according to traditional Islamic teachings, Dar al-Ifta al-Masriyyah said in the statement that the promotion of liberal and egalitarian ideology in mosques, such as allowing women to lead prayers, is a clear violation of the rules of Islam.

Al-Masriyyah concluded by mentioning that such acts are not ways to combat extremism and terrorism; instead these acts are representing a violation of Islam.

On the image released by Dar el Ifta, you can read:

“Women and men **cannot** pray on the same line

A Female Imam **cannot** lead the prayer for men

No to liberal mosques”

It is quite puzzling to see how an Egyptian state Islamic institution is issuing a statement condemning a mosque in Germany, especially when you know what this kind of condemnations can lead to (*takfir*: the practice that enables a Muslim to declare another Muslim *kafir*, unbeliever).

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/dar-alifta-attacks-german-mosque/>

Conclusion

We were all aware of the 80 churches that were burnt to the ground in Egypt after the destitution of the Muslim Brother President Mohamed Morsi. We also heard about the recent different terrorist attacks against Coptic Churches or Pilgrims on their way to a Monastery in the Libyan Desert.

However, Western media rarely talks about the everyday life. In the last decades, the Egyptian public sphere has increasingly become Muslim. In everyday life, Copts suffer from discriminatory behaviours and measures, or see their beliefs being publicly ridiculed or even highly criticised (Muslim religious programmes and comments retransmitted in public spaces, cafés, streets, where Christians are treated as *mushrekin*, which is mainly considered by Muslims as being polytheist (i.e. highly condemnable). Since Nasser, Christians do not have the same access to civil servant positions, to official high responsibility posts, to senior military ranks, to University management posts or even to high Governmental responsibility. Furthermore, they suffer from derogatory discourse both in governmental and Azhari Education systems, the latter even inciting to violent actions against the non-believers or the infidels.

The question that arises today in the Arab world in general is that of citizenship. Whilst their fellow Muslim *citizens* enjoy a far from ideal status, that of Christians in the Arab world is even worse.

The risk is that Christians, more than any others, flee the region. Hence the disappearance of Christian communities, as has recently been the case in Syria and Iraq, or Turkey at the beginning of the 20th Century, would be dramatic. The region (that has already seen its Jewish communities almost vanish) is running the risk of becoming a confessional monolith.

Faced with these major challenges, what are the solutions available to Egypt, which has become the main Christian centre in the region?

Al-Azhar has been criticised, particularly for certain half-hearted stances towards IS and because repeated appeals by President El-Sissi for a renewal of religious discourse had gone unanswered. Criticisms levelled at this one thousand-year old institution, from both the government and from the Egyptian media, have further increased, following the two Church attacks on Palm Sunday. In an article written by Ahmed Mostafa and published by the Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat, Al-Azhar has been accused of becoming "an incubator for terrorists". <http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/21400344>

During his visit to Cairo in April 2017, the Pope recalled the importance of an appropriate education so that relations of fraternity and peace can be established. He also addressed questions of respect for others, equality, citizenship, and, of course renewal of religious dialogue through a revision of textbooks. It is important to patiently undo the work undertaken over nearly a century by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious groups: to radicalise society through Education.

In order to conclude, I would like to quote Monseigneur Gollnisch, General Director of L'Œuvre d'Orient: "The future of Christians cannot be considered apart from the question of the peoples of the region themselves. If we look at Egypt, it's the Muslim Egyptians who got rid of the Islamists and President Morsi. Muslim population, to a large extent, does not want the implementation of an Islamist, fundamentalist, jihadist project. There are Muslims who want their country to move towards modernity and citizenship for all, and who want Christians to be at their side. There is no future for the Christians outside this dialogue."

<http://www.chretiensdelamediterranee.com/chretiens-dorient-nappartiennent-a-parti-mgr-pascal-gollnisch-croix/>