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Church owner fined, attackers given suspended sentences

World Watch Monitor (31.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FCoyZh> - An Egyptian court today (31 January) found 15 people guilty of attacking a Coptic church south of Cairo, and also fined a Coptic man for illegally hosting the church on his premises.

The misdemeanour court in Giza governorate handed down one-year suspended jail sentences to the 15 attackers, with a fine equivalent to US\$28 each for "inciting sectarian strife, harming national unity and vandalising private property", Reuters reported.

The Coptic owner of the premises in the village of Kafr al-Waslin received a fine equivalent to \$20,500 for hosting a church without a licence.

A local source told World Watch Monitor that the building had served as meeting room for Copts, and a nursery, for more than 15 years.

On 22 December, a large group of Muslims gathered at the building after their Friday prayers, following a rumour that a church bell was to be put on the top of the building and that it would be turned into an official church. The group broke into the building and trashed the interior, chanting "Allahu Akbar" ("Allah is the greatest"), according to the source.

Legalisation

Reuters reported that the local diocese had applied for a license after the government passed its new church-building law in 2016.

In October last year, a cabinet committee started work on the legalisation of unlicensed churches, having received 2,650 requests from Coptic parishes waiting for a permit or license to renovate or build.

Earlier this month the Ministry of Housing announced that Christians were allowed to meet in unlicensed churches while their registration applications were processed.

For decades, the construction and renovation of churches in Egypt has been obstructed by complex bureaucracy, resulting in the deterioration of church buildings and a shortage of places of worship for Christians.

Tension between radical Muslims and Copts in rural villages has resulted in several churches being closed for security reasons.

Egyptian parliamentary committee responds to 'Coptic issues' memo released by US Congress

Parliament's foreign affairs committee responded to US allegations of discrimination against Copts, stating that the Muslim Brotherhood had sought to provoke sectarian conflict in Egypt

Gamal Essam El-Din

Ahramonline (22.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Duxf7q> - The head of the Egyptian parliament's foreign affairs committee, Tarek Radwan, said on Monday that the committee has finished drafting a response to a memorandum on "Coptic issues" in Egypt that was made public in December by some members of the US Congress.

The memorandum, drafted by a US-based organization called Coptic Solidarity, claimed that there is systematic discrimination against Copts in Egypt by the government under President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi's administration. On reviewing the memo, some members of Congress adopted a resolution titled "Expressing concern over attacks on Coptic Christians," which received strong bipartisan support.

Radwan said the Egyptian parliamentary committee's six-page response document will be sent to the US Congress, with the main objective of refuting the claims made in the Coptic Solidarity memorandum.

The committee's response begins with some historical perspective, stating that, "Since the dawn of history, Egypt's Muslims and Copts have always been in unity, forming part of a single national fabric."

The committee states that, "After the Arab conquest of Egypt, Muslims were keen that Copts should perform their religious rituals and duties freely. Not to mention that Prophet Mohamed always urged Muslims to do everything good and merciful for the Copts of Egypt."

The committee's document argues that, "Under the 25 January Revolution in Egypt in 2011, Muslims and Copts showed firm unity again, espousing the slogan 'The homeland is for all and religion is for God' and stressed the importance of the principle of 'citizenship' as the rule governing all Egyptians, regardless of religion, colour or race.

The response goes on to identify the Muslim Brotherhood as a primary cause of sectarian strife in Egypt in recent times.

"When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt in 2012, the members of this group, in collaboration with 'foreign hands', began to play a systematic role in invoking sectarian strife. The 25th January Revolution helped uncover the ugly face of the Muslim Brotherhood in this respect, especially after it moved to stir up internal troubles and foment sectarian strife. This Muslim Brotherhood strategy led to the rise of radical and terrorist groups, which were keen to exploit religion for extremist goals.

"But before the one-year-rule of Muslim Brotherhood came to an end, Egyptians began to feel the threat of this group's policies on national unity," the response reads. "On 30 June, 2013, more than 34 million Egyptians – Muslims and Christians - turned out into the streets to put an end to the Muslim Brotherhood regime.

"The 30 June Revolution was one against religious rule or turning Egypt into a sectarian state," said the response, stating that, "After the revolution, members of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated terrorist groups embarked upon torching Coptic churches

across Egypt. They were able to torch a total of 83 Christian places of worship (including churches, monasteries, nuns' schools and Christian service houses), not mention that hundreds of Christian properties and possessions were burned to dust.

"The Muslim Brotherhood moved to exploit the crimes of its members to convey one message to Western public opinion and its governments – that there is a conflict between Christians and Muslims in Egypt."

The Committee's response argues that, "The Muslim Brotherhood's one-year in power involved a great deal of discrimination against Christians. They alleged that the Christians of Egypt are opposed to their 'Islamic Reawakening Project' and so they warned the majority of Copts against joining the 30 June Revolution.

"Soon after the dispersal of their sit-ins in Rabaa and Nahda Squares in Cairo and Giza, Muslim Brotherhood activists issued public orders to the group's members to kill Christians everywhere in Egypt and burn their places of worship."

After the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood regime, the response says, the Egyptian government was keen to address Coptic grievances in terms of re-implementing the principles of "citizenship" on the ground.

"After he came to office in 2014, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi was keen to congratulate Copts in person as they celebrated Christmas each year," says the committee's response.

El-Sisi was the first Egyptian president to do this, not to mention that he vowed that the government would take revenge on all those who killed Copts, on the grounds that they [the Copts] are Egyptians with full citizenship rights.

"Two big bridges were named after two Coptic martyrs, not to mention that the army embarked upon rebuilding and renovating as many as 83 churches across Egypt," the response says.

On the legislative front, the document notes that Egypt's 2014 Constitution was passed to prevent the foundation of religious parties and affirm the principle of "citizenship".

"Article 244 of the Constitution helped Christians gain 39 seats in parliament for the first time," said the response, adding that a new law was passed in August 2016 making it easier for Christians in general and Copts in particular to build churches.

"Right now and thanks to this law, more than 4,000 churches are being legalized, 17 new ones were already built, not to mention that a giant Coptic cathedral was inaugurated at Christmas in Egypt's new Administrative Capital," it says.

"Parliament will soon embark upon discussing a draft law on establishing a national anti-discrimination commission.

The law on the Higher Council of the Anti-Discrimination Commission will be discussed soon to ensure that no religious minorities in Egypt face any kind of persecution or discrimination," the response says, asserting that, "Many Coptic and Christian public figures now occupy leading positions in state ministries, councils and bodies."

The committee's response concludes by quoting Coptic Pope Tawadros II, who said: "It is better to have a homeland without churches than to have churches without a homeland."

Tawadros made the comment after two terrorists attacked a church in eastern Cairo in December 2016, killing 45 Coptic worshipers.

Two Minya churches obtain legal recognition, officially open

Egypt Independent (18.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GbnXP1> - Earlier in January, al-Azraa (Virgin Mary) Church and Mar Girgis Church in the village of Sheikh Alaa at Minya officially opened their doors as legally-recognized churches for the first time, despite being built in 2015, state-news agency MENA reported.

In October 2017, Coptic worshipers entered a church to pray, but were harassed the same day and the church was subsequently closed by police following the sectarian attacks. In response, Coptic Christians staged a sit-in at the church's premises, conducting a daily mass which went on until the reopening of the church earlier in January.

The Orthodox Coptic Archbishopric of Minya governorate said at the time that four churches were closed during October, and questioned if Coptic Christians praying was a crime.

"We stayed silent for two weeks after the closure of a church, hoping that the officials would do the job they were assigned to do by the state."

"However," he continued, "this silence has led to something worse, as if prayer is a crime the Copts should be punished for. Coptic Christians go to the neighboring villages to perform their prayers," the Archbishop revealed, highlighting the desperate situation for Copts in Egypt.

Following harassment of Copts, the housing ministry announced that it would "allow Christians to practice religious rites at unlicensed churches, pending their formal recognition as places of worship," a move that was praised by the Christian community.

Archpriest Antoun said that the Orthodox Coptic Church sent requests to formally recognize 2,600 churches and affiliated buildings across Egypt by September 2017. He added that according to 2016 law, religious rites are to be allowed at unlicensed churches pending the legalization of their status.

Christians make up an estimated 10 percent of the country's population of 100 million, although some estimates argue that the actual number could be far higher.

Throughout the years, they have long struggled to obtain the licences required to build churches, or at least have them legally recognized as such.