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Egyptian cabinet begins legalisation procedures for 53 unlicensed churches



Egypt's Prime Minister Sherif Ismail (Photo: Ahram)

Ahram Online (26.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FdYve5> - The Egyptian cabinet on Monday approved the start of a four-month legalization process for the status of 53 unlicensed churches and affiliated buildings across the country.

"The cabinet decisions comes in light of the rights granted by the 2014 constitution to the followers of the Abrahamic religions to practice their religious rites at places of worship," a statement by the cabinet said.

Article 64 of the Egyptian constitution stipulates that the right to freedom of religious practice and to establish places of worship for the followers of the Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

In 2016, the government passed a law that speeds up the licensing process for building Christian houses of worship.

Prior to the 2016 law, the country's Christians, who make up an estimated 10 percent of the country's 100 million population, had long struggled to obtain building permits for churches, with the process often taking years.

In early January 2018, Egypt's Ministry of Housing issued an order to allow Christians to practice their religious rites at unlicensed churches pending the legalization of their status.

The ministry's directives came after a mob of Muslims stormed a building in Giza's Atfih saying Christians were conducting prayers at an unlicensed site.

A number of Christian worshippers were injured during the attack and furniture destroyed.

Prime Minister Sherif Ismail had formed in January, 2017 a special committee to review pending church approval requests in order to address the issue.

Archpriest Antoun, a member of the PM's committee, said that the Coptic Orthodox Church had presented requests to formally recognise 2,600 churches and affiliated buildings in all Egyptian governorates by the end of September 2017.

Many Christian congregations have for years had to conduct prayers in unlicensed churches or in buildings that were not officially designated for religious use.

Egypt's Copts flock to see church opened in remembrance of beheaded Christians

World Monitor News (15.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2CBdF8c> - It is a special day for the Coptic community of Minya province, Upper Egypt, as a new church was inaugurated this morning in Al-Our village in remembrance of 20 Egyptian Copts and one Ghanaian Christian beheaded by IS on the Libyan coast three years ago today (15 February 2015).

In the early morning, a mass was held at the new Church of the Martyrs of Faith and Homeland by Bishop Bevnoutious. The church was packed with Christians who travelled to Al-Our from various parts of Minya – where the murdered Copts came from. Although the inauguration was not an official event – the governor of Minya did not attend – it still received extensive media coverage, partially because the construction of the church was funded by the Egyptian government. Security forces were present throughout the event.

Boushra Fawzy's son Kiryollos was one of those killed. He was 22.

"We are very happy that we have this wonderful big church named after our martyrs. It is honouring them," the father told World Watch Monitor. "We were happy today that a mass for the third anniversary of their martyrdom was held in their church and we felt a great joy during the service, because that was a dream for us."

As part of the ceremony, the bodies of all 21 victims were expected to be reburied in one big coffin inside the church. However, World Watch Monitor learnt this week that the

families were still waiting for their loved ones' remains to be returned to them and had not been told when exactly it would happen.

Meanwhile, three days before the inauguration, in another part of Minya, the town council of Al-Edwa issued an order to demolish a memorial erected on the spot where 28 Copts were killed last May as they travelled to the monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor on Ascension Day.

World Watch Monitor learnt that the memorial had been set up without official permission. However, the governor of Minya, Essam al-Bedeiwi, intervened and ordered the planned demolition to be halted until he had discussed the matter with the town council.

Boulos al-Samueli, a monk at St. Samuel the Confessor monastery, told Coptic news site Watani: "Governor Bedeiwi also promised he would visit St. Samuel's next week, when he would look into two requests by the monastery: the first is to allow pilgrimage to the monastery, which was halted for security reasons following the terror attack in May 2017; the second is to allow the monastery to build a church in honour of the martyrs, on the spot of the attack."

Two crosses were erected beside the memorial, which was made out of white bricks, next to a plaque showing the names of the victims.

EIPR demands reinvestigation into attacks on the Kafr al-Wasilin church in Atfih, re-opening of the church for worship, and the speedy legalization of all unlicensed churches

EIPR (01.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EnAjqe> - The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights is deeply concerned about the judgment issued yesterday by the Atfih Misdemeanor Court in the Giza governorate in case no. 11359/2017 in connection with the attack on the Amir Tadros Church in the village of Kafr al-Wasilin in the Atfih district. The court gave 19 Muslim defendants a one-year suspended sentence and fined them LE500, while fining a Coptic citizen LE360,000. The EIPR said that the judgment is consistent with the way other state institutions handle such incidents. The state ceded to demands from some local residents to shut down the church following attacks on it, on the grounds that the church is unlicensed and thus in violation of the church construction law. At the same time, the former owner of the plot of land on which the church is erected was arrested, though he sold the land to the Atfih and al-Saff bishopric in 2014. He was referred to trial on charges of unlicensed construction, and a petition from the Atfih and al-Saff bishopric to join the case was denied, though it submitted proof of ownership and also documents showing that the church had submitted its papers with the ministerial committee tasked with settling the legal status of churches, formed pursuant to Law 80/2016 on the renovation and construction of churches and Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017 forming the legalization committee.

The Amir Tadros Church in Kafr al-Wasilin was attacked on December 22, 2017 by hundreds of village Muslims after the Friday prayer amid a total absence of security. The assailants chanted religious and anti-Copt slogans and demanded the demolition of the church, saying the church was about to install a bell, which they opposed.

The Atfih prosecution referred 19 Muslims defendants, four of them fugitives, to trial on charges of assembly, exploiting religion with intent to provoke, shouting to foment sectarian strife entailing harm to national unity, premeditated property destruction, entering a property with intent to commit a crime, and assault of Eid Atiyya. Atiyya was also referred to trial on charges of unlicensed construction in violation of the law and operating a kindergarten before obtaining the necessary permits from the competent body. A Muslim juvenile was also referred to trial before the child court.

The EIPR notes that Law 80/2016 on the construction and renovation of churches and their annexes, issued on September 28, 2016, and Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017 forming a committee to regularize the legal status of churches, issued on January 26, 2017, both bar the closure of unlicensed, operating churches regardless of whether they meet the conditions for legal status. The administrative body has not complied with this provision, shutting down the church on the grounds that it has no official permit, nor has the Atfih prosecution, which dropped the charge of attacking a religious facility against the defendants, thus demonstrating the failure of the church construction law to resolve the sectarian tensions and assaults associated with the construction and renovation of churches and religious structures.

“The church in Kafr al-Wasilin was well known to the security bodies and local residents for years, and it had filed its papers with the committee settling the legal status of churches. The attacks began following a rumor that a bell was being installed,” said Ishak Ibrahim, an officer on freedom of religion and belief at the EIPR. “Despite all that, state bodies treated the building like an ordinary structure, not a church, for the purpose of permanently shuttering it. The problem with the Kafr al-Wasilin church is likely to be repeated under the current church construction law. The complexities of the law have foreclosed the old avenues by which obstacles were evaded, by praying in a home, for example, and then converting it into a church. It has also encouraged people to stir up problems in order to prevent Christians from worshipping and holding mass in unlicensed churches or homes.”

The EIPR calls for the reopening of the investigation into the attacks on the Amir Tadros Church as an attack on and destruction of a house of worship, while also allowing the church to reopen for worship services. The EIPR also calls for the swift licensing of all churches that have filed their papers with the legalization committee, regardless of whether they meet the conditions set forth in the law, as well as fundamental amendments to the new law regulating the construction of churches, to ensure full equality for Egyptians as they exercise their right to worship.

Background: the attack on the Amir Tadros church in Kafr al-Wasilin, Atfih district

On Friday, December 22, 2017, the Amir Tadros Church, located in the village of Kafr al-Wasilin in the Atfih district of the Giza governorate, was attacked and vandalized by hundreds of local Muslims after the Friday prayer. Most of the assailants had prayed at the Sheikh Abd al-Hamid Mosque, just a few meters from the church, in addition to other mosques around the village. Amid the complete absence of security, the assailants chanted religious and anti-Copt slogans, demanding the demolition of the church. Video footage online shows dozens of people in front of the church chanting, among other things, “Top to bottom and all around, we’ll bring the church tumbling down.” Other photos online show the magnitude of the damage to the church.

The Amir Tadros Church is situated on a 1,200-m² parcel of land that was owned by a Christian, Eid Ibrahim Atiyya. Since 2001 the building has been used as a church, with the oral consent of the security establishment and the knowledge of local Muslim residents. On March 17, 2014, Eid Atiyya sold the land on which the church sits to Father Zosima, the Atfih bishop, in a preliminary contract of sale. The existing building, which was made of mud brick, was demolished and rebuilt without a tower or any Christian religious markings on the exterior.

“After the attack, the Atfih and al-Saff bishopric issued a statement: “The Amir Tadros Church, located in the village of Kafr al-Wasilin in the Atfih district, was attacked by hundreds of people, who assembled in front of the building after Friday prayer, chanting hostile slogans and calling for the demolition of the church. They then stormed the church and destroyed its contents after assaulting the Christians inside.”

The statement continued, “When the security forces arrived, they dispersed the assailants and secured the area, after which the injured were taken to the Atfih hospital. It should be noted that the place attacked has been the site of prayer services for some 15 years. After the issuance of the church construction law, the bishopric officially applied to have the church legalized.”

EIPR researchers obtained statements from several eyewitnesses, assault victims, and officials in the Atfih district.

Milad Eid,¹ the son of Eid Atiyya, said, “We’ve been praying in the church since 2001. The place was mud brick at first, with a wood and palm thatch roof, but in 2014 it was renovated. We made two stories to pray in every Saturday and offer services to people. Sometimes we’d organize medical caravans and offer tests and treatment for hepatitis C, for Muslims and Christians.”

“This was confirmed by Hani Samir,² a lawyer for the Atfih bishopric: “The building was sold by Eid Atiyya to the Atfih bishopric in a preliminary contract signed by both parties in 2014. The prosecution confirmed the validity of the signature and the contract. The church filed its papers with the committee legalizing the status of existing unlicensed churches under the church construction law.”

The village was tense for several days in the run-up to the attacks and there were signs of impending violence, according to various sources that spoke to the EIPR. There was also a Facebook page in the name of village residents that contained several appeals for Muslim residents to demonstrate and attack and demolish the building, which was allegedly being converted into a church. According to the appeals, this was not allowed in the village.³

Ahmed, a teacher at the religious institute in the village, told EIPR, “There can’t be a church operating in our midst. I wish they’d try to do it in a fringe, far-off place—that’d be acceptable, but not in a residential area with a big mosque and Azhari institute. That wouldn’t be right for the people living there, for there to be a church in this urban area.”

Ahmed, who owns a plot of land adjacent to the back of the church, added, “I learned from locals that security agreed to let village residents demonstrate on Friday after the prayer. As far as I know, it was agreed and calls went out by Facebook and mobile phones to get everyone to the Friday prayer in the mosque and then go together to demonstrate in front of the build that’s being converted into a church.”

Seeing these appeals, the Atfih bishopric informed security leaders that it feared a possible attack on the Amir Tadros Church and the homes of Copts, particularly as the

calls for attack and incitement increased. Father Morqos, the church priest, then filed a police complaint saying he had received threats against the church. He confirmed that the building was the property of the Atfih bishopric and under its supervision. Several security officials visited and inspected the site to ascertain that no bell was being installed.

Father Zosima,⁴ the bishop of Atfih, said, "Security knew there were groups on Facebook calling for an attack on the church for some time. Security spoke with us, saying there was a rumor or some people had filed a complaint saying we were installing a bell on the church. We told security, is there even a bell tower for us to put a bell in? And if we installed a bell, who would it bother? But we didn't do it because the site can't accommodate a bell, and there's no truth at all to this rumor. Some people from the district and the city council came and looked around, and they found nothing."

A few hours before the attack, several police personnel were on guard shifts at the church, but they withdrew a few minutes before the end of the Friday prayer and were nowhere to be seen at the time of the attacks. Several Christians in the church and religious officials attempted several times to contact the chief of the Atfih station and security leaders, but to no avail.

Eid Abd al-Shahid⁵ said, "On Friday morning at 10 am, some people from State Security and the district, and from the village chief's guard, came to the church and wandered all around, but five minutes before the Friday prayer ended, they all left—this is all on camera—they just left the church. When security left, there were church officials with us who tried several times to call the police chief, to ask for assistance because people were assembling around the church, but no one answered. People gathered around the church, then they stormed it and smashed everything inside."

After smashing the surveillance cameras, dozens of people stormed the church building. They broke down the gate to the two-story church building then stormed the courtyards. They then entered the church, smashing the altar, religious items, and the wooden pews. Some projection screens were also stolen. Although security forces and an ambulance arrived a half hour after the attack began, they were not able to enter the church due to the crowd of local Muslims, who stood chanting and supporting those vandalizing the church inside. Abd al-Wahhab Khalil, the local MP who was in the village when the incident began, urged Copts to carrying the injured outside to the ambulance. Copts refused to do so, asking for security forces to intervene, which happened two hours after the attack began.

The attacks resulted in the injury of Eid Atiyya (the previous owner of the piece of land sold to the church), his son Nadi, and his cousin Saad Ibrahim, all of whom sustained bruises and abrasions.

Milad Eid, Eid Atiyya's son, said, "People came and broke in on us. They hit my father and knocked him on his head and beat and pushed by uncle. Then they went into the two floors of the church and smashed everything there. We heard before this that people would gather and we filed police reports."

According to statements from some local Muslims, some Muslims upbraided other Muslims living next to the church, mocking them for not doing anything when the church was built or it began to be used for worship services for Christians. Several neighbors of the church participated in the attack after smashing the surveillance cameras.

Abd al-Wahhab Khalil, the MP with the Future of a Nation party, called for a customary reconciliation session the following day, on Saturday, December 23, in which Copts would withdraw their police reports. Father Zosima refused.

The Atfih prosecution heard the statements of the three injured parties. It released Nadi Eid and Samir Saad, but detained Eid Atiyya, the former owner of the land sold to the Atfih bishopric, for four days, on charges of converting his property into a church to host ritual practice without a license. Meanwhile, lawyers with the Atfih and al-Saff diocese submitted documents to the chief prosecutor proving the church's ownership of the house and showing it was purchased from its owner in 2014. They also submitted the church's application to the legal status committee as well as the contract of sale.

Father Zosima confirmed that the building is a church, owned by the bishopric, and that it had filed its papers with the committee examining the legal status of churches.

"We submitted the papers for the Amir Tadros Church for legalization with the legal status committee, based on the church construction law, because we've been praying in this place for 15 years and want to legalize it," he said. "The closest church is 2 kilometers away, and if people from Kafr al-Wasilin want to go pray there, they have to walk. It's a ways, and there's no transit other than toktoks, which means they'll pay LE10 going and LE10 coming. In other words, it will cost LE20 to pray. That's a lot for residents of the village."

The prosecution referred 15 Muslims in custody and four Muslim fugitives to trial, as well as one Copt, Eid Atiyya Saad Ibrahim, the owner of the land sold to the Atfih and al-Saff.

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/2Duxf7g> - 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 worshippers.

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 worshippers 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.

