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Fighting discrimination, 'Je Suis' academy aims to protect rights of Egypt's Christian footballers

At 22, Mina Bendary has set up an academy to try and help Coptic Christian footballers who get turned away by clubs due to their names.

Scroll (21.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2IH0Vis> - Mina Bendary dreamed of becoming a professional footballer in Egypt, but found his Coptic Christian name was an insurmountable barrier in the Muslim-majority country.

Such discrimination prompted him to hang up his boots and instead establish an academy to protect the rights of Christian footballers.

He opened the "Je Suis" ("I am") academy nearly three years ago in Alexandria, Egypt's second city, where he now trains a group of players aged 15 to 27.

At 22, Bendary declares he is "the youngest football coach in Egypt".

Wearing blue shirts depicting a football with a crown and a cross, the footballers race around the small pitch under the scorching midday sun.

The academy tries to offer solutions to Christians who “get rejected from teams they apply to as soon as they utter their names, regardless of their performance,” Bendary says.

“This happened in more than one club, which forced me to stop playing and to focus on solving the problem of Christians in football in Egypt.”

Bendary soon realised he was not alone in being asked to play under a Muslim name.

His eyes sparkling, he points to a player dubbed Cristiano – on account of the similarity of his looks and style to Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo.

The 17-year-old midfielder, Mina Samir, explains his experience at a high-profile club.

“After I was picked in the playoffs, my coach asked about my name, and I told him ‘Mina’ and he lost his enthusiasm telling me that they will be calling me.”

The coach never called.

‘Why this intolerance?’

Egyptian professional clubs and the national team are currently void of Coptic players.

Hany Ramzy is one Coptic player who did represent his country – he was captain of the national side in the late 1990s before playing abroad.

Former Egypt international and Tottenham Hotspur striker Ahmed Hossam, known as Mido, made a rare public statement in April about such prejudice.

Egyptian football embraces “some people who have a lot of discrimination that they do not hide,” he told Egypt’s DMC channel.

“How is it possible that in the history of Egyptian football for there to only have been five Christian players in the top level?” he asked, in comments that went viral.

“There are Christian players who stop playing at a young age because of the discrimination of some of the coaches,” said Mido.

Copts make up around 10% of Egypt’s population of 96 million and have long complained of discrimination in the workplace, education system and state institutions.

The Egyptian Football Association denies such prejudice extends to the sport.

“First thing we learn in the association (is that there is) no discrimination,” says Magdy Abdelghany, who sits on the FA’s board.

For the North Cairo Electricity youth team, including talented Christian players has led to on-pitch success in the Egyptian capital.

With three Christians in its main line-up, the team won the city’s youth tournament this year.

But the club’s coach, Mohamed Khalifa, says discriminatory practises nevertheless continue in Egypt.

"But they do not come from religious differences, and instead from a lack of understanding or acceptance of the other," he says.

Back on the pitch in Alexandria, 27-year-old Mina Shokry Ismail is dumbfounded at the discrimination he and his fellow players face.

"Our house was the only Christian one and was very loved. First and foremost we are Egyptians," he says.

"I do not understand, why this intolerance in football?"

Egyptian Copts face Muslim mobs protesting against legalisation of churches

World Watch Monitor (04.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2wmV6Xk> - The closure of a church in Upper Egypt that sought [legalisation](#) has been condemned as illegal by the congregation's lawyer, and charges made against eight of its congregation, who have been detained for more than a month, as not valid.

Coptic Christians of Al-Koumair village in Luxor Governorate had been gathering at the house of one of the community members for over 30 years. As the number of Copts increased in the village, and the nearest church was eight miles (13km) away, the diocese of Esna and Armant bought the house in 2006 to be used as Mar Girgis Coptic Orthodox Church. The adjacent building comprising a hall, a nursery, and accommodation for the priest, was acquired too.

According to the members of the Coptic community, the Muslim villagers always knew about the existence of the de-facto church and they also attended Copts' weddings and funerals that had taken place in the church hall.



Police arrested eight Muslims and seven Copts and closed down Mar Girgis Orthodox Church building in Al-Koumair village. (World Watch Monitor)

After the diocese applied for the legalisation of the church – after the Government passed a law making it easier for churches to gain building permits, even retrospectively – and a special committee visited it for inspection on 25 March, a group of Muslim villagers gathered around the church and started throwing bricks and stones at it, as well as at the neighbouring houses of Copts.

Gamal Ghali, a Coptic Christian from Al-Koumair village, described to World Watch Monitor what he saw. “On 31 March, the day before [Orthodox] Palm Sunday, a Muslim mob cut the railway track [near the village], protesting against the government for allowing the building to turn into a church. Throwing bricks and stones at it, they were shouting ‘*Allahu akbar*’ [Allah is the greatest] and ‘We don’t want a church in our village,’” he said. “We stayed inside our homes; none of us went out until the police arrived and dispersed the crowd.”

The next day, police arrested eight Muslims and seven Copts from their homes and closed down the church building. The 15 were detained for 15 days, which was then extended by 15 more days and, on 28 April, by 15 more. They were charged with disturbing the public peace, cutting the railway track, and spreading “terror” and “panic” among villagers.

The congregation’s lawyer, Ashraf Shakir, said that the decision to arrest seven members of the church along with Muslims had only been made “in order to keep the balance for the grip of the security in the village”.



The reconciliation session of the Coptic and Muslim communities in Al-Koumair village. (World Watch Monitor)

Before the third extension of the arrested villagers’ detention, the Muslim community of Al-Koumair invited their Coptic neighbours to a reconciliation session, which took place on 26 April. (The [reconciliation scheme](#) aims to restore good community relations without needing to involve law enforcement officials, but some Christians, especially in small towns, have complained that they are pressured to simply drop their complaints.) A reconciliation agreement was drafted, signed and submitted to the prosecution for the release of the detained villagers. The detention, however, still continues.

Despite the formal agreement of reconciliation, which local Copts say was signed only in order to secure the release of the detained, they fear local Muslims will not accept the existence of the church, even if an official permit is issued by the authorities.

The fact that the church remains closed is “against the law”, the church’s lawyer told World Watch Monitor.

“The church-building law forbids the termination or suspension of religious activities at any building while the application for its legalisation is being processed,” he added. “We demand that the church be opened and that the state impose its supremacy over the demand of those extremists that the church remain closed, because otherwise it will open the door to the repetition of such events in other villages.”

Another church in Luxor Governorate has been closed in similar circumstances. After Anba Karras Coptic Orthodox Church in the village of Halilah applied for legalisation, dozens of young Muslims gathered in front of the church on 16 April and shouted slogans against Copts. Security forces arrived at the scene and closed the church, but no arrests were made.

Youssef Adly, a church member, told World Watch Monitor: “A few days before these events, the legalisation committee visited the church to inspect it. When the Muslim villagers learnt about it they started protesting. Local officials cut off the power of the building on 28 April.”

The church was founded in the 1990s and since then has operated without interruption, and serves 86 families in Halilah and 34 families from neighbouring villages.

[There are more than 3,500 pending applications](#) from other churches that still need to be examined by the government commission set up to verify whether they meet legal requirements. However there have been several reports of protests by Muslim communities against the visits from the legalisation committees and the prospect of the formalisation of existing congregations and the [establishment of new churches](#).

Egypt’s disappearing Coptic women and girls

World Watch Monitor (01.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2rfQ9tF> - At least seven Coptic Christian women and girls disappeared in Egypt last month, in what is becoming a recurring phenomenon.

In each case, the family of the woman says she was abducted by a Muslim who wished to convert her to Islam and marry her.

All of the disappearances have been reported to the police. However, their families allege that they have often been met with inaction or indifference. Some have even claimed that members of the police force were involved in the disappearances.

Below, World Watch Monitor outlines the details of each case, as far as they are known.

Christine



Christine disappeared after being threatened on Facebook by someone she didn't know. (World Watch Monitor)

On 7 April, Christine Lamie, 26, disappeared after being threatened on Facebook by someone she didn't know.

Lamie, a mother-of-two from Qalyubia Governorate in north-eastern Egypt, had gone to work at the Civil Status Authority in Banha but never returned, according to her husband, Bahaa Girgis.

"A few days before that, Christine received a threatening message on Facebook from someone she didn't know, saying 'I will not leave you, Christine, I will take you even on the last day of my life'," Girgis told World Watch Monitor. "She told me about this and was very afraid. She blocked this person on Facebook."

When she did not return home, nor answer her phone, her husband started calling relatives and friends, but none knew where she was. The next day, Easter Day in the Coptic Orthodox Church to which the couple belong, Girgis reported his wife's disappearance to the police.

Four days later, on 12 April, Girgis went back to the police station to ask for an update. "I was surprised when the officer there told me that my wife Christine had gone to a police station the day before, filed a report that she wasn't kidnapped and that she converted to Islam by her full will," he said.



Christine and her husband Bahaa (World Watch Monitor)

"I know my wife very well; she would not convert to Islam by her will. She likes Christianity and she is very religious. She loves me and her sons very much; she cannot be away from us. Whenever she returns home after work, she rushes to our sons and hugs and kisses them and tells them how much she missed them.

"She was forced to convert to Islam after she was kidnapped," he added. "She was pressured and threatened to make her do so."

World Watch Monitor also spoke to Christine's priest, who corroborated her husband's account of the marriage and her disappearance.

"Christine is one of the honest members in our church. She has a strong relationship with God. She is very religious, meek and humble. She loves her family, her church and religion so much. There was no reason for her to leave her family and convert to Islam," said Fr. Girgis Zaki, from St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church in Banha.

Briskam

Another recent case involved a 17-year-old girl whose mother, Kawther, was the alleged victim of a kidnapping ten years ago. According to her family, Kawther was forced to convert to Islam and change her name after she was filmed naked and threatened that the video would reach her relatives.



Briskam's friends told her grandfather that she had been kidnapped by a Muslim man. (World Watch Monitor)

Her daughter, Briskam Raafat Mikhail Maher, a secondary school pupil from Hejaza Kebly village, Qena Governorate (Upper Egypt), went missing on 15 April. The girl's friends told her grandfather that she had been kidnapped by a Muslim man.

Briskam had been living in her grandparents' care since her mother disappeared, the girl's uncle, Malak Kamel, told World Watch Monitor.

According to Kamel, one day last month a female classmate of Briskam – whose brother Kamel alleged took part in the kidnapping of her mother – told Briskam that her mother wanted to see her.

"Briskam was very excited and went with the girl to meet her mother," Kamel said. "After Briskam met her mother, [the classmate's brother] Mohammed announced his desire to marry Briskam, but her mother refused it strongly so that the same scenario that happened with her ten years ago would not repeat."

According to Kamel, Briskam's mother then told the girl's grandparents to keep Briskam away from school, fearing she may be kidnapped, but Mohammed later visited them to assure them he would not harm Briskam as he considered her like a sister.

Then on 15 April, Briskam attended school accompanied by her grandfather. However, when he went to collect her from school in the afternoon, he could find neither Briskam, nor her classmate.

"We then learnt Mohammed and another man kidnapped Briskam in a tuc-tuc [auto-rickshaw] from the front of the school. Her mother confirmed that the kidnapper was Mohammed, who wants to marry her and convert her to Islam," said Kamel.

"When we reached the Qus police station [to report the kidnapping], there was a surprise for us: they knew everything about it and threatened us to conceal it and not to mention the name of the kidnapper, nor any details about the incident, if we wanted the return of Briskam."

Kamel further alleged that a police station assistant was the "mastermind" both of the alleged abduction of Briskam and of her mother ten years previously.

Meray



Meray did not return home from university. (World Watch Monitor)

A second-year student of Sohag University took a tuc-tuc from in front of her house in Tahta, Sohag Governorate, in the early hours of 10 April. Meray Girgis Sobhy was supposed to go to university, then visit a private tutor and return home, her father told World Watch Monitor.

However, when she did not return at the expected time, nor answer her phone, her father called the tutor only to learn that his daughter had not attended the class. Meray's father searched for her in every local hospital, but to no avail. He then filed a report with the police but told World Watch Monitor that "they made no effort to investigate the matter and search for her".

World Watch Monitor also spoke to Marina Girgis Sobhy, Meray's sister, and Nabil Luka, Meray's uncle, who confirmed the father's account of the incident.

Rasha



Rasha disappeared after a visit to her grandmother. (World Watch Monitor)

A secondary-school pupil, Rasha Khalaf Thabet Aziz, 18, from Ezbet Hafez village in Beni Suef Governorate was returning home from a visit to her grandmother on the Orthodox Easter Day (8 April), when she was kidnapped. An eyewitness told her family that three masked men had pushed the girl inside their car with force and fled. Milad Shaker, Rasha's cousin, told World Watch Monitor the family had filed a report about her disappearance but no arrests had been made so far.

Hoda



Hoda went missing on 8 April following an Easter party. (World Watch Monitor)

Sixteen-year-old Hoda Atef Ghali Girgis from Imbaba, Giza Governorate, went to St. Mary and St. Michael's Coptic Orthodox Church for an Easter party, also on 8 April. Following the party, she took a tuc-tuc from in front of the church to return home but never did, her father, Atef Ghali Girgis, told World Watch Monitor. Hoda's family filed a report with the police, but her father accused them of "inaction, apathy and indifference".

Mary



Mary with her son (World Watch Monitor)

Mary Adly Milad, 40, a mother-of three from Al-Borgaiya village in Minya Governorate, disappeared on 5 April. After finishing her work at a private clinic in the city of Minya, she took a taxi to return home, her family told World Watch Monitor. However, she did not return and her phone was switched off. Police were informed.

“Mary is a very good and kind person,” said her cousin, Mina Ezzat. “She is loved by all the people in our village. Her relationship with her family was very good. We have checked with the police station in Minya city for any update about her, but unfortunately they have no information about her until now. Please pray for her safe return to her family.”

Mirna

Mirna Emil Yousef, 20, from Kafr Samari village, Sharkia Governorate, disappeared on 23 April. She had gone to Zagazig University for an exam and did not return home. Her family tried to call her many times, but her mobile phone was switched off. Her family filed a report at a local police station, accusing one of Mirna’s Muslim classmates of kidnapping her.

Two boys also missing

Kirollos



Kirollos disappeared after finishing his tutorial. (World Watch Monitor)

Ten-year-old Kirollos Saady Shohdy from Maghagha, Sohag governorate, disappeared on the evening of 23 April while returning home from a tutorial. Police were informed.

Fady



Fady went missing while playing near his house. (World Watch Monitor)

Primary school pupil Fady Hany Farag, 11, from the predominantly Christian village of Nag Shama in Sohag Governorate, was playing 200 metres away from his house on 4 April when he was kidnapped, his family told World Watch Monitor. After searching for him in all nearby villages, Fady's family filed a report at the police station. Fady suffers from heart issues and needs to take medication, his father said. He added that they "had not seen any movement from the police" to help them find the boy.

Coptic teacher cleared of contempt of religion for questions about Muhammad

World Watch Monitor (25.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KfyriH> - A Coptic teacher has been found not guilty of contempt of religion, after he was charged last month for including wordplays in a set of questions about Islam's prophet, Muhammad.

During the hearing on 19 April, both the headmaster of the school and a local MP defended the teacher, Magdy Farag Samir, saying he had a "good reputation and good manners" and that "he did not mean to insult".

Following the verdict, local Coptic priest Armia Abdou Bebawy told World Watch Monitor: "We thank the Egyptian judiciary for not discriminating between citizens. This case has boosted cohesion and community peace."

He added that Copts "appreciate, respect and cherish everyone's faith".

Why was he charged?

Samir, 49, a teacher of social studies at Barot Preparatory School for Girls in Beni Suef Governorate, had asked his students: "Where was the prophet Muhammad born?" He then suggested three options: 1. Yathrib (in Saudi Arabia). 2. Mecca (also in Saudi Arabia) 3. Hafiza Abo Tartour (Abo Tartour is a village in Egypt, but also the word for a cone hat).

He also asked: "Who was the nurse of the prophet Muhammad?" The two options were: 1. Halima Al-Saadia (the correct answer). 2. Halima Bta'at El ta'amiya ("Bta'at El ta'amiya" translates as "a seller of falafel", a Middle Eastern dish).

"The students and their parents considered this as an insult to the prophet Muhammad and Islam," said a relative of the teacher, who did not wish to be named, "But Magdy didn't mean any kind of insult, he did that just to facilitate the right answers to the two questions."

Samir was forced to transfer to a different school following the incident, which took place in December, but the parents of his former students also submitted a formal complaint against him to the governorate's Directorate of Education, which was then sent to the Public Prosecution Office for investigation.

On 14 March, Samir was arrested and charged with contempt of religion. He was initially detained for four days, but a day later his detention was extended to 15 days, pending investigation.

'Crimes of contempt in Egypt only refer to contempt of Islam'

"The revolution of June 2013 was supposed to get rid of the religious regime," a human rights activist from Minya, who also did not wish to be named, told World Watch Monitor, "But this has not been achieved so far. Many Copts are being charged with contempt of religion and jailed for nothing ... because the revolution dropped the Muslim Brotherhood but left their ideology unchanged."

"Egypt's law of contempt of religion only applies to one side – Islam," he added. "Crimes of contempt in Egypt only refer to contempt of Islam."

A Coptic lawyer from Beni Suef, who again wished to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor: "The judicial system has recently discriminated against Copts and

perpetrated injustice. Copts face judicial discrimination most blatantly in prosecutions for blasphemy.”

Convictions for contempt of religion are “harsh” against Copts, said another Coptic lawyer, from Cairo. “The accused person is charged with several offences, such as ‘provoking sectarian strife’ and ‘contempt of religion’. This is done in order to increase the term of their incarceration,” he said.

“People accused of contempt of Islam are not only sanctioned by the courts but also ostracised by their community, who force Copts to leave their homes,” the lawyer added, saying extremist Muslims play a significant role in cases of contempt of Islam filed against Christians – by assembling in front of courts to put pressure on judges.

Protestant leader rejects community reconciliation system

World Watch Monitor (20.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2qRt1IT> - The head of Egypt’s Protestant Church has said he urges clergy not to take part in “reconciliation sessions” that aim to resolve community conflicts without the involvement of the police and legal system.

Rev. Dr. Andrea Zaki said he “strongly” opposed the scheme because it renders the law “absent”.

The reconciliation scheme is often used to resolve tensions such as conflict between Copts and Muslims over the building of new churches, but it has been criticised by some Christian leaders. The scheme aims to restore good community relations without needing to involve law enforcement officials. However some Christians, especially in small towns, have complained that they are pressured to simply drop their complaints.

“[The scheme] does not always go in the right direction; sometimes it benefits those who have power. Sometimes they let the criminal escape and give them freedom to repeat what they did,” Zaki said in response to a question from World Watch Monitor.

Zaki, who is President of the Protestant Community of Egypt and also General Director of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, was speaking to a group of journalists in Cairo hosted by the Christian satellite broadcaster SAT-7, which broadcasts services from large Egyptian Evangelical churches as well as from Coptic cathedrals. He said that there are around two million Evangelicals and Protestants across Egypt, represented by 18 denominations, and that they are the country’s second-largest Christian community after the Copts.

“We are against community reconciliation; we are pro applying the law and a trial for all criminals, whatever their religion, whatever their background,” he said.

He said he believed the refusal by Protestant and Evangelical clergy to take part in reconciliation sessions has contributed to decisions to try cases in court, and cited murders of two Copts that had been brought before a judge and resulted in the death penalty in both cases – including for 19-year-old Ahmad Saeed Ibrahim al-Sonbati, who last year murdered Coptic priest Fr. Samaan Shehata in broad daylight in a suburb of Cairo.

Metal detectors and bureaucracy

Zaki said that church attacks, like this one in Tanta last year, have only increased attendance (World Watch Monitor)

“Our government does the maximum for our security,” said Zaki, who met with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in November. “If you go into the local churches, they’re like military bases.” Metal detectors and armed police are common sights outside many churches, and are believed to have limited the death toll of the suicide attack on Alexandria Cathedral last year. Some security officials, Zaki said, “were killed on our behalf, so we should admire this too: our state is doing what they can do to protect the Christians”.

Although Egypt’s Evangelical churches have not been targeted by extremists, they too are being protected by armed police. “You can expect at any moment someone come with a bomb, so every day we trust God,” said Zaki. “The good news is, we never fear bombs or death. As long as we are committed to Jesus, every time they bomb the church you have double the numbers.” Other Egyptian church leaders interviewed by World Watch Monitor during the visit agreed that after bomb attacks church attendance rises.

“Our government does the maximum for our security... If you go into the local churches, they’re like military bases.”

One reform enacted by Sisi’s government is the passage of a law in 2016 that makes it easier to acquire permission to build and renovate churches – a sensitive issue that can inflame tensions with local Muslims. Some 4,000 churches are in the process of registering with the government. Zaki said that around 1,000 of them are Evangelical, and that between 300 and 400 Evangelical churches have opened in Egypt in the last ten years. New members mainly come from a Coptic Orthodox background, and “a segment” return to the Coptic Church, he said.

The registration process, Zaki said, is “OK – it’s not fast, it’s not slow.” It is, however, an improvement on the previous system in which Christians often had to rely on oral permission to build their churches. “In the past, to get a written licence was like a miracle,” he said.

Losing faith

Zaki said Egypt’s churches are also facing challenges from a fundamentalist approach to Christianity spreading on social media, and from a “spirit of rebellion” unleashed following the 2011 revolution known as the Arab Spring.

This week, for example, a youth conference was to take place focusing on hermeneutics – the discipline of interpreting Biblical texts. “One of the positives and negatives of social media is creating debate and issues,” Zaki said. “So in the last two years there was confusion, a mass debate and criticism and judgment and disbelief of the other.” Questions regarding whether stories in the book of Genesis should be read literally or metaphorically are creating “a lot of theological confusion”, he said. “We are trying to create a platform to listen to each other without judging.”

A big issue for Egyptian Christians is the relationship between the Church and the state, he added. “The majority of middle-aged or old people will [be] pro the state; young people are divided; the majority against any military background in leadership; not all of them are pro-Sisi,” he said, referring to the president’s role as head of the armed forces before he took office in 2014.

One of the positive outcomes from the 2011 revolution is greater scope for self-expression, Zaki said. But he said the consequent “spirit of rebellion” has extended from rejecting leadership to rejecting the Bible. “This is why atheism is emerging in Egypt,” he said, and it is a phenomenon among “Muslims and Christians equally”. Official figures do

not exist, but the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo has described atheism as “one of the many challenges facing the country”.

“You need to deal with it in a wise way... We don’t want to push [people] in the opposite direction, we want to include people,” Zaki said.

102 Churches to be Legalised in Egypt

Egypt Streets (18.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2EUHRfF> - Prime Minister Sherif Ismail has approved the legalisation of 102 unlicensed churches and 64 church-associated buildings according to the MENA news agency.

The policy transpired on Monday during a meeting with a regulating committee charged with reviewing and legalising unlicensed churches.

It is extremely difficult in Egypt to gain church building licenses, with the process often taking years, which means that many Egyptian Christians congregate in unlicensed churches. However, as of late, regulations appear to be loosening. January saw an order issued from Egypt’s Ministry of Housing allowing Christians to practice their religious rites at unlicensed churches pending legislation procedures, while in February the Cabinet’s Committee approved the legalisation of 53 churches and church-affiliated buildings.

Indeed, 2016 saw the passing of a law that eased regulations around obtaining licences for building Christian houses of worship, building on the 2014 constitution which guarantees the right to freedom of religious practice for Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Christians are a religious minority in Egypt and the issue of building churches in the country has been particularly controversial. According to Catholic News Agency, Egypt has about 2,600 churches in the entire country, meaning there is one church for every 5,500 Christian citizens, while there is one mosque for every 620 Muslim citizens.

There has been a number of incidents where often-Muslim mobs have instigated attacks against Christian citizens and damaged or destroyed churches, particularly in Upper Egypt.

Disputed status of Beni Suef church sparks sectarian violence

By Hadeer El-Mahdawy
Translated by Habiba Effat

MadaMasr (18.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Hd5WEt> - The homes of several Coptic Christians in the Beni Suef village of Beni Menin were set ablaze by Muslim villagers on Monday night in the latest incident of sectarian violence, according to a member of the village who spoke to Mada Masr.

Monday’s violence was preceded by attacks on a church building used for worship in the village, as well as homes and shops owned by Copts, which took place on April 14, the source added.

The Fashn Prosecution, which has jurisdiction over the region in which the village resides, issued four-day detention orders on Monday for 20 people and arrest warrants for 10

others in connection to the April 14 events, according to the privately owned [Al-Shorouk newspaper](#). The 20 people that are currently in custody include nine Coptic Christians and 11 Muslims, who have been charged with illegal assembly and disrupting public peace, according to Ishaq Ibrahim, a researcher on religious freedoms at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR).

Security forces also arrested five Copts during the attacks that took place on Monday, according to a Coptic villager, who spoke to Mada Masr on condition of anonymity and fled Beni Menin upon hearing that a warrant had been issued for his arrest on charges of inciting violence against Muslims. All of the Coptic men from the village have taken refuge in neighboring villages, with only a number of women and children remaining in Beni Menin, the source added.

Another Coptic villager who spoke to Mada Masr on condition of anonymity stated that investigation authorities have accused the five Copts arrested on Monday with setting their own houses on fire. However, he told Mada Masr that the Coptic men had been arrested while attempting to extinguish the fires, which were set off when someone threw Molotov cocktails at their residences.

A Muslim villager denied stories of Monday's attacks, stating that they had been fabricated.

The conflict began over the legal status of the church building, an issue that has often served as a tinderbox for sectarian strife. On April 11, the first Coptic source was summoned to the Fashn Police Station, where police officer Mohamed Rabea threatened to report him for conducting prayers in the church building "without a permit." The source told Mada Masr that Copts in the village have used the building to pray for a decade.

"The officer asked Coptic villagers to coordinate with the National Security Agency and to stop holding prayers in the building," the source said. On April 12, security forces arrested Magdy Roushdy Labib, the son of the previous owner of the church building, who sold it in 2010 to Bishop Stephanous of Biba and Fashn, the source added. "The sale was registered in court for the purpose of holding prayers in the building."

According to the Coptic villager, a Fashn priest subsequently submitted documents to confirm the building's status as a site of worship in 2017, as part of a survey of churches and church buildings in Fashn that was conducted after the issuance of the [church building law](#) on September 28, 2016.

Ibrahim attributes the frequent occurrence of these sectarian events to this very same law. Out of 3,500 applications submitted by churches to legalize their status, only 219 churches and affiliated buildings have been approved by the government committee responsible for reviewing these applications since the issuance of the new law in 2016. The committee, which stopped receiving new applications in September 2017, confirmed the status of 53 church buildings in [March](#) of this year, as well as an additional 166 [on Monday](#).

"A police officer at the station asked the son of the previous owner to sign an eviction notice," the Coptic villager stated. When he refused, because he did not legally have the right to do so, the police officer issued a cease and desist order on grounds of 'inciting religious discontent.' Last Friday [April 13], officials attended the inauguration of a mosque in the village. The officials informed Coptic residents that there was no problem holding prayers in the church. However, churchgoers were surprised when, on [April 14] during a church service, they received a phone call warning them of an attack on the church. They evacuated the building, but matters escalated, resulting in attacks on several Coptic-owned homes and shops.

The attacks were not limited to the church building and its immediate vicinity, the Coptic villager stated.

"Although I live a kilometer away from the church, they attacked my house with bricks and Molotov cocktails and broke the windows. My children and I were terrified, and my daughter was hit in the head by a brick. I couldn't even leave the house to take her to the local hospital," he said. "The police arrived three hours after the clashes and arrested a number of Muslims and Copts in the village."

The source who had fled from the village said he had left with one of his brothers, while another had been arrested. He said, "I don't know where we can go. Don't we have the right to pray? Aren't we Egyptians? Why should I be attacked and have to run away and leave my work and home just because I pray and say the name of the Lord?"

Mada Masr was unable to reach the Fashn archbishopric responsible for the church in question for official comment.

The Muslim villager presents a different account of the events, however. Security sources informed Muslim villagers on April 12 of the existence of a church that had previously been unknown and was not licensed, the source told Mada Masr.

Village elders intervened to prevent the situation from escalating, the Muslim village said, adding that, on April 13, Copts and Muslims in the village participated in the inauguration of a local mosque. On April 14, a group of children began fighting in front of Coptic homes, the source stated.

"They were messing around and we sprayed water on them. They left," he said, adding that a Coptic villager fired shots into the air from a rooftop, which provoked neighboring residents and gave rise to fighting.

The Muslim source said that he intervened to protect the homes of his Coptic neighbors during the attacks out of a sense of duty. He feels the situation was blown out of proportion, however, since Copts and Muslim in the village have always lived in peace and harmony.

An estimated 200 to 250 Coptic Christians live in Beni Menin, according to Ibrahim, which he put as a relatively low figure. Although this was the first attack of its kind in the village, there have been similar incidents, with the most recent occurring earlier in April, in a village in the governorate of Qena.

The houses attacked also included one owned by a Muslim villager, according to the second Coptic source, who added that the Muslim man was forced to sign a police report at the station accusing Copts of arson.

While the causes of sectarian violence in Upper Egypt are complex, Ibrahim asserted that the legislation that regulates church legalization plays an important part. He described the law as "discriminatory," saying it increases sectarian tension by implying that the construction of churches is a problem, especially in villages where Copts are a minority, as they are in Beni Menin.

The researcher added that the state wished to continue controlling churches and violating the rights of individuals to worship freely and did not take necessary measures to stem violent and discriminatory discourse or address those found to be inciting sectarian violence.

According to a [report](#) in November 2017, from the time the new church building law was issued until October 2017, EIPR recorded 20 incidents of attacks or sectarian tension linked to the practice of religious rites, with the governorate of Minya witnessing nine incidences, followed by Beni Suef with five incidences, and Sohag with three, Cairo with two and Alexandria with one.

Coptic teacher charged with contempt of religion for questions about Muhammad

World Watch Monitor (22.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2GsUUcY> - A Coptic teacher at an Egyptian state school has been charged with contempt of religion after including wordplays in a set of questions about Islam's prophet, Muhammad.

Magdy Farag Samir, 49, a teacher of social studies at Barot Preparatory School for Girls in Beni Suef Governorate, asked his students: "Where was the prophet Muhammad born?" He then suggested three options: 1. Yathrib (in Saudi Arabia). 2. Mecca (also in Saudi Arabia) 3. Hafiza Abo Tartour (Abo Tartour is a village in Egypt, but also the word for a cone hat).

He also asked: "Who was the nurse of the prophet Muhammad?" The two options were: 1. Halima Al-Saadia (the correct answer). 2. Halima Bta'at El ta'amiya ("Bta'at El ta'amiya" translates as "a seller of falafel", a Middle Eastern dish).

"The students and their parents considered this as an insult to the prophet Muhammad and Islam," said a relative of the teacher, who did not wish to be named, "But Magdy didn't mean any kind of insult, he did that just to facilitate the right answers to the two questions."

Samir was forced to transfer to a different school following the incident, which took place in December, but the parents of his former students also submitted a formal complaint against him to the governorate's Directorate of Education, which was then sent to the Public Prosecution Office for investigation.

On 14 March, Samir was arrested and charged with contempt of religion. He was initially detained for four days, but a day later his detention was extended to 15 days, pending investigation.

"The revolution of June 2013 was supposed to get rid of the religious regime," a human rights activist from Minya, who also did not wish to be named, told World Watch Monitor, "But this has not been achieved so far. Many Copts are being charged with contempt of religion and jailed for nothing ... because the revolution dropped the Muslim Brotherhood but left their ideology unchanged."

"Egypt's law of contempt of religion only applies to one side – Islam," he added. "Crimes of contempt in Egypt only refer to contempt of Islam."

A Coptic lawyer from Beni Suef, who again wished to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor: "The judicial system has recently discriminated against Copts and perpetrated injustice. Copts face judicial discrimination most blatantly in prosecutions for blasphemy."

Convictions for contempt of religion are "harsh" against Copts, said another Coptic lawyer, from Cairo. "The accused person is charged with several offences, such as 'provoking sectarian strife' and 'contempt of religion'. This is done in order to increase the term of their incarceration," he said.

"People accused of contempt of Islam are not only sanctioned by the courts but also ostracised by their community, who force Copts to leave their homes," the lawyer added, saying extremist Muslims play a significant role in cases of contempt of Islam filed against Christians – by assembling in front of courts to put pressure on judges.

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 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.