

Egypt: 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.

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.

Believers of all faiths and atheists in prison: 24 countries of particular concern

HRWF Int’l (10.01.2018) – *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l* has released its 2017 database of believers and non-believers who have been imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Twenty-four countries in all were identified by *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l* for depriving believers and unbelievers of their freedom in 2017: **Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.**

“In 2017, we documented over 2200 individual cases of illegal imprisonment of believers and non-believers and we carried out campaigns to get their release, some with success,” according to Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l*.

Among all denominations, Christians of all faiths were in jail in the highest number of countries: Protestants in 13 countries, Catholics and Orthodox in 2 countries.

However, members of a dozen other religious or belief communities are known to have been in jail in 2017: Jehovah’s Witnesses in 6 countries; Sunnis in 4 countries; Shias, Said Nursi and Tabligh Jamaat followers in 3 countries; Ahmadis, Baha’is, Buddhists and Sufis in 2 countries; Atheists in Egypt, Falun Gong practitioners in China, and Scientologists in Russia.

“Prison terms are usually imposed on peaceful and law-abiding members of religious or belief groups on the basis of laws restricting their freedom to change religion, share one’s beliefs, and practice their right to freedom of association, worship and assembly. Additionally, they may be imprisoned simply because of their religious identity”, Fautré said.

According to the database, **China, Iran and South Korea** recorded the largest number of freedom of religion or belief prisoners.

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively put in prison, a number of Catholic priests and bishops have also been missing, since their arrests many years ago for being faithful to the Pope instead of swearing allegiance to the Communist Party.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of house churches, and Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, both of which are systematically suspected of separatism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Iran**, the Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, make up the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow citizens despite the risk of imprisonment and execution. Baluchi and Kurdish Sunnis as well as Sufis are also particularly targeted.

In **South Korea**, over 300 young objectors to military service were still serving 18-month prison terms at the end of 2017. Since the Korean War, more than 19,200 Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly been sentenced to a combined total of over 37,200 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. Eritrea, Singapore and Tajikistan are other countries which still imprison conscientious objectors.

"Our best wish for 2018 is that the EU converts its words into action and fully uses the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief to help release many FoRB prisoners of conscience," Fautré hopes.

The lists of prisoners per country can be consulted at:
<http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

() Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization since 1989. In 2017 it covered in its daily newsletter more than 70 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination. See its news database at <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>*

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ABOUT ANTI-CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGIES AND ANTI-CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (02.01.2017) – According to a recent Pew Center Research report, Christians, who numbered 2.3 billion in the world in 2015, were harassed by governments or social groups in a total of 128 countries – more countries than any other religious group.

Christians of all faiths around the world are currently victims of state repression, discrimination and/or (violent) social hostility for being Christians and/or practicing their fundamental right to religious freedom: freedom to have and to keep their religion; freedom of expression about issues related to religion, freedom of association, worship and assembly; freedom to have missionary activities and to convert. Various ideologies are underpinning anti-Christian state policies and social attitudes. They lead to diverse violations of human rights and religious freedom committed

- in the name of various forms of Communist ideologies enforcing atheism, such as in China, Eritrea, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam...
- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where it is the official religion of the state or the primary source of the Constitution and the legislation, such as in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen ...

- in the name of Islam in Muslim majority countries where there is no official state religion, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey...
- in the name of Hinduism, including in (nominally) secular state, such as in India and in Nepal
- in the name of secularism, *laïcité*, anarchist ideologies or Islam in liberal democracies where anti-Christian social hostility is expressed through hate speech, acts of vandalism of places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, etc. which are often under-reported or ignored by public powers and the media.

State repression against Christians can include the death penalty (Pakistan), various forms of physical punishment (Saudi Arabia), prison terms (China), exorbitant fines (Central Asia) and discriminatory restrictions to their rights.

Social hostility by individuals or collectively organized non-state actors can include a wide range of religiously or ideologically motivated acts: discrimination, insults, hate speech and hate crimes, derogatory statements by public officials, acts of vandalism targeting places of worship and community buildings, physical attacks, torture, killings, extra-judicial executions, communal violence, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide.

This is a picture of anti-Christian persecution around the world.

Egypt attack: Gunman targets

Coptic Christians in church and shop

BBC

(29.12.2017)

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<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42511813> – **Nine people have been killed in two attacks on Coptic Christians in Helwan district, south of Cairo, Egypt's interior ministry has said.**

Six civilians and a policeman died when a gunman tried to storm a church but was intercepted and arrested, it said.

It said the man had previously attacked a Coptic-owned shop in the same area, killing two brothers.

The so-called Islamic State (IS) has claimed its "soldiers" carried out the church attack.

The interior ministry's account differs from an earlier version of events given by Egypt's health ministry.

The initial report said 12 were dead, and suggested there were two attackers. It said one had been killed, and the other fled but was later captured.

More than 100 Christians have been killed in Egypt in the past year, with most attacks claimed by the local branch of IS militants.

Security forces have reinforced checkpoints in place around the capital in response to the attacks.

They announced plans earlier this week to protect festivities around the New Year and, on 7 January, Coptic Christmas. They include the deployment of rapid-reaction forces, combat troops and jamming equipment

Conflicting accounts

According to the interior ministry statement, the first attack on Friday took place at a household appliances shop. Then the attacker headed to the Saint Mina Coptic church, where he attempted “to trespass the church’s perimeter security”.

“The security forces have dealt with the attacker and managed to arrest him after he was injured,” the ministry said. Forces are on guard around the capital.

But it said that seven people, including an auxiliary policeman, had been killed and four injured as the gunman opened fire at the church.

The attacker also had an explosive device, a machine gun and 150 rounds, it added.

The ministry suggested he was known to security services, saying he was “one of the most active terrorist elements and he carried out several terrorist attacks which resulted in the martyrdom of a number of policemen and civilians”.

However, the interior ministry account contradicts earlier ones from officials and witnesses, who spoke of a higher death toll and more than one attacker.

Video footage has also emerged appearing to show one gunman lying dead at the scene and another alleged attacker fleeing in a red car.

String of attacks

In the wake of Friday’s attacks, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi offered condolences to family members and vowed to continue “cleansing the country of terrorism and extremism”.

Egypt’s Copts have in the past accused the authorities of making only token gestures to protect them and these incidents will not help calm tensions, our correspondent Radwa Gamal says.

Egypt is a Muslim-majority country and its Christian minority – mostly members of the Coptic Orthodox Church – make up around 10% of the population.

Last Easter, on Palm Sunday, at least 45 people died in twin attacks on Coptic churches in Alexandria and the Nile Delta city of Tanta. At least 29 Copts were killed on a bus en route to a monastery in central Egypt in May, and a Coptic Orthodox priest was stabbed to death in Cairo in October.

The attacks have been blamed on, and in many cases claimed by, Islamists affiliated with IS.

Egypt: Parliament to enact law to criminalise atheism

By **Olusegun Abisoye**

The Independent (23.12.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2DKA0BQ> – The Committee on Religion in the Egyptian Parliament has disclosed plans to pass into law, a bill that makes atheism a criminal offence in the North African nation.

Current Egyptian law says atheists can be prosecuted for expressing their disbelief in public but the committee's proposal would go further and criminalise disbelief itself.

It would be recalled that in 2014, little more than a week after Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was sworn in as Egypt's President, the government announced that it was preparing a national plan to crush every form of atheism.

A few months later Al-Shabab, a government-linked newspaper, stated that atheists were "the country's second enemy after the Muslim Brotherhood" and quoted a psychologist saying that "atheism leads to mental imbalances

and paranoia”.

As part of its effort to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood the Sisi regime began promoting a version of Islam that is often characterised as “moderate” – though “militantly mainstream” might be a better term.

Saudi Arabia adopted a similar position in 2014 when “promotion of atheist thought” became officially classified as an act of terrorism.