

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.

EGYPT: What was behind the attack on Prince Tadros church?

Mada (25.12.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2pwq9wu> – A house that had been used as a place of worship by Christians in the village of Waslin, Atfieh in Giza was attacked and three worshippers assaulted on Friday. The Giza prosecution continues its investigations with 15 defendants accused of attacking the church, while Eid Attiya, the owner of the land on which the makeshift church was built was detained on Sunday for four days pending investigations into charges of building without a license, according to Ishak Ibrahim, religious freedoms researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

The attackers viewed the place as a project to build a church and a project that had to be stopped. However, the Atfieh diocese said in a [statement](#) on Friday that prayers have been held here since 2001, and that after a long-awaited law concerning the building and restoration of churches was issued in September of last year, the diocese submitted a request to obtain a permit for the church.

The diocese lawyer Hany Samir told Mada Masr that the church was built in 2001 on a piece of land owned by Eid, which he then sold to the Atfieh diocese with a contract signed by the two parties in 2014. The prosecution confirmed the validity of the signatures on the contract.

On Saturday, the prosecution interrogated six individuals

suspected of attacking the church, accusing them of illegal gathering, thuggery, destruction of private property, beating the victims and entering an inhabited building with the aim of committing a crime, in addition to abusing religion to incite strife, [according to Al Masry Al Youm newspaper](#). South Giza prosecution ordered the six men to four days detention pending investigations, according to privately owned [Al-Shorouk newspaper](#).

We heard a bell

In its [statement](#) describing the incident, the Atfieh diocese said that “hundreds of individuals gathered in front of the building after the Friday prayers, chanting hostile chants, demanding the demolition of the church, then raiding the place, destroying its contents, and beating the Christians present there.”

In a [television interview](#) with the MEsat channel on Saturday, the Bishop of Atfieh, Anba Zusima, said that prayers have been conducted regularly in the church since its establishment in 2001, adding that there are about 350 Christian families in the village. He went on to say that mass has been held every Saturday at the church for the past year, attended by 200 to 500 people.

The diocese submitted the papers of the church to legalize its situation after the adoption of the [law on building churches](#) in late 2016.

Ahmed Emara, a teacher at an Al-Azhar-affiliated religious institute in Wasalin, denies that the building was a church where prayers had been held since 2001. In a telephone conversation with Mada Masr, he said, "This talk is absolutely not true. True, there is a priest who comes to them every Saturday, but this has only been going on for one year. We know that it is not a church, but an association distributing goods to the poor."

"Also, six months ago we heard that this house hosts a church, and when we asked the owner of the building, he told us that he had built it for his children when they get married," he added.

Emara, who owns a plot of land adjacent to the church, objects to the building of a church "in our midst," and in a residential space, saying "I wish they had tried to build it somewhere more remote, that would have been acceptable. But to build it in a populated area where there is a large mosque and an Al-Azhar Institute, would be an insult to the people living here."

"The nearest church is a kilometer away," Anba Zusima said in his televised remarks "and the people of the village of Waslin would have to walk this distance to be able to pray. There is no transportation available for them except the toktok, which means people would have to pay LE10 to get there, plus another LE10 to come back. This is quite a sum for them to pay, and it would amount to about LE100 for a family to go and pray."

According to eyewitness accounts, local Muslim anger was triggered by news that the church had installed a bell. Anba Zusima, however, said that the two-story building was without

a tower and there is no place to install a bell. Emara insisted in his conversation with Mada Masr that a few days before the incident, people heard the sound of a church bell.

Ibrahim, religious freedoms researcher at EIPR, says that what happened in Atfieh has become increasingly common, Muslim residents of villages attack places that had been used as Christian places of worship when they feel that they will be granted a permit, in accordance with the new church building law. He notes that there have been 22 attacks on places dedicated to Christian prayer since church-building law was issued in September last year. Ibrahim added that since the law was passed, “places of prayer” have been closed indefinitely by authorities under the pretext that no decision was taken regarding its legal registration.

No reconciliation session, yet

Emara relates that after the sound of a bell was heard, people began to circulate calls on Facebook and text messages to rally after Friday prayers and demonstrate in front of the church building, pointing out that “security had approved the gathering.”

Eid Abdel Shahid, a Christian resident of the village, told Mada Masr that they had informed security forces of the calls for demonstrations in front of the church about a week ago, adding “Members of State Security, the police and the mayor’s guards were posted in front of the church. However, five minutes before the end of the Friday prayer, they all

withdrew, leaving the church to the crowd, and the church cameras have recorded all this.”

Emara recalls the events of the day. “People came out from Friday prayers and security knew they were headed to the church. On their way there, they invited everyone they met to join them: tuk tuk drivers, people coming back from their land. And by 11pm we were surprised to find security arresting some of the people who were there –maybe they arrested the young people who acted recklessly and did some acts of vandalism.”

Anba Zusima also confirmed that security forces were aware of the calls to gather and mobilize in front of the church. He said that the ambulance was unable to reach the church to transfer the three people wounded in the attack, until security dispersed the crowd.

Lawyer Samir says that the diocese refused to hold an informal reconciliation session, the customary method of settling sectarian incidents adopted by the state. Abdel Shahid confirmed to Mada Masr that a number of Muslims in the village requested to hold a reconciliation session with diocese officials who refused.

Ramy Kamel, head of the Maspéro Youth Association for Development, told Mada Masr, “MP Abdel Wahab Khalil proposed holding an informal reconciliation session where Christians give up their legal claims, but the church refused. So the MP turned up the pressure, and even said that the Muslims will have a more violent reaction if one of their own is detained.”

Samir told Mada Masr that it is possible that the Copts will eventually accept the reconciliation proposal and give up their legal claim because of the pressure they are facing.

Emara thinks the probable reconciliation will still not be the end of the problem. He says, "Even if a reconciliation is reached, the residents will never accept that a church is built in their village."

Egypt: Teenager's murder 'aimed to intimidate Copts ahead of Christmas', says his pastor

The body of 14-year-old Ishak Nashaat Birwan was found on Wednesday (20 December), 11 days after he disappeared, in a canal near where he lived in Izziyah, a large Christian village near Manfalout in Asyut.

Samir Fekry, Ishak's cousin, told World Watch Monitor that the body was taken to the morgue at the public hospital in Manfalout for a post-mortem.

"Ishak's body had facial deformities, it had no eyes and there were signs of torture on different parts of his body," he said.

Fekry said Ishak's family went to the police the day after his

disappearance but “none of them did anything to help us investigate the matter”.

People told us later that on 9 December, three young men asked Ishak for a lift in his tuk-tuk, Fekry said. “Ishak then disappeared and there was no word from him,” he added. “We tried to call him many times but his mobile phone was turned off. We searched for him everywhere in our village and the villages nearby, but we couldn’t find him.”

Ishak’s body was released from the morgue after a day and his funeral at Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Izziyah village was attended by large crowds of people.

The church’s pastor, Rev. Adel Rafaat, told World Watch Monitor: “Ishak was a very good young man, he was one of our church members. He was loved by all of us and he loved everybody. He always had a smile.

“Ishak was targeted and killed because of his faith, because he is Christian. They wanted to spoil the joy of our coming Christmas. Extremists chose a young man from our village specifically because our village is a big Christian village and their aim was to turn Christmas joy of the villagers to sadness.”

Fekry expressed frustration with the authorities for not taking more action to find his cousin. He said: “Ishak had no enemies ... After kidnapping him, none of the kidnappers contacted us demanding any ransom for his return. So why he was killed? Was it because he is a Christian? We demand the government find the killer and the cause of the killing and how he disappeared for 10 days until he was found dead.”

OP-ED: ABOUT THE ISLAMIC TOTALITARIANISM

An ideology that wants to radically change the existing nature of a state into a theocracy to be dominated by one religious worldview

An ideology that wants to change the structure of a diverse civil society into a society to be dominated by one religious worldview

An ideology that wants the daily life and the behavior of each individual to be dominated by one religious worldview

is a totalitarian ideology, as was the Communist ideology inspired by the political philosophy of Marx and Engels.

Islamic totalitarianism is a totalitarian ideology inspired by the Quran but it is not a religion.

It divides and fragments the Muslim communities around the world.

The primary “collateral victims” of the fight for power of Islamic totalitarianism are Muslims, who in many countries adhere to an historically peaceful Islam.

Christians are a second category of “collateral victims” of Islamic totalitarianism in Muslim majority countries.

Diverse civil populations in countries where Islam is not professed by a majority are the third category of “collateral victims” of Islamic totalitarianism.

The Islamic totalitarian virus infecting the software of the *ummah* must not infect humankind. An antidote must be administered.

Combating Islamist totalitarianism with ideas, with words and in practice is legitimate. It is obligatory. It is the self-defence of states, of non-Muslim societies and minorities, and of individuals.

Combating groups and individuals, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic universities such as al-Azhar, which promulgate Islamic totalitarian ideologies is a must. This is not Islamophobia. It is a fight for human dignity for all, for equality for all and for human rights for all.

Willy Fautré

USCIRF NEW REPORT: RANKING COUNTRIES BY BLASPHEMY LAWS

All-Party Parliamentary Group on International for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG)

APPG (15.08.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2u00DF2> – 71 of the world's 195 countries have blasphemy laws. Penalties for violating blasphemy laws in these countries can range from fines to imprisonment and death. USCIRF's latest report examines and compares the content of laws prohibiting blasphemy worldwide.

Blasphemy is defined as "the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God."

According to the study:

- Blasphemy laws are astonishingly widespread. Seventy-one countries, spread out across many regions, maintain such statutes.
- Every one of these blasphemy statutes deviates from at least one internationally recognized human rights principle. Most of these laws fail to respect fully the human right of freedom of expression.
- All five nations with blasphemy laws that deviate the most from international human rights principles maintain an official state religion.
- Most blasphemy laws studied were vaguely worded, as many failed to specify intent as part of the violation. The vast majority carried unduly harsh penalties for violators.
- Most blasphemy laws were embedded in the criminal codes and 86 percent of states with blasphemy laws prescribed imprisonment for convicted offenders. Some blasphemy statutes even imposed the death penalty.

71 countries have blasphemy laws on the books

Afghanistan – Algeria – Andorra – Antigua and Barbuda – Austria – Bahrain – Bangladesh – Barbuda – Brazil – Brunei – Canada – Comoros – Cyprus – Denmark* – Egypt – Eritrea – Ethiopia – Finland – Germany – Greece – Grenada – Guyana – India – Indonesia – Iran – Iraq – Ireland – Israel – Italy – Jordan – Kazakhstan – Kuwait – Lebanon – Libya – Liechtenstein – Malaysia – Malta* – Mauritius – Montenegro – Morocco – New Zealand – Nigeria – Oman – Pakistan – Papua – New Guinea – Philippines – Poland – Qatar – Russia – Rwanda – San Marino – Saudi Arabia – Singapore – Somalia – South Sudan – Spain – Sri Lanka – St Lucia St. Vincent and Grenadines – Sudan – Suriname – Switzerland – Syria – Tanzania – Thailand – Tunisia – Turkey – United Arab Emirates – Vanuatu – Yemen – Zambia – Zimbabwe

****Blasphemy laws for Malta and Denmark were repealed after the data for this report was coded and analyzed.***

Top 10 countries as of July 2017

1. *Iran*
2. *Pakistan*
3. *Yemen*
4. *Somalia*
5. *Qatar*
6. *Egypt*
7. *Italy*
8. *Algeria*
9. *Comoros*
10. *Libya*

The Economist

The Economist (13.08.2017) –
<https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2017/08/anti-religious-speech> – BLASPHEMY laws, in the sense of laws that penalise speech or acts that disrespect God or the sacred, are “astonishingly widespread”. From the harshest laws to the mildest, all of them deviate in some degree from the international norms that uphold freedom of belief and expression.

Those were the main conclusions of a report issued this week by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), reflecting several years of work by a panel of researchers. It identified 71 countries that punished blasphemy-two of which, Denmark and Malta, repealed their laws very recently-and ranked them according to severity. The countries were assessed on the basis of the harshness of their penalties, the vagueness or precision of the offence, and the degree to which the blasphemy laws underpinned discrimination against some religious groups. Pakistan and Egypt were among the countries found to be using blasphemy laws as a form of anti-minority oppression.

The five countries deemed to practise the grossest violations of international standards were all Muslim-majority lands. Top came Iran and Pakistan, both countries where “blasphemers” can face death. At the other extreme came Ireland, which introduced a new blasphemy law in 2009 on the grounds that the constitution required such legislation. There have been no convictions under the law and initial moves to prosecute Stephen Fry, a British actor, for stridently anti-theistic remarks were dropped amid general embarrassment.

Many European states have blasphemy laws on the statute book, designed to protect established or privileged churches, but they are hardly ever invoked. Russia, Kazakhstan, Poland and Montenegro are on the list, but most other ex-communist countries seem to have retained a relatively secular ethos in their constitutions and therefore have no blasphemy law.

Although Canada appears on the list, with the ninth-mildest regime, the authors commend the fact that Canadian law explicitly upholds the right to robust religious debate, as long as it is conducted in “good faith and decent language”. New Zealand’s legislation affirms something quite similar.

The research delivers a surprisingly harsh verdict on Italy, deemed to be seventh worst infringer of international norms. In truth, that country is hardly in the same league as those that execute, lash or lynch blasphemers. But the terms of an Italian court decision in 2015 were rather troubling to free-expression campaigners. It upheld a fine imposed on an artist who, in a public place in Milan, had depicted a sexual act involving the former Pope Benedict and one of his clerical advisers. The judgment said criticism of religion was legitimate if it was carried out by qualified people with relevant experience—a category into which the artist clearly did not fall.

Joelle Fiss, one of the report’s authors, said their research raised questions about established or state religion. Although

having a state religion was permitted in international law, the research showed a correlation between such regimes and harshly enforced blasphemy laws. That, in turn, posed a question about whether it was possible, even hypothetically, to have a state religion which does not imply some disadvantage to religious minorities.

One of the most thoughtful recent comments on the subject has come from Mairead McGuinness, an Irish politician whose job as vice-president of the European Parliament includes dialogue with religions. The fact that her country maintained a blasphemy law, however soft and little-used, weakened Europe's hand in dialogue with other parts of the world. "The problem [arises] when Europeans criticise the abusive blasphemy or apostasy laws in countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sudan or a host of others," she said. "The local authorities frequently accuse us of hypocrisy."

Her conclusion is that Ireland should have a referendum on abolishing the line in Article 40 of the constitution which says that blasphemy should be punished by law: a change that all the country's political parties and churches would support. In other words, civil liberty begins at home.

Press comment: Secularism

Secularism (17.08.2017) – <http://www.secularism.org> – Dozens of countries from all corners of the globe retain laws which punish blasphemy and most of them punish the 'crime' severely, according a report from the US government.

The paper, from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, was entitled Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws. Its authors said blasphemy laws were "astonishingly widespread". They found laws restricting freedom of expression on religious issues in 71 countries.

Two of those featured – Denmark and Malta – have recently repealed their laws. But elsewhere the report appeared to have

underestimated the scale of the problem, as it did not include Northern Ireland or Scotland. The National Secular Society played a vital part in their repeal in England and Wales in 2008.

Every country featured was criticised for “deviating from some international human rights law principles”. Most of the laws deviated from “a significant number” of those principles.

Around a quarter of the laws found were in the Middle East and North Africa; another quarter were from Asia and the Pacific. More than a fifth were in Europe, with 15.5% coming from sub-Saharan Africa and 11.2% from the Americas.

An overwhelming majority of the laws were found in national penal codes. The report said punishments ranged from “moderately to grossly disproportionate”. Fifty-nine states sanctioned a prison sentence for ‘blasphemers’; some imposed other sentences such as lashings and forced labour.

The laws were ranked according to a series of indicators, including how far their language threatened freedom of expression; how severe the penalty was; and how far they were used to discriminate against minority groups. These showed how far they deviated from international human rights principles.

The authors said the laws often put particular strain on “the forum, either public or private, in which a person can express or display his/her opinions or beliefs and control written or spoken words”. They also said the legislation was often vaguely worded, with only one-third of the criminal laws specifying that intent must be part of the ‘crime’.

The six countries with the most severe blasphemy laws were all Muslim-majority countries. Iran and Pakistan were given the worst rankings, mainly because both countries’ laws explicitly allow the death penalty for insulting Muhammad. They were followed by Yemen, Somalia, Qatar and Egypt.

In some cases, the rankings underestimated the reality of the impact of a country's blasphemy laws. For example, in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea, there was no sanction specified in written law. This meant none of those countries were given points on the indicator for the severity of the punishment. But their laws mean the punishment can be prescribed in other laws or open to judicial interpretation.

This has particularly harsh consequences in Saudi Arabia, where judges often impose long prison terms or public floggings for 'blasphemers'. In April a man arrested on a blasphemy charge was sentenced to death for apostasy.

The report also said: "In states where there are unresolved conflicts between two or more religious groups, accusations of blasphemy can be used as a tool to strengthen one group's power over another". And in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, 'blasphemers' are often punished through extrajudicial actions and mob 'justice'.

Italy, which came seventh on the list, had the most severe blasphemy laws in Europe.

In 2015 an Italian court upheld a fine imposed on an artist who had publicly depicted a sexual act involving the former Pope Benedict and one of his clerical advisers. The judgment said religion could be legitimately criticised by qualified people with relevant experience.

Most European states which have blasphemy laws on the books rarely invoke them. Ireland, which introduced a blasphemy law in 2009 and has not convicted anyone for the offence since, was the lowest-ranked country.

But Mairead McGuinness, an Irish politician who works as vice-president of the European Parliament, has said blasphemy laws weaken European politicians' ability to protect 'blasphemers' abroad. "The local authorities frequently accuse us of hypocrisy," she said.

The authors also said the report raised criticisms of established state religions. The five worst-ranked countries all had state religions, and countries with official state religions tended to get higher scores than those without them.

Responding to the report Chris Sloggett, the NSS's communications officer, said: "Blasphemy should never be illegal. Religious ideas should be as open to challenge, insult or ridicule as any other.

"This report – which, in places, understates the damage done by blasphemy laws – is an important reminder of the pointless punishment which many face for speaking their minds. It highlights the work that needs to be done around the world to protect free expression.

"And it should nudge countries that retain these laws to realise they are not harmless, as they undermine international standards on free expression and solidarity with free thinkers."

EGYPT: 26 DEAD AS GUNMEN FIRE ON BUS CARRYING COPTIC CHRISTIANS

CNN (26.05.2017) – <http://cnn.it/2qWf7za> – Twenty-six people have been killed in Egypt after unidentified gunmen opened fire on a bus carrying Coptic Christians in what officials are calling a terror attack.

Ten assailants wearing fatigues and face masks fired on the

passengers from three four-wheel drive vehicles, Egypt's Interior Ministry told CNN.

The Christians were traveling Friday to a monastery, St. Samuel the Confessor, around 100 km (62 miles) northwest of the city of Minya when they came under fire, the ministry said.

Twenty-five others were also injured, some of whom are now in critical condition, Health Ministry spokesman Khaled Mugahed told state-run TV al-Masriya. Men, women and children are among the dead and injured, and 50 ambulances are now at the scene, he said.

The attack comes as the country is still under a three-month state of emergency period following twin attacks on Coptic churches on Palm Sunday last month that killed dozens of people, in attacks claimed by ISIS.

It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the shooting, but Coptic Christians have been targeted by ISIS militants several times in recent years and ongoing violence has triggered a mass exodus of Coptic Christians from some towns.

Spate of attacks

Coptic Christians make up about 10% of Egypt's population of 91 million. They base their theology on the teachings of the apostle Mark, who introduced Christianity to Egypt.

Persecution and discrimination against Egypt's Coptic Christians has spiked since the toppling of Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011.

In December, an attack on a Coptic church in Cairo killed 25 people.

Coptic churches and homes have been set on fire, members of the Coptic minority have been physically attacked, and their

property has been looted, [rights group Amnesty International reported in March.](#)

A church in Minya was torched in 2013, gutting its interior.

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