

EGYPT: Who are the Coptic Orthodox?

See updated HRWF list of documented cases of Coptic Orthodox prisoners [here](#).

HRWF (12.12.2016) – The Orthodox Churches are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the particular focus of this chapter, traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, also known as the Coptic Pope.

The Egyptian port city of Alexandria was an important intellectual and cultural centre for centuries. It was also a prominent Christian centre until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. Even the word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about twelve million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today it comprises less than eight percent of the overall population.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly twenty million members.

Coptic Christians played a visible role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolt which demanded the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They were frequently caught in the crossfire of the various political groups vying for power during that turbulent period.

When Pope Shenouda III died the following year, there was widespread speculation over the future of Muslim-Coptic relations, as tensions remained high at that time. In November

2012, the 118th Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tawadros II, was chosen according to ancient tradition, his name picked by a blindfolded child from a glass bowl where the names of two other candidates had also been placed.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the majority Muslim population remain fragile, especially with the rise of extremist narratives in the region over the past few years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to ISIS beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. They were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.

Teachings

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Coptic Church took a different position over a fine point of Christology that led to its separation from the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, a schism which exists to this day. The precise nature of the conflict is still disputed by historians.

What is *not* under dispute is that the Coptic tradition has remained firmly rooted in the historic Orthodox Christian faith with an ardent devotion to its apostolic origins. It emphasises the foundational teachings of the Church Fathers, creeds, and early Church councils and the centrality of the Sacraments, holiness of life, and the importance of prayer. Monasticism is still a prominent dimension of Coptic faith. Like in other Orthodox traditions, priests are permitted to be married, and bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Emperor Diocletian, nearly one million men, women, and children were killed. Other waves of persecution and mass killings were to follow. Notably, the Church has consistently refused any favoured

relationship with successive governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

Controversies

Coptic Orthodox Christians find themselves in an increasingly hostile religious environment. In **Egypt**, politico-religious convulsions in recent years are bound to produce unpleasant circumstances for religious minorities of any sort. The Coptic Orthodox Church is particularly vulnerable, however, not so much for its actual teachings as it is for its visibility as Egypt's most sizable religious group in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim majority nation. The Copts' historic presence in Egypt provides scant protection against conservative Islamist violence and a failed judicial system that will not bring perpetrators to justice.

It is true that Copts are especially exposed to vaguely-worded criminal charges, such as blasphemy, insulting the Prophet or 'causing harm or damage to the public interest.' Accusations of this nature have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Coptic community.

Even when no offense was intended, any hint of mockery toward Islam or discussions over the life of Prophet Muhammad can trigger an extreme response from people who are looking for places to vent their rage.

Orthodox in Prison in Egypt

In 2015, six Coptic Orthodox Christians were in prison on fabricated or false blasphemy charges.

Kirollos Shawki ATALLAH was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in 2015 for posting photos on Facebook deemed defamatory to Islam.

Bishoy Armia BOULOUS (until his conversion Mohammed Hegazy) was arrested in 2013 and sentenced in 2014 to five years in

prison for filming demonstrations against Christians. He was declared not guilty by an appellate judge on 28th December 2015. However, he remains in prison for charges of blasphemy filed against him in 2009.

Makram DIAB was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to six years in prison for telling a Salafi Muslim that Muhammad had more than four wives, resulting in an argument.

Bishoy KAMEEL KAMEL GARAS was sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison: three years for allegedly defaming Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, two years for insulting the president and one year for insulting Mohamed Safwat who made the allegations against him. The offenses were made on a Facebook page falsely posted in his name. A hearing for his acquittal was set for September 2015 then delayed until early 2016.

Gamal Abdu MASSOUD was sentenced to three years by a juvenile court (he was then sixteen years old) for posting cartoons mocking Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook in December 2011 and sharing them with other students. He was released in April 2015.

Ishaq MEDHAT was initially charged in August 2015 with 'inciting sectarian strife' and 'harming national unity' and later with 'insulting religion.' He was distributing Bibles on the street when he was arrested. There is no law that makes the act of attempting to convert illegal, but Article 98 of the penal code is often used to criminalise the use of religion for the purposes of 'inciting sectarian strife and harming national unity and social peace.' He was kept in pre-trial custody for at least two weeks. No further details are known of his case.

Conclusions

Salafist influence in the Middle East and beyond has contributed to the fragmentation of Egyptian society, a

society which has traditionally been associated with tolerance for religious diversity. The toxic environment of political rivalry, deep social hostility, restrictive government policies and abusive practices of police and security forces has made the country untenable for many Egyptians today and especially minority groups such as Coptic Orthodox Christians.

This has limited freedoms for Copts to practice their faith without fear of judicial or violent consequences. The current Egyptian government has a particular role to play in ensuring the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by its constitutional law. This can only be safeguarded by a judiciary that functions independently of any partisan or state influence. Judicial reform of this nature must become a greater priority of the el-Sisi government if it is to achieve the progress toward democracy to which it aspires.

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