

# **Egyptian govt legalizes 900 churches in three years**

*New law replaces the 1934 legislation that made the construction of new churches subject to ten conditions*

By Arnaud Bevilacqua

La Croix International (15.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2GwjkQX> – President Abdel Fattah al Sissi's Egyptian government legalized more than 100 Christian churches – 111 to be precise – in March this year.

This makes a total of 984 centers of Christian worship centers that have been legalized, restored or built over the last three years.

## ***Law of August 2016***

A new law on worship dating from August 2016 provides the framework for the process of legalizing and authorizing the building of new churches.

Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church gave its backing to the new law following months of tension with the al Sissi government. The new law replaced 1934 legislation that made the construction of new churches subject to ten conditions.

According to the old rules, building a church – in contrast to a mosque – required compliance with numerous conditions relating to the distance from schools, canals, government

buildings, railways and residential zones.

Moreover, even when authorization to build was obtained, a project often remained in suspense if it failed obtain the consent of local communities.

In many cases, the rigid application of the rules prevented the building of churches in cities and villages inhabited by Christians, particularly in rural areas in Upper Egypt.

It also led to the spontaneous establishment of places of worship without the necessary authorizations.

### ***Discrimination continues***

As a result, Christians were regularly suspected of building churches without permits. The Coptic Orthodox Church has long hoped that a new law would put an end to these conflict situations.

Islamist groups often made use of these situations to attack Christians with greater or lesser virulence and sometimes carry out their threats.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Initiative for Individual Rights, a local human rights organization, published a report in November 2018 that strongly criticized the 2016 law governing the building of churches.

The report concluded that 15 Christian worship centers had experienced incidents and nine of these had been definitively closed between September 2017 and October 2018.

### ***Government aims to win over Coptic community***

The Copts are one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, making up 8 to 10% of the Egyptian population, i.e. 8 million people.

Often targeted by the local branch of ISIS, the Coptic minority also receives significant attention from President al Sissi whose authoritarianism is subject to regular criticism.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian president has sought to present himself as the defender of the Coptic Church, often promising support to the community.

Thus, in January, he attended Coptic Christmas celebrations and the inauguration of the new Cathedral of the Nativity on the site of the new Egyptian administrative capital, which is currently under construction in the desert near Cairo.

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## **SUDAN: Dozens of churches burned in Sudan**

*More than 30 churches have been burned down in the Nuba Mountains area of Sudan*

By Rebecca Paveley

Church Times (08.03.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2JfheJR> – AT LEAST 32 churches have been burned down in the Nuba Mountains area of Sudan over the past year, opposition leaders have said, with reports that up to 40 more may have been demolished.

Baroness Cox visited the region of the Nuba Mountains in Southern Kordofan last month with her charity Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), before flying to South Sudan to collect testimony from regional leaders and communities. In the Nuba Mountains, her team found that thousands of people were still displaced after years of conflict and are too terrified to return home.

Although a ceasefire is technically in place between the Sudanese government of President Omar al-Bashir, who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N), military planes from the Sudanese airforce still fly overhead, and local officials told the HART team that the conflict continued, with frequent indiscriminate attacks on Christians.

The Commissioner for the Nuba Mountains, David Isaiah, told Lady Cox and her team: "The government of Sudan is using every means to mislead the world into thinking there is no war in the Nuba Mountains."

The Nuba conflict is an extension of the long civil war that eventually provided South Sudan with its independence in July 2011 (News, 1 July 2011). The Nuba people played a key part in helping the former South Sudan rebel forces to gain sovereignty. But, in the mineral-rich areas of the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile State, promises of autonomy were unfulfilled, and suspected rigged local elections triggered renewed fighting between the Sudan government and the rebels.

The areas are still home to many Christians, although the population is religiously mixed, including animists and Muslims.

The deputy chair of SPLM-N, General Jagot Mukwar, said: "Antonovs [Sudan's military aircraft] have not dropped bombs for two years. But we hear that government troops could be moving closer. In November and December, civilians were ambushed on the main road in Habila. It happened three times in two months. Two weeks ago, a farm was burnt, also in Habila. The government is killing its own people. They are burning churches. They do not want people to be Christians. They want us to speak in Arabic. They want us to have Arabic names."

Lady Cox called for cross-border aid to be allowed into the region to reach communities who were not able to trust aid that came from the Sudanese capital, Khartoum. And she demanded that the UK Government review its policy of continuing trade links with Sudan, despite acknowledging that there had been no improvement in human rights.

President al-Bashir is under growing pressure to step down, after the spread of anti-government protests which began in December over a sharp rise in the price of bread. As a result of the protests, he has imposed a year-long state of emergency, placing even heavier restrictions on the press and opposition leaders, and giving security forces a free hand to crack down on protesters. Nevertheless, thousands of people went on strike on Tuesday in protest, Associated Press reported.

The President has also announced that he would postpone pushing for constitutional amendments that would have allowed him a third term in office.

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# ETHIOPIA: Muslim mobs attack 10 church buildings in Ethiopia

*Unprecedented religious destruction in town sparked by false rumor.*

Morning Star News (01.03.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2tQ4FK9> – NAIROBI, Kenya: Christians in a town in southern Ethiopia were stunned when local Muslims attacked 10 church buildings on Feb. 9, destroying one and burning the property inside all the structures, according to aid agencies.

Chanting the jihadist slogan, “Allahu akbar [God is greater],” Muslims in Halaba Kulito targeted worship buildings belonging to eight denominations, reported Scotland-based aid agency Steadfast Global and Voice of the Martyrs-Canada. Kale Hiwot Galeto church’s building was razed.

“The incensed crowds comprising Muslim residents of all ages from across the town made their way to the churches chanting ‘Allahu Akbar’ after being given false information that a mosque in the surrounding countryside had been fire-bombed,” said a Steadfast Global representative who requested anonymity. “The contents of all the churches were removed from the buildings and set on fire on the street.”

Except for some minor vandalism, Christians in the town have not suffered such attacks to this extent, he said. But Halaba

Kulito, in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), is a predominantly Muslim town with nearly all Christians there having moved from surrounding villages for work reasons, creating an underlying tension, he added.

He learned from witnesses that an Islamic conference was held in Halaba Kulito about week before the trouble flared that included speakers suspected of holding extremist views, but he said he had no information on what was said at the conference.

Witnesses indicated that the assailants were clearly instructed to target only property and not Christians, he said.

One of the attacked churches, Meserete Kristos Church, has since been vandalized again, and area Christians have faced intimidation and threats, he added.

While Kale Hiwot Galeto church building was destroyed in the Feb. 9 attack, aid workers believe the other nine church buildings were not set ablaze only because of the risk to neighboring Muslim-owned properties.

Municipal police were present during almost every attack but took no action, the agencies reported.

The attacks lasted about five hours, with state police arriving in town in the early afternoon and restoring order. A number of the assailants were said to be arrested and placed



in custody, and the aid agencies believe they will be charged and tried.

More than 9,900 worshippers are estimated to attend the 10 churches. A small number of Christians sustained minor injuries and returned home after receiving hospital treatment, including two that were more seriously injured, according to the aid agencies.

Huge amounts of property were destroyed, including Bibles, song books, instruments, benches and chairs.

Despite the destruction, all of the congregations managed to meet for worship the following Sunday, the agencies reported. At the same time, after the attack a significant number of Christians chose not to gather for worship out of fear, they learned. The local government has allocated a police guard to each of the attacked the churches.

Most of the churches are gathering contributions from their members to try to replace damaged items, but they will need help from the wider church, according to the aid agencies, which have distributed emergency funds and are studying ways for ministry partners to help restore and rebuild.

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## **EGYPT: 21 churches receive long-delayed government approval to build**

World Watch Monitor (29.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2zGzAtZ> – Twenty-one churches in Egypt's southern rural Minya governorate can restore, expand and rebuild their churches after receiving approval from the Minya Governor.

Governor Essam al-Bedeiwi approved the 21 applications over the last six months. Some of the churches had been waiting for more than 20 years for a permit to come through.

On 17 November an evangelical church in Tama, Sohag governorate, also received permission to renovate its building.

Some analysts note that the approvals have preceded several visits by international evangelical delegations to Cairo.

Last week, leaders from evangelical churches around the world met Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo, as part of the celebrations marking 500 years since the Reformation. This followed a visit in early November by a

delegation of Christian evangelicals from the US to meet evangelical leaders in Egypt.

US Vice President Mike Pence is also scheduled to go to Cairo in late December.

A local source told World Watch Monitor that Egypt's President is keen to "show the US that Egypt is standing with the Christians and that there is no persecution in Minya governorate".

Meanwhile the Coptic community in Minya has seen many of its churches forcibly closed or set on fire. Some of them have been reopened but others are still waiting for a permit.

Last month, in one weekend alone, four Coptic churches were closed by local authorities in Upper Egypt seeking to ease tensions between Muslim and Christian villagers. In response, the Bishop of Minya, Anba Macarius, said: "It is as though worship is a crime that Copts have to be penalised for."

As World Watch Monitor reported last year, it is almost impossible for Christians to obtain a license to build a church in Egypt. But last year, Egypt's parliament approved a law relating to the building and renovating of churches, and in October a cabinet committee met to start work on the legalisation of unlicensed churches.

### ***Copts grieve with mosque victims***

Meanwhile Coptic churches around the country rang their bells at noon on Saturday (25 November) in solidarity with the victims of Friday's attack on the al-Rawda Mosque in North Sinai. The attack killed at least 309 people and injured 128.

In a statement, the Church "offered its sincere condolences" to the bereaved families, adding that its members were "praying for a speedy recovery of the wounded", the Egypt Independent reported.

A local IS affiliate known as Sinai Province has attempted to impose its hardline interpretation of Islam on Egypt's North Sinai population around El-Arish, Sinai's largest city and approximately 80km east of Bir al-Abed, where the attack took place.

Hundreds of Christians fled the area and re-located to Port Said in late February and March, after Islamists posted videos and leaflets telling Copts to leave the area or be killed.

In October, an attack on a Coptic Church in El-Arish was repelled by state security forces stationed outside the building.

World Watch Monitor has reported how IS is also trying to establish a foothold in Upper Egypt, an area "marginalised" by politicians, lacking in security and in which many people are poor and uneducated.

On Ascension Day (26 May) a bus attack killed 29 Copts travelling to a monastery in Minya.

### ***Talk show host dismissed***

A TV talk-show host was temporarily dismissed after she questioned why Muslims were the target of Friday's attack, saying: "We have heard about ... attacks against Copts and their churches, and we considered it directed at non-Muslims, the followers of another religion and seen as their [IS affiliate] enemies. But [now they attack] Muslims! How could they?!"

The owner and head of the Sada al-Balad channel, Abdul-Enein, said the matter was under investigation and that the host had been sent on leave. In a statement, he added: "In Egypt, we all are one people – no difference between Muslims and Christians. We are all equal and live together in peace. Terrorism or aggression against peaceful individuals is a criminal action not only in Egypt but in the whole world."

This isn't the first time controversy has been sown by the comments of a talk-show host. In June, the powerful Islamic cleric Sheikh Salem Abdul Jalil appeared in court on charges of making anti-Christian comments on *his* TV show, causing the TV channel to end its contract with him and send an apology to all "Christian brothers".

It came at the same time as the submission of a bill to the Egyptian government scholars at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the pre-eminent seat of Sunni Islamic learning, which "aims to reaffirm the total incompatibility between the violence justified by religious arguments and Islamic law".

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**ALGERIA: 'Unjust law' still denying churches their 'right**

# to worship'

World Watch Monitor (19.10.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2hSDh7Z> – Churches in northern Algeria continue to clash with the authorities over permission to hold services in non-religious buildings.

Authorities in Tizi Ouzou province – 100km east of the capital, Algiers – have said a 2006 law that regulates non-Muslim worship is breached by churches meeting in houses meant only for accommodation or commercial purposes.

But the churches have cited the 2016 constitution, which states that religious freedom is guaranteed if in compliance with the law. They have said that they are complying with the law because of their formal affiliation with the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974 and is accredited with both the ministry of the interior and the local government.

One of the churches, in the commune of Ait Bouadou, uses a house that was leased on behalf of the EPA. It opened in December 2015 and, two months later, following complaints from locals, was ordered to close. In September the church received a letter from the mayor, again stating that the church is “not permitted” and demanding its closure because the house was intended initially for “dwelling or commercial use”.

The church of more than 200 people continues to meet while its leader seeks legal advice.

A second church, in the centre of Tizi Ouzou, was summoned by the authorities on 18 October and asked to “comply with the provisions of the 2006 law”. The pastor of the 100-strong church in Boghni, which has been active “for several years”, said it was “explained to the chief of the *daira* [local government] that we are a community affiliated to the EPA and that we meet in accordance with the law”.

The church has submitted documents to the authorities, showing its affiliation to the EPA, and continues to meet.

Earlier in 2017 summonses were issued to churches in Ait Djima and Maatkas, also in Tizi Ouzou.

In April 2016 World Watch Monitor reported that Algerian churches faced intimidation and harassment because of the 2006 law, including the EPA-affiliated churches in Maatkas and Ait Djima.

At the time, a pastor of a Protestant church in the capital, Algiers, said the 2006 law is used as a tool of persecution by the authorities. "It is an unjust law against Christians, who are denied their right to worship and the opportunity to share the Gospel freely," Rev. Haddad said, adding that "the situation of Christians in Algeria will not improve until the outright law, which is no longer justified, is repealed".

Because of the long-standing difficulty faced by Algerian churches, it has become standard practice to rent premises and inform the local authorities they have done so. Despite this, the authorities fail to respond to almost all applications from churches, including EPA affiliates.

Several Christians have received fines and suspended prison sentences under the 2006 law, including Christian teacher Habiba Kouider, who was charged in 2008 for the illegal possession of bibles.

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