

(Oriental) Orthodox Christians

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The Oriental Orthodox Churches, not to be confused with the Orthodox Churches stemming from the 1054 schism, are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. One of them is the Coptic Orthodox Church. It traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, who is 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 hub until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. The word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians, and so the Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about 12 million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today less than eight percent of the overall population follow it.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox Christians in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly 20 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, which entailed his name being 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 couple of years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) beheaded 21 Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. The victims were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.¹

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, 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 while bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Egyptian 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 governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

EGYPT: Reasons for the Persecution of Coptic Orthodox Christians

In July 2018, the US government estimated that the population of Egypt was 99.4 million. Most experts and media sources report that approximately 90% of the population are Sunni Muslims and about 10% are Christians (estimates range

¹ Malsin, Jared, "ISIS: Christians Mourn Their Relatives Beheaded in Libya," Time, February 23, 2015, accessed June 2020. <https://time.com/3718470/isis-copts-egypt/>.

from 5 to 15%). Approximately 90% of Christians in Egypt belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, according to Christian leaders.²

Egypt has long been home to Coptic Orthodox Christians, the largest and oldest ethno-religious minority in the country.³ With the expansion of Islam throughout the centuries, they became a minority in their own country and have subsequently suffered severe persecution.

Since the 1970s, the relations between the various political regimes and the Coptic Orthodox Church have dramatically deteriorated, especially under President Anwar Sadat and following the revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak.⁴ Throughout the last few decades, the Coptic Orthodox Church has become very vulnerable and, in the last ten years, Coptic Orthodox Christians have been particularly targeted by Islamist terrorists and mob violence.⁵

Coptic Orthodox Christians in Prison in Egypt

Over the last decade, Coptic Orthodox individuals⁶ and others have been prosecuted on the basis of vaguely worded criminal charges such as blasphemy, insulting a heavenly religion, insulting the Prophet or ‘causing harm or damage to the public interest’. Such accusations have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Coptic Orthodox fuelled by Islamists and sympathisers of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Coptic Orthodox behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **one case** of detained Coptic Orthodox Christians in its Prisoners’ Database.⁷ It is Abdo Adel, who was sentenced to three years in prison.

² For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Egypt, 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>.

³ Rachidi, Soukaina, “The Copts: Egypt’s Overlooked and Persecuted Christian Minority,” *Inside Arabia*, May 15, 2019, accessed May 2020. <https://insidearabia.com/copts-egypt-overlooked-persecuted-christianminority/>.

⁴ Brownlee, Jason, “Violence against Copts in Egypt,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2013. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence_against_copts3.pdf.

⁵ Ochab, Ewelina U, “Remembering The 21 Coptic Orthodox Christians Murdered By Daesh,” *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, February 14, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2019/02/14/remembering-the-21-coptic-orthodox-christians-murdered-by-daesh/#771b45fc4dcf>.

⁶ Cureton, Alexander, “CURETON: Coptic Christians Are Brutally Persecuted In Egypt. Why Is No One Talking About It?,” *The Daily Wire*, June 17, 2019. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/cureton-coptic-christians-are-brutally-persecuted-alexander-cureton>.

⁷ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Coptic Orthodox Christians, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

There has been a decrease in the number of Coptic Orthodox prisoners in the last few years. In 2015, six Coptic Christians were behind bars, mainly on fabricated or false blasphemy charges related to online posts. At the beginning of 2016, one Coptic Christian was released after completing his sentence. In 2017, several Coptic Christians were released after completing their prison terms (ranging from three to five years) which left only two: Abdo Adel and Makram Diab. In 2018, Makram Diab was released after serving six years in prison.⁸

Articles of the Penal Code

Members of the Coptic Orthodox Church are usually charged under **Article 98 (f)** of the Egyptian Penal Code which criminalises ‘any use of religion to promote or advocate extremist ideologies...with a view toward stirring up sedition, disparaging or showing contempt for any divinely revealed religion, or prejudicing national unity and social harmony’.⁹

Other provisions of the Egyptian Penal Code used in these cases address various forms of religious insult. For example:

Article 161 prohibits the printing and dissemination of deliberately distorted religious texts for state-approved religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), and also criminalises the mocking or ridicule of religious ceremonies in public.¹⁰

International advocacy

On 13 December 2018, the **European Parliament** passed a resolution on the situation of human rights defenders in Egypt that condemned ‘the continued persecution of minority groups in Egypt’ and called for ‘the promotion of international collaboration, including an independent investigation by the UN to assess the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt’. The European Parliament also pressed ‘Egypt to review its blasphemy laws and ensure the protection of religious minorities’.¹¹

⁸ Tosatti, Martco, “Egypt: The Coming Persecution,” Lastampa.it, December 30, 2019.

<https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2012/03/13/news/egypt-the-coming-persecution-1.36492993>.

⁹ Egyptian Penal Code (law no. 58 of 1937), Article 98(f). Freedom House, “The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights,” A Freedom House special report, October 2016.

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Policing_Belief_Full.pdf, or,

“Law No. 58 01 1937 Promulgating The Penal Code,” issued October 23, 1992.

<http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/Egypt/criminal-code.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ European Parliament, Resolution on the situation on Egypt, notably the situation of human rights defenders (2018/2968(RSP)) December 13, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0526_EN.html.

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US Government include Egypt on the US State Department's Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations.¹²

CASE STUDIES

Abdo Adel sentenced to three years

Abdo Adel was arrested on 6 July 2018 after Muslim villagers had filed a complaint with police that he allegedly insulted Muhammad. On the previous day, Abdo Adel had published a Facebook post comparing Muhammad with Jesus. On the day of his arrest, a group of young Muslim men tried to attack his house, and to break into the St. Tadros Church and the house of the priest, Fr. Makarious El-Kommas Antoun. They had to be dispersed by police stationed outside of his home, according to World Watch Monitor. Police arrested 90 Muslims in the mob, and then released most of them after a 'community reconciliation session'.

Abdo Adel makes the church's bread for use during the mass. He is not very skilled at reading, writing or using Facebook. To calm down the local population, Fr. Antoun posted a formal apology on his Facebook page after the incident saying: 'We strongly denounce what was published on the Facebook page of this man, which is understood as an abuse to our Muslim brothers'.

Abdo Adel was convicted for insulting Islam in the first degree and sentenced to three years in prison.¹³

ERITREA: Reasons for the Persecution of Orthodox Christians

A population census has not been conducted since 2010, but as of July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Eritrea to be six million. There are no reliable figures available on religious affiliation. Some government, religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49% Christian and 49% Sunni Muslim. In 2016, the Pew Foundation estimated the population

¹² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries for special watch list: Egypt, 2020, 2020*.

<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Egypt.pdf>.

¹³ "Egypt: Copts Attacked after Facebook Post 'Showing Contempt of Islam'," World Watch Monitor, July 24, 2018.

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/07/egypt-copts-attacked-after-facebook-post-showing-contempt-of-islam/>, and,

"Coptic Christian Convicted of Blasphemy, Jailed for Facebook Post," Mission Network

News, December 17, 2018.

<https://www.mnnonline.org/news/coptic-christian-convicted-of-blasphemy-jailed-for-facebook-post/>.

to be 63% Christian and 37% Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox.¹⁴

The country is ruled by a totalitarian one-party dictatorship of Maoist inspiration. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of continuous armed struggle by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Since then, national presidential or legislative elections have never taken place.

The only recognised religions in Eritrea are the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Evangelical Church and Sunni Islam.¹⁵

In Eritrea, Orthodox Christians cannot be considered Coptic because the Coptic Pope granted autocephalous status to their church in 1994. However, the Eritrean Orthodox Church was historically under the authority of the Patriarch of Alexandria and still is. Since the current government in Eritrea took power, this Church has experienced severe restrictions despite being one of the four recognised religions. After years of objecting to state interference in religious affairs, Patriarch Abune Antonios was deposed by the government in January 2006 and placed under house arrest. Another patriarch, who was selected by the regime, has governed the church since that time.

Orthodox Christians in Prison in Eritrea

Despite state recognition, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and its Patriarch have been heavily persecuted since Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1991.¹⁶ The newly independent government wanted a national Orthodox Church separate from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and so asked Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria for Eritrean Orthodoxy autocephaly.¹⁷

In 2004, Abune Antonios was elected as Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. He opposed the government's interference in the affairs of the church and objected its confiscation of church properties, hijacking of church offerings, expropriation of tithes and pressuring priests and deacons to military services. The government deposed him, placed him under house arrest in 2006 and appointed a new, more obedient, Patriarch.

¹⁴ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Eritrea, 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/>.

¹⁵ "Eritrea: Freedom of religion or belief", Christian Solidarity Worldwide, September 2018. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1447968/3175_1540636081_2018-09-general-briefings-eritrea.pdf.

¹⁶ "Eritrean War of Independence," New World Encyclopedia, accessed June, 2020. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Eritrean_War_of_Independence.

¹⁷ Stefan, Matt, "Shenouda III," Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shenouda-III>.

This context explains the persecution of Abune Antonios and those who are faithful to him.

Orthodox Christians behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **four cases** of Eritrean Orthodox Christians in its Prisoners' Database.¹⁸ Three of these individuals are in maximum-security detention centres and one is under house arrest, Patriarch Abune Antonios. These members occupied high level positions within Eritrea, until they were arrested for involvement in the renewal movement of the Orthodox Church. The number of cases documented by HRWF has not changed over the last couple of years.

Articles of the Penal Code

Quite often believers of all faiths are arrested and imprisoned without any formal charges, trial or conviction.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution on the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak. The resolution stated that:

Abune Antonios, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the nation's largest religious community, has been in detention since 2007, having refused to excommunicate 3000 parishioners who opposed the government [...] since then, he has been held in an unknown location where he has been denied medical care.¹⁹

The European Parliament called 'on the Eritrean Government to release Abune Antonios, allow him to return to his position as Patriarch, and cease its interference in peaceful religious practices in the country'. Additionally, it reiterated 'that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemned any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion'.²⁰

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) expressed its concern for the continuation of religious repression in the country and highlighted the domination of the

¹⁸ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Eritrean Orthodox Christians, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

¹⁹ European Parliament, Resolution on Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak (2017/2755(RSP)) July 6, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html.

²⁰ Ibid.

government in the internal affairs of the four recognised religious communities, including the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. USCIRF determined that Eritrea merited designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF has recommended to the US government to

- Redesignate Eritrea as a country of particular concern (CPC);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States;
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to release unconditionally detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios.

USCIRF has designated Eritrea as a CPC since 2004.²¹

On 21 June 2019, the **UN Human Rights Council** issued a press release by Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz about human rights in Eritrea, especially the government's crackdowns on various religious communities. Concerning the arrest of Orthodox believers, she said that on 13 June 2019, 'security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre Bizen monastery. The priests - three over 70 years old - were allegedly arrested for opposing the government's interference in the affairs of the Church'.²² She also pressed the government to 'release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs'.²³

CASE STUDIES

Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church under house arrest since 2007

In 2007, two priests accompanied by government security agents entered the Patriarch's residence and confiscated his personal pontifical insignia. **Abune Antonios**, who was born in 1929 and suffers from health problems, was then arrested for resisting government interference in religious affairs. Since then, he

²¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries of particular concern: Eritrea 2020*, 2020.

<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Eritrea.pdf>

²² "UN Expert Urges Eritrea to Allow Religious Institutions to Operate Freely and Respect the Right of Freedom of Religion," OHCHR, June 21, 2019.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24721&LangID=E>.

²³ "Crackdown on Christians in Eritrea Spurs UN Expert to Press Government 'to Live up to Its International Commitments' UN News," United Nations, June 21, 2019.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041041>.

has been under house arrest and strict state surveillance. Formal charges have never been brought against him.²⁴

Since 2007, Abune Antonios has been considered by the US to be a religious prisoner of conscience.²⁵

Three high-ranking Orthodox Christians detained in a maximum-security centre since 2004

Gebremedhin Gebregioris, a theologian expert and the head of the Sunday Schools department in the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarchate;²⁶ **Futsum Gebrenegus**, a senior doctor who appeared regularly on Eritrean TV and had positions on many government-appointed commissions;²⁷ and **Tekleab Menghisteab**, a deacon and priest in the Eritrean Church,²⁸ were all detained in 2004 for their involvement in the renewal movement of the Orthodox Church.

They have been kept incommunicado since then, and no formal charges have ever been brought against them.

Conclusions

In 2014, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected President of Egypt with a landslide majority. In the last few years, he has prioritised religious freedom and non-discrimination issues on his agenda and strives to create interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence among religious communities within Egypt. However, his efforts will only be successful if the judiciary functions independently of any partisan influence. Furthermore, the abuse of laws criminalising blasphemy or contempt of religion must also be addressed.

As to the situation of religious freedom in Eritrea, unfortunately it has dramatically deteriorated since the country's independence from Ethiopia. There is no hope of improvement if the current totalitarian regime continues on this path.

²⁴ "Abune Antonios," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, December 12, 2019, accessed May 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abune_Antonios.

²⁵ "Patriarch Abune Antonios," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, June 5, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/patriarch-abune-antonios>.

²⁶ "REV G. GEBREGIORIS," Church In Chains Ireland An Irish voice for suffering persecuted Christians Worldwide, May 21, 2020, accessed May 2020. <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/gebremedhin-gebregioris/>.

²⁷ "FUTSUM GEBRENEGUS," Church In Chains Ireland An Irish voice for suffering persecuted Christians Worldwide, May 22, 2020, accessed May 2020. <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/futsum-gebrenegus/>.

²⁸ "TEKLEAB MENGHISTEAB," Church In Chains Ireland An Irish voice for suffering persecuted Christians Worldwide, May 22, 2020, accessed May 2020. <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/tekleab-menghisteab/>.