

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Christians in Egypt: Solidarity or Suffering?

Christianity is the second largest religion in Egypt, with most adherents belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Smaller Christian groups in Egypt hail from the Coptic Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Evangelical Church. Saint Mark the Evangelist is said to have founded the Church of Alexandria, Egypt making it one of the oldest Christian communities. Today, Christians comprise 10-15 percent of Egypt's population (about 10-15 million people).

Islam is the state religion of Egypt so despite Christianity's long history in Egypt, Christians have experienced significant discrimination and persecution over the years through a combination of government policies and terrorist activities. During Hosni Mubarak's 30 years as President of Egypt, Christians faced discrimination in education, in divorce cases where family law favored the Muslim spouse, and in employment where it was difficult for them to obtain positions (especially high-level ones) in government, the military, and security forces. There were severe restrictions on building churches. Vandalism and violent attacks against Christian communities went unpunished.

Both Christians and Muslims joined to help bring down the Mubarak government in 2011. Christians hoped that life would improve and they would be able to participate more equally in Egyptian society but extremists took advantage of the instability. Mohamed Morsi came to power, supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, who pushed for an Islamist-inspired constitution and reportedly threatened violence against Christians if they demonstrated against Morsi. But Morsi was overthrown in a 2013 coup led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the current President of Egypt.

Is life better for Christians under President Sisi? He has publicly demonstrated more religious tolerance, attending the opening of a new Coptic Orthodox cathedral and a mosque in Egypt's new administrative capitol in January 2019. His government has encouraged the inclusion of churches in new urban developments and eased some restrictions on the building and repairs of churches. Although some Egyptian Muslims believe the plight of Christians is exaggerated, the government has attempted to ensure Muslim-Christian national solidarity. However at the local level, particularly in upper Egypt and rural areas, authorities have closed churches and anti-Christian vio-

lence is all too common; perpetrators operate with impunity. Egyptian law allows private citizens to bring blasphemy charges and so Christians, atheists, other smaller religious groups, as well as Muslims are vulnerable to prosecution for "insulting Islam" and disturbing the "public order."

Islamic extremist groups also pose a threat to religious minorities. In 2015, 21 Egyptian Copts knelt on a beach in Libya and were beheaded as ISIS expanded its activities from Iraq and Syria. In 2017 Palm Sunday church bombings killed 40 people and Islamic State militants targeted Christian-owned shops, monasteries, and other sites, killing dozens of people. In November 2018, several Christians were killed as terrorists opened fire on buses transporting Copts to a monastery for a pilgrimage. Such an environment has limited the range of when, where, and how Christians can take part in religious retreats, pilgrimages, public festivals, and holidays. Christian girls have been abducted, sexually harassed, raped, and in some cases, forced to marry Muslims.

Although some Coptic Orthodox leaders have praised the Egyptian government's efforts to eradicate Islamic extremism, there are still many political issues that negatively affect the Christian population. Corruption is an ongoing problem so that Christians feel that crimes against their communities go unpunished in favor of maintaining the status quo. Not surprisingly, some Christians have fled Egypt over the years due to the hostile socioreligious climate. The Coptic Orthodox pope commented that such a pattern of migration has upset the balance of a very traditional and ancient religious community. Indeed, given Egypt's significant role in the development of early Christianity, the loss of such religious diversity would be a tragedy that should be addressed by taking legitimate steps toward protecting religious minorities and ensuring religious freedom for all.

When Pope Francis visited Egypt in April 2017, he met with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, considered to be the highest authority of Sunni Islamic thought and Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt. The Holy Father spoke to participants at an international peace conference at the Al-Azhar Center and reiterated that in "this land of covenants between peoples and believers, we must say once more a firm and clear "No!" to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God. Together let us affirm the incompatibility of violence and faith, belief and hatred."



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