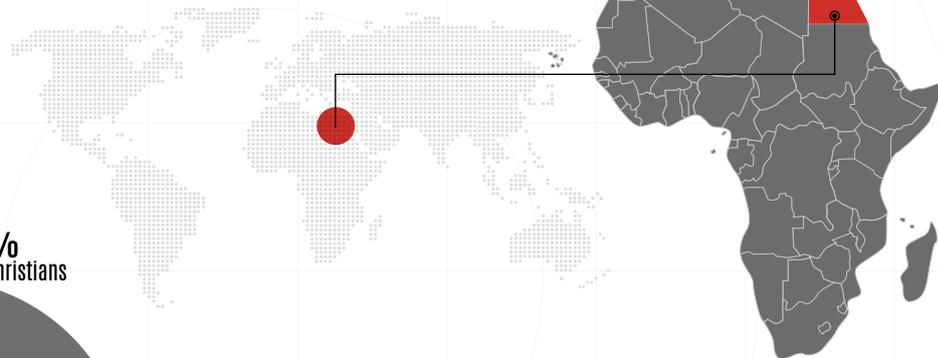
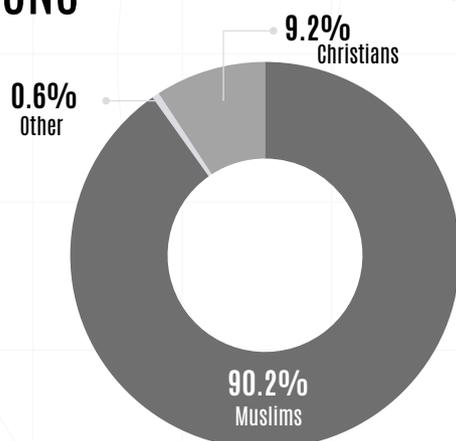




EGYPT

RELIGIONS



Population

102,941,484

GDP per capita

10,550 US\$

Area

1,002,000 Km²

GINI INDEX*

31.5

*Economic Inequality

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Arab Republic of Egypt has a long tradition as a nation state. Although predominantly Muslim, the country is home to the largest, mostly Coptic, Christian community in the Arab world, with the highest concentration in the governorates of Upper Egypt. Many Christians also live in Cairo. Very few Jews are left.¹ The numbers of Shi'a Muslims,² Baha'is and other groups are also very small and unknown.

In the last decade Egypt has suffered from political and economic instability. In 2011 long-serving President Hosni Mubarak was toppled after mass demonstrations. In 2012 Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected president by a slim margin. Between June and July 2013, the Egyptian military removed him from office following street protests by millions of Egyptians. Those opposed to Morsi's fall from power and the associated events described the development as a coup. Supporters of the overthrow said it was necessary to save democracy.

In 2014 General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was elected president of the country. He was then re-elected in April 2018. Eco-

nomics and security problems continue, especially in the Sinai Peninsula where the country is facing an Islamist insurgency by groups allied with the Islamic State group (Daesh).

In a referendum held in January 2014, Egyptians approved a new constitution (amended in 2019).³

The Preamble of the constitution describes Egypt as: "The cradle of religions and the banner of glory of the revealed religions. On its land, Moses grew up, the light of God appeared, and the message descended on Mount Sinai. On its land, Egyptians welcomed the Virgin Mary and her baby and offered up thousands of martyrs in defence of the Church of Jesus. When the Seal of the Messengers Mohamed (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) was sent to all mankind to perfect the sublime morals, our hearts and minds were opened to the light of Islam. We were the best soldiers on Earth to fight for the cause of God, and we disseminated the message of truth and religious sciences across the world."⁴

According to Article 2, "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation." The Preamble specifies that "the reference for interpretation thereof is the relevant texts in the collected rulings of the

Supreme Constitutional Court.” Article 3 states: “The principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.”

Article 7 protects Al-Azhar University as the most important Sunni institution of Islamic teaching. “Al-Azhar is an independent scientific Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is the main authority for religious sciences, and Islamic affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world.”

Article 53 declares: “Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties, and may not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, belief, sex, origin, race, colour, language, disability, social class, political or geographical affiliation, or for any other reason.”

Article 64 states: “Freedom of belief is absolute. The freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers of revealed religions is a right organized by law.” According to article 74, “No political activity may be exercised or political parties formed on the basis of religion, or discrimination based on sex, origin, sect or geographic location”.

Article 244 states: “The state shall endeavour that youth, Christians, persons with disability and Egyptians living abroad be appropriately represented in the House of Representatives, as regulated by law.” The Egyptian Penal Code stipulates that denigrating religions, promoting extremist thoughts with the aim of inciting strife, demeaning any of the “divine religions”, and harming national unity carry penalties ranging from six months to five years in prison.⁵

Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, in practice the government does not recognise conversions from Islam. In 2008, the Administrative Court ruled in favour of the government in not recognising conversion from Islam, noting that its duty is to “protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam.”⁶

The law does not recognise the Baha’i faith or its religious laws and bans Baha’i institutions and community activities. Baha’is do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. The same applies to Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁷ In 2019, the government closed again the room containing the tomb of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Al-Hussein, in order to prevent Shi’as from using it during Ashura.⁸

Electronic National identity cards are issued by the Ministry of Interior. They have official religious designations only for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths. Since a 2009 court order, Baha’is are identified by a dash.⁹ Despite the classification of “religion” on ID cards, the government has never provided official data about the Coptic population.

In August 2016, the Egyptian parliament adopted a new Church Construction Law to facilitate the construction, renovation and legal recognition of churches. However, escalating attacks, administrative obstacles and failure by the state to stem social violence against Christians when they try to build, restore or just have their churches recognised reveals a huge gap between the law and everyday life. More worrisome is the fact that security agencies have repeatedly failed to protect Copts and prevent attacks against churches and Coptic properties.¹⁰

Regarding marriage and divorce, Egyptians are subject to different personal status laws, based on their official religious affiliation.

Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men, and non-Muslim men must convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim woman. Since 2005, divorced mothers can have custody of their children until they are 15.¹¹ If one parent is not Muslim, the Muslim parent is automatically awarded custody.¹²

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In May 2018, 11 Muslims and nine Copts were acquitted by the Misdemeanour Court in Beni Suef, Upper Egypt. This decision followed a conciliation agreement whereby the local church would remain closed until it was officially legalised. The people taken into custody were initially arrested because of an attack by Muslim villagers on the local church after they learnt that Copts had applied for legal recognition of their place of worship.¹³

In May 2018, a mob attack against a church in Abou el-Shuqaf (near Alexandria) and other Christian-owned properties left seven Copts injured. The police arrived late and arrested 11 extremists and nine Copts, including four who were injured during the attack. Allegedly they were arrested in order to be pressured to withdraw the charges against the attackers. The nine Copts were released only after Father Aghabius Mounir, priest of Abou El-Shuqaf’s Mar Morcos church, withdrew his accusations against the people who wrecked his car.¹⁴

In June 2018, the Egyptian government agreed to pay for the medical treatment in Aachen, Germany, of Samiha Tawfiq, a Copt who was badly injured to the right side of her face in the December 2017 bomb attack at Cairo's St Peter and St Paul's Church.¹⁵

In July 2018, Bishop Epiphanius, Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Macarius the Great, was found dead inside the religious complex. Two monks were arrested in connection with the death; after they were tried and convicted, one received a life sentence and the other, Father Isaiah, the death penalty. Sherif Azer, a member of Reprieve, a British human rights watchdog group, is trying to get the death sentence commuted on the grounds that Fr Isaiah's confession was obtained under torture and that the case is full of inconsistencies.¹⁶

In July 2018, a Copt from the village of Menba, Minya, was accused of "showing contempt of religion" for comparing Muhammad to Jesus in a Facebook post in which Islam was insulted.¹⁷ Some 90 Muslim extremists who participated in an anti-Coptic attack caused by the post were arrested; they were later released after a court conciliation settlement between the Copts and the Muslims. Meanwhile the Copt responsible for the Facebook post was sentenced in December 2018 to three years in jail for "disdain of Islam".¹⁸

In mid-August 2018, in the town of Mostoroud (Qalioubiya governorate), a suicide bomber tried to enter the Virgin Mary Church. When the police stopped him before he entered the building, he detonated the explosive vest he was wearing, killing himself. No one else was harmed.¹⁹

In July 2018, seven Jehovah's Witnesses were stopped by National Security Service in Beni Suef and had their religious materials confiscated. The importation and sale of Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses literature is banned.²⁰

In late August 2018, a mob of Muslims attacked the village of Demshaw Hashem in southern Egypt, injuring two Copts and a firefighter, both of whom had to be hospitalised. The attack followed accusations against Christian residents that they were using their homes for prayer. Like in previous incidents, security forces reportedly did not intervene at the time of the attack and arrived after the incident ended.²¹ A few days later, the Coptic Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Minya and Abu Qurqas, Anba Makarios, refused to take part in a "reconciliation session" between representatives of Christian and Muslim communities. He explained that such meetings undermine Christians' rights

by letting criminals escape justice. Instead Makarios demanded that the law be enforced.²² The human rights organisation Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) condemned these practices and demanded a trial for perpetrators of attacks, compensation for the victims, and the construction of a church in the village.²³

Southern Egypt saw other violent attacks during this period,²⁴ followed by the forced closure of churches and the arrest of attackers but also of Copts charged with illegal gathering, obstructing the road, disrupting public peace, and inciting sectarian strife. The Copts were also charged with praying in an unlicensed place.²⁵

According to an EIPR report, from the moment the church construction law was adopted in September 2016 to April 2018, 14 churches were shut by state agencies, denying access and prayer services to Copts.²⁶

In August 2018, President al-Sisi appointed Christians to the post of governor of Damietta and Dakahliya, the first time this has happened since April 2011, when protests by Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood forced the government to withdraw the appointment of a Copt as governor for Qena,²⁷ Upper Egypt.²⁸ Manal Awad Mikhail, who was appointed the new governor of Damietta in August 2018, is Egypt's first ever female Coptic governor.²⁹

In November 2018, an attack against Coptic pilgrims heading to a monastery in Minya (Upper Egypt) left seven people dead and 19 wounded. It was claimed by the Islamic State.³⁰ A few days later, police reportedly killed 19 terrorists thought to be behind the attack.³¹

In November 2018, an alleged Islamic State supporter was sentenced to death for the fatal stabbing of an 82-year-old Christian doctor in 2017.³²

In November 2018, MP Mohamed Fouad presented a motion to the parliamentary speaker requesting a report from Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly concerning the difficulties Baha'is face in practising their religion, a situation that violates Articles 53, 64, and 92 of the Egyptian constitution.³³

In November 2018, during his speech at the World Youth Forum in Sharm-El-Sheikh, President al-Sisi said he would protect freedom of worship and that the state would build a church in each new community. What is more, "if we have other religions, we would build them houses of worship." He added that "it is the right of every citizen to worship as they please, or not to worship. It is a subject we are not

interfering with.”³⁴

In December 2018, the Prosecutor General of Egypt referred 11 individuals to a criminal court for attacking a Coptic church in south Cairo in December 2017 during pre-Christmas celebrations.³⁵

The lawsuits filed by four of the 12 Baha’i couples to have their civil marriages recognised were successful in October 2018. Although Baha’is welcomed the issuance of the first civil marriage licence in 2017, they also noted that the courts were inconsistent in their rulings. By the end of the year, standard procedures for issuing civil marriage licences to couples with no designated religious affiliation had not yet been developed.³⁶

In December 2018, President al-Sisi ordered the construction of a Coptic church in the city of New Ahalina 2.³⁷

A couple of days before Coptic Christmas, a policeman was killed trying to defuse an explosive device near a church.³⁸

On 6th January 2019, the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, the biggest church in the Middle East, was inaugurated in the New Capital on the eve of Christmas.³⁹ President al-Sisi and Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb of Al-Azhar were at the inauguration ceremony together with the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, Pope Tawadros II. Al-Sisi also attended Christmas Mass in 2018.⁴⁰

In mid-January 2019, Coptic jurists filed a lawsuit with the Attorney General’s Office against the governor of Minya province over the closure of a Coptic place of worship in the village of Mansheyat Zaafarana. After violent demonstrations by Islamist mobs, police promised demonstrators that the church would be closed.⁴¹

In mid-January 2019, Islamic militants kidnapped a Christian man travelling in a communal taxi in northern Sinai.⁴²

In January 2019, Al-Azhar and the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) inaugurated separate academies for preachers.⁴³ While Al-Azhar’s academy only focuses on Islamic studies, the International Awqaf Academy, which plans to train female preachers, includes other subjects as well, like economics, politics and psychology.⁴⁴

In February 2019, Father Yassa Marzok contradicted a statement by the Egyptian government claiming that there were no closed churches in Minya governorate. The cler-

gyman noted instead that eight Coptic churches were shut down in the city of Samalout alone.⁴⁵

In June 2019, a report by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy stated that several rural villages – maybe hundreds – do not have a church at all. In an interview, Bishop Macarios of Minya and Abu Qarqas explained that about 150 villages and neighbourhoods in his diocese needed a church or other religious buildings.⁴⁶

In July 2019, the Ministry for Antiquities published a booklet illustrating the trip of the Holy Family in Egypt. The goal was to have the “Stations of the journey of the Holy Family through Egypt” recognised as World Heritage by UNESCO.⁴⁷

In September 2019, atheist blogger Sherif Gaber⁴⁸ tweeted that he had been sentenced to three years in prison for contempt of religion, spreading immoral values and disturbing the public peace through his YouTube channel, adding, however, that he was not in custody.⁴⁹

In November 2019, a Coptic human rights lawyer, Huda Nasralla, won the right to equal inheritance. In court her brothers backed her claim, but their testimony was ignored twice. In her appeal, she cited Article 245 of the 1938 Orthodox personal status regulations, which guarantee Coptic women equal inheritance as men. Her main argument is that Shari’a does not apply to her. Although another Coptic woman won the right to equal inheritance in 2016, Shari’a is generally applied in inheritance cases. Only in matters of marriage and divorce does the judiciary defer to the Coptic Church.⁵⁰

In November 2019, Ramy Kamel, a human rights activist and a founding member of the Maspero Youth Union,⁵¹ was arrested. A prominent defender of Coptic rights in Egypt, he had posted on social media footage of attacks and the forcible removal of Christians from their homes.⁵² His charge sheet included membership in a terrorist organisation and using social media to spread “false news threatening public order”. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that he was arrested after he applied for a visa to travel to Geneva in order to intervene at the UN Forum on Minority Issues at the end of November 2019.⁵³

On New Year’s Eve 2019, Copts in Fao Bahari, a village in Dshna (southern Egypt), were barred by the police from praying in their small makeshift church on the grounds that it was not licenced for religious rites. According to the se-

curity forces, holding Coptic prayers would offend the sentiments of Muslims villagers and probably cause hostilities against the Copts. The same night, a fire was declared in a house owned by a Coptic family. Six Muslims were detained, including one believed to have incited violence, and five Copts, four who owned the burnt house, and one who posted a video of the fire on social media.⁵⁴

In its 2019 report on religious freedom, the US Department of State cited Jehovah's Witnesses saying that several of their members were questioned by authorities due to their status as a "banned group". In February 2019 a Jehovah's Witness was "violently interrogated" twice, threatened, blindfolded, and beaten by security officials in Upper Egypt. On various occasions in April, October, and November 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses were interrogated by police officials in Cairo and Minya. In September 2019, security officials permitted more than 200 Jehovah's Witnesses to hold a religious meeting in a private home.⁵⁵

In 2019, Alexandria University and Damanhour University inaugurated their own Coptic Studies Institute, the first of their kind in Egypt.⁵⁶

In January 2020, after two years of restoration, the 14th-Century Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue reopened its doors; about 180 Jews visited it in February 2020.⁵⁷ The US\$ 4 million project was entirely financed by the Egyptian government.⁵⁸

The restoration of Cairo's Bassatine Jewish cemetery was also completed in 2020 thanks to the American Research Center in Egypt and the Drop of Milk association, with funding from the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation⁵⁹. It is believed to be the second oldest Jewish cemetery in the world. The restoration includes the documentation and mapping of what remains of the site.⁶⁰

In January 2020, Orthodox, Evangelical and Catholic Churches reached an agreement on a new unified personal status bill for non-Muslims.⁶¹

In July 2020, the Coptic Church warned about the distribution of "forged gospels" that contradicted Christian teachings.⁶²

In February 2020, the Administrative Court in Cairo banned Shi'a websites and TV channels, including the website of renowned Shi'a activist Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis.⁶³ The Prosecutor's Office explained that the decision was taken in an attempt to fight the dangers of Shi'a ideology in

Egyptian society and prevent any exploitation of religious ideologies to achieve political ends.⁶⁴

In July 2020, after Turkey's decision to convert the Basilica of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, Egypt's Grand Mufti Shawky Allam declared that this action was "inadmissible", and that places of worship should remain as they are.⁶⁵ He also declared that there is no objection, according to Islamic law, to use money belonging to Muslims in order to build churches.⁶⁶

In August 2020, the criminal court in Minya delayed again the court case of So'ad Thabet, a Christian woman who was beaten and stripped by a mob of 300 men in her village after rumours spread that her son had had an affair with a divorced Muslim woman. After hearing arguments, the court referred the case back to the court of appeal in Beni Suef. Thabet, who refused to take part in a reconciliation session, has been caught up in this legal battle for more than four years. In 2017, her case was dropped because of "lack of evidence". Later, three of her aggressors were eventually charged and sentenced in absentia to 10 years in prison. Thabet and her family had to flee the village, and Coptic villagers who lost their homes had to be "reconciled" with their attackers.⁶⁷ Her son, Ashraf Abdo Attia, and the Muslim woman he allegedly had an affair with, were found guilty of adultery and sentenced to two years in prison and the payment of a fine of 1,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$ 65).⁶⁸

In September 2020, the Administrative Court of the Egyptian State Council ruled that it does not have jurisdiction in the case filed by lawyer Haitham Saad. Saad had asked the Minister of justice to amend the personal status law in order to ban verbal divorce. Like President al-Sisi, Saad wants verbal divorce by a husband to require authentication to be valid. Egypt's religious authorities, among them Al-Azhar, have categorically rejected this proposition on the basis that verbal divorce by a husband is the rule in Shari'a since "the time of the Prophet [Muhammad]" and so without the need of any witnesses or authentication.⁶⁹

In September 2020, Coptic Solidarity published a report on the abduction of Coptic girls and women, who are sexually abused and forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslims. The report cited 13 case studies, estimating some "500 cases within the last decade."⁷⁰

In October 2020, Lamia Loutfi, program manager at the New Woman Foundation, a Cairo-based human rights organisation helping female victims of violence and dis-

crimination, lodged a complaint against the teachers of her daughter's school for trying to force her and other students to wear the hijab. This incident revealed that many schools across Egypt engage in similar practices.⁷¹

By October 2020, the number of churches and ecclesiastical buildings that were legalised reached 1,738.⁷²

At the beginning of November 2020, Nabil Habashy Salama, a Coptic man, was kidnapped in Sinai. At the time of writing, no organisation has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.⁷³

In November 2020, the Minister of Awqaf (religious endowments), Mohammed Mukhtar Juma, explained that Egypt is becoming "a model of religious coexistence", and is defeating any sectarian discrimination while ensuring full equality of citizens of different faith communities. He added: "We have a duty to protect our mosques and our churches together because in this way we protect our homeland".⁷⁴

In mid-November 2020, two Christians, Ayman Rida Hanna and Mounir Masaad Hanna, who were arrested in June 2019 after appearing in a video discussing praying in Islam, were referred to a criminal court for mocking Islam and insulting religion. One of their lawyers, Amr al-Qadi, said that they "remained in pre-trial detention until the prosecution [charged them] despite [the] repeated calls to release them."⁷⁵

Also in November, a young Christian teacher, Youssef Hany, was arrested for insulting Islam after he posted comments on Facebook. He and a Muslim woman, identified only by her Facebook name, Sandosa, were charged under Article 98 (f) of Egypt's Penal Code, which outlaws insulting a "heavenly religion," namely Islam, Christianity and Judaism.⁷⁶ Their lawyer, Makarios Lahzy, explained that the charges are unconstitutional since the article "does not clearly and expressly define contempt of or defamation and leaves the notion loose and unreliable."⁷⁷ Furthermore, Copts-United, an advocacy group, wondered how Hany could be arrested for allegedly insulting Islam while those who later insulted Christianity and called for Hany, and Copts, to be killed were not detained.⁷⁸

In that same month, Mohamed Ashraf, a young stand-up comedian, was arrested after a video of one of his performances – originally broadcast in January 2020 – went viral, causing a backlash. In his act, he mocked some broadcasters at the state-owned Al-Quran Al-Kareem ra-

dio station. Ashraf, who was facing multiple charges, like contempt of religion, threatening the values of Egyptian families and insulting and defaming the radio station's presenters, was released a few days later after apologising to one of the radio's host.⁷⁹

At the end of November 2020, mobs attacked with stones and Molotov cocktails a Coptic church, and Coptic-owned houses and shops in Barsha, a village in the Governorate of Minya. The attacks were reportedly provoked by an article considered offensive to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad posted on the Facebook account of a young Copt. An elderly Coptic woman was hospitalised for burns after her home was set on fire as a result of the incident. 100 people, including 35 Copts, were arrested.⁸⁰

In November 2020, Egypt's Grand Mufti Sheikh Shawki Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam declared in a weekly TV interview that the historical phenomenon of political Islam has become "a real disaster, [turning] into a nightmare that disturbs not only the Islamic Umma, but the whole world".⁸¹

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, places of worship were closed from mid-March to the end of August 2020.⁸² The authorities banned public religious gatherings during Easter and Ramadan.⁸³ These restrictions were criticised by certain religious groups.⁸⁴

In May 2020, Pope Tawadros II issued new rules regarding weddings, limiting participation to a maximum of four people, in addition to the spouses, the priest and the deacon. No celebrations were permitted. In addition to recommending a pre-wedding medical examination, the couple was expected to dress soberly.⁸⁵

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In some respects, the situation of religious freedom has improved somewhat over the past few years. Different messages encouraging greater national unity between Muslims and Christians and initiatives to promote interfaith tolerance, protect religious heritage sites, and legalise hundreds of churches are definitely a very positive development. But deeply rooted social intolerance and discrimination against non-Muslims remain serious societal problems, particularly in Upper Egypt.

While the official government discourse likes to reiterate fraternity and equality among Egyptian citizens, reality and facts on the ground present a contrasting reality. Already discriminated by law, and not enjoying the same rights as

their fellow Muslim citizens, Christians are often victims of crimes such as blackmail, violent aggressions and kidnapping. Victims report that in most cases, police forces do not intervene in attacks against Copts; while their aggressors benefit from legal impunity. In many cases, it is Copts who end up in jail.

Moreover, those who are outside the traditional monotheistic religions, or not officially recognised, such as atheists, Baha'is, Shi'as and Jehovah's Witnesses, face daunting challenges such as negative societal attitudes and contradictory governmental policies.

In the autumn of 2020, as a result of its crackdown against human rights activists⁸⁶ and any form of opposition, the Egyptian government effectively silenced actors defending religious minorities and religious freedom in Egypt. Progression towards full enjoyment of religious freedom is hesitant at best, and the current situation does not have any sign of improvement.

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