Egypt

Egypt is a majority Sunni Muslim country and with around 90% of the population being Sunni, a large proportion of these following Sufism, they are well-established in the social fabric’.121

Nearly all Muslims are Sunni, with a large proportion of these following Sufism. Salafi Muslims number c.6 million, with Ahmadis, Shi’ites and Mu’tazilis making up the remaining 91%. Coptic Christians (c.8-9%), other Christian denominations (1%),122 Baha’is (0.003%), Jehovah’s Witnesses (0.002%) and Jews who number fewer than 40, constitute the final 9% of the population. 123

There are significant human rights abuses in Egypt and the right to freedom of religion or belief continues to be denied.124

A growing number of Egypt’s citizens are announcing themselves as atheists but sharp responses from the government, meting out prison sentences, is restricting the numbers of those willing to publically declare their beliefs. Egypt has long been divided along sectarian lines, with short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule and the influence of Daesh125 exacerbating tensions.

President Sisi has spoken about the need for greater tolerance and taken a few symbolic actions, including becoming the first Egyptian leader to attend Coptic Christmas Eve Mass.126 Nevertheless, there remains a high level of government restriction on religion. The government is largely unable to protect Christian places of worship from bomb attacks or Christians themselves from kidnap and extortion.127

Daesh claimed responsibility for three church bombings in 2016 and 2017 in which 70 people were killed and more than 100 injured. This year, 117

Copts were attacked multiple times and in several places during the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha. One week earlier a suicide attack on a Coptic church in north Cairo was thwarted.
In November 2018 three buses carrying Christian pilgrims on their way to a remote desert monastery south of Cairo were ambushed, killing seven people and wounding 19; the local Daesh affiliate claimed responsibility.128

While in this case police killed 19 terrorist suspects,129 in general the authorities have failed to prosecute those who attack Christians and have instead enforced state-sponsored reconciliation agreements which provide impunity for the perpetrators and leave Christians vulnerable to future attacks.130

In addition, there remains a high level of social hostility towards different religious groups131 – mobs regularly attack churches, Shia Muslims experience active discrimination,132 and Copts are harassed for drinking water during Ramadan fasting hours and gathering to pray in houses; they are at risk of looting.133 These targeted actions are particularly supported by Salafi militants within the country.

Egypt inflicts severe penalties for declaring oneself to be an atheist, including up to five years’ imprisonment. In January 2018 the Head of the Egyptian Parliament’s Committee on Religion put forward new legislation to outlaw atheism that was debated in Parliament and considered by the President.134 That this law was even considered highlights the environment that those with no religious beliefs experience and the risk taken if they publically state them.

It is illegal to register an explicitly humanist, atheist, secularist, or other non-religious NGO and those that attempt it face harassment from the authorities.135

It remains difficult to open places of worship for recognised faiths, though the Egyptian government has prioritised the reconstruction of several significant non-Muslim places of worship.

In October 2018 it was reported that only 340 out of 3,730 applications from unlicensed churches seeking legal status and building permits had been granted under the 2016 Church Construction Law, meant to provide an avenue for Christians to legally build and renovate churches.136

Many unregistered churches have waited around 15-20 years already to be registered by the state; meanwhile they remain vulnerable to being shut down or attacked.

The church in Ezbet Sultan Pasha village, Minya, faced concerted mob attacks with police complicity when seeking legalisation in July 2018.137

On 2 July 2018, a man’s fields were burned days after he was accused of planning to turn his home into a house church.138 128

Blasphemy cases are increasing in Egypt.139 Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal code criminalises contempt of religion140 and acts as a blasphemy law.

In December 2017 a 29 year-old man was accused of ‘contempt of religion’ for running a Facebook page called ‘Atheism’.141

In July 2018 a mob attacked several Coptic Christian homes in Minbal village, Minya, following the publication of a Facebook post deemed offensive to Islam.142

Atheists and adherents of non-recognised religions are barred from registering their chosen belief on ID cards.143

Thanks to a 2008 court ruling, official recognition of conversion from Islam is impossible, and those who do in practice face significant social and governmental hostilities.144
Conversely, official recognition of conversion to Islam is easy to obtain.

References:


138 World Watch Monitor, ‘Copt’s fields torched after rumours he was turning his house into a church’, 26 June 2018, https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/copts-fields-torched-after-rumours-he-was-turning-his-house-into-a-church/ 21 Blasphemy cases are increasing in Egypt.

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