

**Update:**

Recent aggression against Alexandria's Coptic Christian community has placed Copts under new threat. In October, 2005, mob violence incited by inflammatory Egyptian media reports resulted in the siege of St. George Coptic Orthodox church, the stabbing of a Coptic nun, and the destruction of Coptic property. The riots took place in the run up to Egypt's parliamentary elections, with some reports tying the violence against the Coptic community to political motives. This new outbreak of hostility toward the Copts has heightened fears and tensions in a community already on edge.

**Background:**

The Coptic Church is the ancient Christian church of Egypt, based on the teachings of Saint Mark.<sup>1</sup> The modern use of the term "Copts" refers to a distinct, ethno-religious group which traces its ancestry back to the pre-Arab Christian Egyptians.<sup>2</sup> In the Seventh century, C.E., the Arabs conquered Egypt, bringing with them Islam. The Muslim-Arab Egyptians control much of the administrative procedure of contemporary Egypt. In the last 20 years, a wave of Islamic fundamentalism has risen in Egypt, creating tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Egyptian Christians, who make up between 10 and 20 percent of the nation's population, look the same as their Muslim neighbors, and they wear the same clothes, eat the same food, and visit the same cafes and shops. Many Copts, however, complain of discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

**Violent Confrontations:**

The tension between the Christian and Muslim communities is still very high and has, at times, escalated into violent clashes. In 2000, a conflict between Muslims and Christians occurred in the village of Al-Kosheh.<sup>5</sup> The conflict escalated from a disagreement between a Christian shopkeeper and a Muslim customer, and quickly evolved into a violent dispute leaving 19 Christians and two Muslims were dead; 33 others were injured and 81 properties were destroyed.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights noted that the Al-Kosheh clash was only the fourth time (as of 2000) that Muslims and Christians fought in the last three decades. It also stated that what happened was not a social phenomenon, but not an accident either. The government failed to bring a successful case against those suspected of inciting the violence, and the country's highest court upheld the acquittal of 94 of 96 suspects charged with various crimes in this incident.<sup>7</sup>

In 2002, four people were injured when another clash between Muslims and Christians occurred over the ringing of church bells in the town of Minya, in Upper Egypt. After warning Christians there to keep the bells silent, Muslims attempted to burn down the

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of Religion.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopedia Coptica.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, Feb 10 2002

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, Feb 22 2002

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> CNN News, Jan 28, 2000

<sup>7</sup> State Dept. Report Egypt, 2004

church and five houses of Christians living in close proximity. A crowd of about 100 from both communities gathered and began to throw stones and fire rifles at each other.<sup>8</sup>

While full-fledged violence between Christians and Muslims happens sporadically, it gives evidence of the hostility that exists between the two communities.

Other abuses include not providing the legal means to assist converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to show their new religious status. Conversion is not forbidden by law, but authorities tend to arrest only converts to Christianity under the charge of falsifying documents when their identity cards have been changed.<sup>9</sup>

Occasional incidences of harassment are reported by converts from the police, but the government denies this as systematic, and emphasize that it is the actions of a few individuals, not a result of policy.<sup>10</sup>

The Egyptian Constitution allows for the freedom of belief and practice of religion, but the government sometimes restricts this right. In the area of religious abuses, the following discriminatory actions have been documented<sup>11</sup>:

- The government appoints and pays the salaries of Imams (Muslim leaders) but does not provide any funds for the building, repair, or funding of Christian churches.
- A decree issued by the Ottoman empire, in 1856, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build a place of worship remains part of the governments contemporary political policy.
- In 1976, President Mubarak issued a decree making the repair of all places of worship (including mosques) subject to the same civil construction code, but building requirements remain stricter for churches.
- Security officials can deny or delay permits to water and electricity supplies, depending on the attitude of the local administrative officials and the governor towards the church and their personal relationships with the church representatives.
- The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination of religion, but there are no Christians serving as governors, presidents or deans of public universities, they are underrepresented in Parliament, and they are rarely nominated by the Government as candidates for the National Democratic Party.

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<sup>8</sup> BBC News, 2002

<sup>9</sup> State Dept.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

- Under Shari'a law, which is practiced in the country, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women are not required to convert to marry Muslim males. Muslim women are not allowed to marry Christian men. Inheritance laws are based on Shari'a law as well. Under the interpretation in Egypt, Christian widows of Muslim males are not granted any rights of inheritance. Christian men are prohibited from marrying Muslim women by civil and religious laws. A civil marriage abroad is an option.
- The Constitution and the Civil and Penal Codes do not prohibit proselytizing but those accused of the act are usually harassed by police or arrested. In January, 2004, four Christians were arrested without charge when they were reportedly found carrying religious materials.

### **Coptic Demands<sup>12</sup>:**

Security and equality are the two elements most in demand by the Copts. Security encompasses proper adjudication of the law and prosecution of the perpetrators of violence against Copts. True religious freedom is also important to the Copts living in Egypt.

Copts want the abolishment of the Hamayouni decree, first established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Ottoman rule, which requires government permission to build or repair religious buildings. *Update: A recent decision was made by President Mubarak to relinquish his approval of Church construction and repair to the local governors. On the surface this appears to be progress, but subjecting the process to local politics could potentially make it more difficult to receive permission for building and repair.*

They are also seeking the removal of religious affiliation from national identity cards, the freedom to convert (i.e. the recognition of converts *to* Christianity), revision of educational curriculums to encourage students to embrace the diversity of ethnic and religious groups within Egypt, and an end to media discrimination and libel against Copts.

Copts feel that discrimination from government controlled media outlets, in obtaining jobs and promotions, school admissions (particularly to publicly funded institutions), in educational curricula (not including the Coptic culture and accomplishments in Egyptian history), airtime on state-owned television and radio outlets, and in access to the national Parliament exists and should be remedied.

Leadership Council for Human Rights  
 444 N. Capitol Street, NW #841  
 Washington, DC 20001  
 P: 202.638.0066  
 F: 202.638.4584

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<sup>12</sup> According to United States Copts Association