

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

Session 34

Egypt

Freedom of religion or belief

Submission by:



European Baptist Federation

The EBF was founded in 1949 to unite European Baptists as Europe emerged in the aftermath of WWII. Today the EBF is comprised of approximately 825,000 members in 61 member bodies representing nearly every country in Europe and Euro-Asia as well as five Baptist Unions in the Middle East. The EBF is one of the five regions that make up the Baptist World Alliance and serves as European representative for the BWA. The EBF is diverse in language, culture, and tradition but remains united in Baptist identity, evangelistic zeal, and a concern for human rights and religious freedom.

Summary Report:

1. Approximately 85-90% of Egypt’s population of 99 million are Sunni Muslim. Egypt is simultaneously home to 9.5 million Christians, the largest community of Christians in the Middle East. The majority are Coptic Orthodox Christians but the total population includes other Christian minorities such as Baptists, Anglican/Episcopalians, Armenian Apostolic, Maronite, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, Presbyterian, Brethren, Seventh-day Adventist and many others including a small number of Christian converts with an Islamic background.¹ Under the January 2014 constitution of the el-Sisi government, only Abrahamic religions are recognized as legitimate religions/forms of worship. The Baptist Convention of Egypt, member of the European Baptist Federation, is member of the Protestant Churches of Egypt, the recognized representative body to the Egyptian government. Egypt is also home to various small non-Abrahamic religious communities including Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists and Agnostics.² An important development since the 2014 UPR cycle is the implementation of the 2016 Church Construction Law which empowers regional officials to approve church buildings. Previously the approval of church permits was the domain of Egyptian security services.³ On the one hand, this represents a step towards regulatory parity with mosques, which are governed under a similar 2001 law on mosque building. On the other hand, this places approval for church building into the hands of local officials that are, especially in rural areas, more likely to discriminate against non-Muslims. Since 2016, only 53 of 5,340 applications from churches have been approved.⁴ Many of such applications have attracted the attention of local hard-liner Islamist groups. One such case is the closure of eight Coptic churches in Upper Egypt from 2016-2018 as a response to mob violence against them in protest of their application for legal recognition.⁵
2. Indeed, the greatest threat to religious minorities in Egypt remains mob and extralegal violence perpetrated by Islamic extremists of various stripes. The rates of attack are higher in rural areas where more extremist strains of Islam are more common. Open Doors, an organization documenting persecution of Christians, reports the following statistics on violence against Christians in Egypt for 2019:

Egypt	Reporting Period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked

¹ *Final WWL 2019 Country Dossier Egypt Level 3/ Embargo(Rep.)*. (2019). Open Doors.

² *Ibid*, 7.

³ Aboulenein, A., & Abdelleh, M. (2016, August 30). Egyptian parliament approves long-awaited church building law. *Reuters*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-politics-religion/egyptian-parliament-approves-long-awaited-church-building-law-idUSKCN1152KK>

⁴ *Tier 2 Egypt: USCIRF Annual Report 2018(Rep.)*. (2018). United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

⁵ Egypt: Muslim mobs force closure of eight Coptic churches seeking official recognition. (2018, August 29). *World Watch Monitor*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/08/egypt-muslim-mobs-force-closure-of-8-coptic-churches-seeking-official-recognition/>

WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 – 31 Oct 2018	17	54	17	25	20
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 – 31 Oct 2017	128	209	1	7	21

**Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.⁶*

***Table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures*

3. Egypt maintains anti-blasphemy laws under Article 98(f) of the Criminal code. Such blasphemy laws are in violation of Egypt’s international human rights commitments under Article 18 of the ICCPR protocol. Accusations of blasphemy motivate mob violence and intimidation of religious minorities, atheists and agnostics and often lead to their prosecution under Article 98(f). Blasphemy cases soared since the 2011 revolution in Egypt and have remained high under the current administration.⁷
4. Since the el-Sisi administration took power in 2013 it has positioned itself as a secular government and has made official overtures to recognize and improve the situation of Coptic and other Christian minorities within Egypt. However Christians, minority Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and others continue to face official discrimination in employment, health, education, and the legal system. Further they face the threat of violence at the hands of radical Islamists that in many cases act with impunity. Progress in FoRB for Christian communities has been made with the 2016 Church Construction Law, but the majority registration applications under the new law are rejected or remain unprocessed. Lastly, Article 98(f) of the Criminal code continues to criminalize blasphemy, in violation of article 18 of the ICCPR protocol ratified by Egypt. It is imperative that Egypt remove legal barriers to Egyptians full exercise of their freedom of religion and belief, as well as hold perpetrators of violence consistently accountable under the law. With the high levels of religious intolerance and discrimination, Egyptian society could also truly benefit from official educational initiatives addressing diversity, religious tolerance, interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding. The Egyptian government is in a good position to support and sponsor such initiatives.

UPR 2014:

⁶ *Final WWL 2019 Country Dossier Egypt Level 3/ Embargo(Rep.).* (2019). Open Doors.

⁷ Haddon, H. (2015, April 21). In Sisi's Egypt, Blasphemy is still a crime. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/21/in-sisi-egypt-blasphemy-is-still-a-crime/>

Sample of adopted UPR recommendations:

5. *Eliminate all legal provisions and policies which discriminate against adherents of other religions than Islam and adopt a unified law for places of worship. -Netherlands*
6. *Expedite the provision of all official documents, particularly identity documents to all members of its Baha'i community. – United States*
7. *Guarantee freedom of religion and belief to all groups and minorities, including in relevant legislation, without discrimination. -Finland*
8. *Redress laws and government practices that discriminate against members of religious minorities, and in particular urgently pass a unified law that makes construction and repair requirements equal for the places of worship of all religious groups. – United States*
9. *Undertake all necessary measures to guarantee the freedom of religion of all religious orientations, in particular the Copts, including the right to practice religion in public. - Germany*

Sample of rejected UPR recommendations:

10. *Immediately release all imprisoned journalists, prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders. -Norway*
11. *Eliminate legal and bureaucratic restrictions affecting an individual's right to choose his or her religion. – United States*
12. *Remove any categorization by religion on State documents including ID cards. -Canada*
13. *Strengthen protection of the rights of religious minorities, in particular the conditions for the exercise of freedom of worship and put an end to all impunity for violations of these rights. -Cape Verde*

UPR 2019 Suggested Recommendations

14. Expedite decisions and approvals of the 5,000+ applications for registration under the 2016 Church building law so that Christian communities can enjoy the benefits of official status
15. Review Article 98(f) of the criminal code in order to bring the law into compliance with Egypt's international commitments per article 18 of the ICCPR protocol.
16. Review the 2014 Constitution with a view to the constitutional understanding of religion, and take measures to recognize all religious faiths, including non-Abrahamic religions and religious minorities, under provisions for religious communities and freedom of religion.
17. Support educational initiatives in diversity, tolerance and peacebuilding. Engage in and provide opportunities for interreligious dialogue and understanding initiatives.
18. Strengthen protection of the rights of religious minorities, the conditions for the exercise of freedom of worship, and put an end to all impunity for violations of these rights