

**Testimony before The Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International
Organizations**

**“Human rights abuses in Egypt”
Monday 10 December 2013**

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Preamble

While this hearing was originally due to take place on 1 October 2013, it is providential that it has now been set for 10 December, the day proclaimed in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly as ‘Human Rights Day’. This day was chosen to commemorate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the tenets of which are at the core of this testimonial statement, and are the entitlement of every Egyptian and every member of our shared humanity.

Introduction

The uprising in January 2011 was expected to bring about change and offer new hope for Egypt. It saw citizens from all walks of life standing in unity in their call for reform, and this was seen as a turning point in their struggle towards a free and just Egypt; their experience in the years following the uprising however has revealed that this goal is a long way from realisation. The principles of freedom, equal citizenship and social justice must serve as the pillars of the current process of nation-building and reform, both constitutional and political.

In their contemporary history of the past decades, Christians in Egypt have been suffering persecution and marginalisation, even before the uprising. In its aftermath however, this suffering has intensified significantly.¹ The frequency in attacks on Christians and other religious minority groups, their communities and places of worship is increasingly disturbing. Carried out by radical elements in society, these attacks are not merely on individuals but on the Christian and minority presence in its entirety. Those intolerant to religious minorities are partly enabled by the breakdown in law and order and the growing culture of impunity that Egypt has witnessed in previous years. Moreover, the persecution of religious minorities over the past decades has not manifest itself solely in physical attacks, but has frequently been embedded in process and policy, then translated into dealings with citizens on unequal grounds, inevitably having resulted in greater division and marginalisation. It is not only Christians who suffer marginalisation, persecution and attacks, but other religious minorities such as Bahá’ís, Jews and Muslim minorities such as Sufi’s and Shiites.

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; *Did you know...Egypt*; 28 January 2013; <http://www.uscirf.gov/reports-and-briefs/spotlight/3922-did-you-knowegypt-january-28-2013.html>

It is pertinent that this hearing is scheduled to take place on 10 December,

This report, and any content or sentiment expressed in it, are by no means an attempt to discredit Egypt, which Egyptian Christians have proudly held as their indigenous homeland for over two thousand years, or undermine its current transformative process, but to input into safeguarding this process by shedding light on the inequalities that impact Christians as the largest numerical minority, and in turn other minorities, and thus potentially undermine that very process.

Historical perspective

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt is the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East and has a long history of persecution. The Church starts its calendar in the year 284 AD, marking the beginning of the rule of Emperor Diocletian, during which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, lost their lives for their Faith. The second strong wave of persecution then came with the Islamic conquest in the 7th century, during which Christians were given the choice between paying the *jizya* tax, conversion to Islam or death. Against this backdrop, non-Muslims have historically been given so-called *Dhimmi* status. While the term *Dhimmi* is no longer used, the socio-political inequality that has existed over the past decades implies that many minorities, including Christians, have felt that they have a lesser citizenship. Even throughout the 20th century, the pattern of discrimination and systematic persecution at the hands of both state and non-state actors continued to exist, and in recent decades, concurrent with the rising trend of Islamisation, there has been an increase in violent attacks against Christians. Under the Sadat and Mubarak eras, Egyptian Christians suffered many such attacks, including the massacre of 81 Christians in the Zawya al-Hamra neighbourhood in 1981,² the massacre of 21 Christians in Al Kosh in 2001,³ a drive-by shooting resulting in the death of six Christians leaving their church after prayer in Nag Hammadi in 2010⁴, and the death of 21 Christians on 1 January 2011 by a car bomb outside Saint Mark and Saint Peter church in Alexandria,⁵ as well as many other similar incidents.

More recently, an incident in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Minya evokes experiences of the persecution faced by Christians in the *Dhimmi* period centuries ago. In this incident, two men, Emad Damian and his cousin Medhat Damian, were killed by Islamists in the Assiut governorate for refusing to pay a *jizya* tax.⁶ In the current day and age, and in the context of the ongoing process of democratisation in Egypt, such an incident should be unthinkable, yet it is indicative of the reality lived by some Christians in certain parts of

² Egypt Independent; *Roots of religious violence lie in both state and society*, 13 September 2013:

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/roots-religious-violence-lie-both-state-and-society>

³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; *Christian minorities under attack: Egypt*, 20 January 2011;

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/01/20/christian-minorities-under-attack-egypt/25y3>

⁴ BBC News; *Egypt Copts killed in Christmas church attack*, 7 January 2010;

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8444851.stm>

⁵ BBC News; *Egypt bomb kills 21 at Alexandria Coptic church*, 1 January 2011;

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12101748>

⁶ Assyrian International News Agency; *Two Christians Murdered in Egypt for Refusing to Pay Jizya to Muslims*, 13 September 2013; <http://www.aina.org/news/20130913143703.htm>

Egypt on a daily basis; the reality that a radical fringe of society is opposed to their very presence.

2011 uprising and transitional period

As the years following the uprising have shown, the Christian community and other minority groups bear an even heavier burden in times of political instability and changes in leadership. Their suffering seems to increase significantly, extending beyond ongoing persecution on a daily basis.

In the transitional period after the first uprising of 2011, the situation for Christians in Egypt progressively worsened. Christians increasingly witnessed incidents involving the violation of their freedoms and faced intensified threats to their peace and security. Such incidents include the burning and demolition of, and attacks on, churches, the kidnapping of Christian girls and attacks on peaceful marches, resulting in the loss of many innocent lives. One of the most significant of these incidents is the death of 28 peaceful demonstrators at Maspero in October 2011,⁷ dubbed by the Coptic Orthodox Church and various advocacy organisations in the United Kingdom as Egypt's 'Bloody Sunday'.

The Morsi presidency

Since the initial wave of protests leading to the removal of former president Mubarak the Egyptian political landscape has undergone significant changes. The most important of these was the formation and increasing influence of Islamist parties, having newly found legitimacy after being outlawed for the largest part of their existence during previous regimes, and despite the fact that political parties based on religion were legally prohibited.

After having gained a strong presence in the November 2011 parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party nominated Mohammed Morsi as its candidate for the first, and deeply polarised, presidential elections in Egypt, which he won with a 0.7% majority. The view of many however is that during both parliamentary and presidential elections, the use of religious coercion was prevalent throughout the nation. Although Mohammed Morsi resigned from his position as Chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party immediately after the elections, he remained publically affiliated with the party throughout his presidency and catered almost exclusively to its sympathisers. He is on public record, on numerous occasions referring to them as 'his family and his clan'. Religion played a more prominent role than ever before in Egyptian politics, decision-making and citizenship during his presidency.

Under the rule of Mohammed Morsi, there was a general break-down in law and order. The low level of state commitment to ensuring protection and justice for its citizens further increased religious minorities' susceptibility to violent attacks at the hands of extremists. Not only Christians came under attack of radical elements of society. With increasing anti-Shiite

⁷ Amnesty UK; *Egyptian army must answer for 'bloodbath' at Coptic protest*; 12 October 2011; https://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?NewsID=19751

rhetoric relating to the conflict in Syria, four Egyptian Shiite Muslims who gathered to celebrate a religious feast were brutally killed by a mob in Cairo on 23 June 2013.⁸ During this and other similar incidents, security forces did not prevent violent and religiously motivated mob attacks, or their escalation, against individuals or property. Whether due to inability or unwillingness, state protection was not guaranteed.⁹

The basic civil, political and social rights of citizens, especially those adhering to beliefs or ideologies different from the ruling party, were under great threat during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi. Egyptian Christians and other minorities witnessed a significant increase in violations of their religious and civic freedoms. These aforementioned violations include the denial of peaceful worship and construction of sacred places, restrictions on the choice or expression of faith, and violent attacks resulting in loss of life, displacement and destruction of property. In an unprecedented incident on 7 April 2013, the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo was violently attacked by mobs. The Cathedral is located within the premises of the Patriarchate and headquarters of the Church and is therefore a symbolic presence of Christianity in the region. Security forces did not arrive in time to prevent the mob violence from escalating. When they eventually did arrive, police forces were seen to simply stand by and watch, and in cases even assist the attackers, visibly firing tear gas into groups of Christians gathered within the Cathedral precinct.

Efforts by secular and liberal elements in society during the Morsi presidency to draft an inclusive constitution were thwarted by Islamist pressures to implement *Sharia* law and push for a theocratic state. The result was a constitution, drafted by an Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly and decreed by Mohammed Morsi, which gravely inhibited the freedoms and violated the rights of those who held opposing religious or political views. The ambiguity of Islamic *Sharia* law interpretation during this time gave rise to a series of criminal blasphemy or 'defamation of religion' cases against non-Muslims or Muslims with moderate views opposed by radical Islamists. These cases are based on Article 98 (F) of the Egyptian Penal Code, which criminalises contempt for religion and has practically resulted in illegitimate, ungrounded accusations and legal action against political or ideological opponents of the dominant power.¹⁰ This so-called 'blasphemy law' only seems to have been working in one direction however, holding people to account when they have allegedly insulted Islamic religious symbols. One such example is of Alber Saber, an activist and blogger, who was arrested in September 2012 for sharing a film that was deemed insulting to Islam on his Facebook page and, under Article 98 (F), was eventually accused of publicly declaring himself an atheist.¹¹

The discontent of the Egyptian people during the twelve months of Mohammad Morsi's presidency sparked nationwide protests initially calling for early presidential elections, and

⁸ Human Rights Watch; Egypt: Lynching of Shia Follows Months of Hate Speech - Police Fail to Protect Muslim Minority; 27 June 2013; <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/27/egypt-lynching-shia-follows-months-hate-speech>

⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; *2013 Annual Report, Egypt*; [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf)

¹⁰ Freedom House; *Policing Belief, The impact of blasphemy laws on Human Rights*; October 2010 ; http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Policing_Belief_Full.pdf

¹¹ Human Rights Watch; *World Report 2013, Egypt*; <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/egypt>

once ignored, calling for him to step down. This was referred to by many as Egypt's 'second uprising' and had the support of the Egyptian military forces. Mohammed Morsi was removed on 3 July 2013, marking the beginning of yet another transitional phase, comprising constitutional reform and elections. A new constitutional committee was appointed under interim-president Adly Mansour.

Current transitional period

After the removal of Mohammed Morsi and sit-ins of protesters calling for his return were dispersed by the security forces, an unprecedented wave of violence erupted against Christians. They alone were set as scapegoats and erroneously blamed and accused of instigating or contributing to the violent dispersal of pro-Morsi demonstrators. These accusations subsequently led to the destruction, looting and burning of over one hundred churches and Christian properties across the nation in the space of only a few days.¹²

A view to the future

The principles of equal citizenship, social justice and freedom should all be reflected in the dealings of the state with its citizens and must be institutionalised into all aspects of governance. The process of legitimate constitutional reform will prove pivotal over the coming period as it is the key to ensuring that all Egyptians are viewed and treated equally before the state and its institutions. Egypt's legal reform agenda must be geared towards this notion of equal citizenship, meaning equal rights and equal accountability before the law. This development will not only prevent potential institutional discrimination, but set a clear precedent for those who have previously enjoyed impunity and benefited from exclusive policies. First and foremost, the implementation of equality before the law would entail dealing with citizens on the basis that they are Egyptian before being anything else; man or woman, young or old, secular or religious, Bahá'í, Christian or Muslim. This would in turn need the removal of the stipulation of one's religion on the statutory national identification cards. Finally, the model of reconciliation that is called for is one that must be built upon prior criminal acts being investigated and accordingly dealt with, and future ones being subject to a stringent rule of law; only then will Egypt be able to live true reconciliation and work towards a common future.

As the indigenous people of Egypt, with a great respect for the authenticity and independence of their homeland, in the past few months, Christians have once again proven themselves to be peaceful, law-abiding and participating citizens. In these actions they absolutely negated accusations of their reliance upon and loyalty to foreign powers or negatively-perceived domestic authorities.

In conclusion, Egyptian Christians respect the value and sanctity of the life of every Egyptian and empathise with families that have lost loved ones. They also take pride in their

¹² Coptic Orthodox Church UK and EU Media and Communications Office; *Christian churches, homes, properties, businesses and individuals attacked in Egypt from 14 August 2013 to date (22 August 2013); 23 August 2013;* <http://copticmediauk.com/2013/08/christian-churches-homes-properties.html>

indigenous homeland and support every effort and process that works towards creating a prosperous, safe and cohesive state, ensuring the formation of a constitution and legal system that protects the rights of every citizen while also holding him or her accountable before that same system.

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