

Country Profile

Egypt

Royal United Services Institute¹

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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¹ Several Egypt-researchers contributed to this profile. They have preferred to remain anonymous.

Total population: 99.4 million (2016)

Religious affiliation (percent)

Muslim	90
Christian	10
Other	<i>Data unavailable</i>

Source: Egypt Survey 2017, Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, Egyptian government. https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=7195&Year=23448 El Gergawi, Sherry. "Egypt military restoring churches destroyed following Morsi's ouster," Ahram Online. (2016.)

Role of Religion in State and Government

Egypt is officially a republican state with a predominately Sunni Muslim population and a small Orthodox Coptic Christian minority. It officially recognizes the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Islam is the official religion of the state and its religious jurisprudence is a source of legislation.

But the state is not subservient to Islam. The state is fundamentally underpinned by the strength and existence of the military establishment, whose powers are rooted in their access to material resources, and its international political alliances.

Only followers of recognized religions have the right to regulate affairs such as marriage and inheritance. Article 64 of the Constitution guarantees Egyptians freedom of belief and the right to establish places of worship and practice rituals, but it is not universally applied. Followers of non-Sunni Islam, Bahai's, atheists and other unrecognised religious groups do not have the option to seek financial support from the State and face various bureaucratic hurdles.

As the largest minority group, Egyptian Christians are the only group formally allowed to build places of worship other than Muslims, but they face various legal obstacles in doing so. This has been officially ameliorated in recent years, but obstacles remain.

The relationship between the State and religion in Egypt can be described as one of subservience: The State instrumentalizes religion when it deems that necessary to achieve political goals or maintain order. In times of peace and crisis, the State is focused on maintaining the minimum of communal harmony that is needed to avoid bloodshed. But it has demonstrated insufficient comparable interest in protecting vulnerable populations.

Effectively all religious institutions have little credibility because they have been perceived as co-opted by the State since 1952, so they cannot play roles outside those assigned to them.

Freedom of religion

As previously mentioned, article 64 gives Egyptians the right to subscribe to any faith Article 65 allows them to express these opinions and ideas through any means. These articles are not universally enforced, and unclear legal regulations allow state officials to brand speech or action as an attempt to “undermine public order” or “insult religion or state institutions”. It is under these types of provisions that arrests have been made in the past.

The Constitution does not touch upon the subject of conversions, but it is widely perceived that the state legally recognizes only conversions to Islam.

Diversity of rituals, practices, dress codes and food habits are largely visible in the public arena such as the marketplace, educational institutions, government offices and public gatherings. One exception is North Sinai, where extremist Islamist insurgents are waging a war on the State and also targeting Christians, driving hundreds of them to flee in recent years.

Many Christians in rural Egypt, however, do blend in often and reportedly evade harassment by avoiding noticeable displays of confessional identity. Acquiring a permit to build a church or attempting to license an already built church anywhere in Egypt is an expensive process that can be laborious. In Upper Egypt, real or imagined incidents of Christian infractions have previously sparked violence including church attacks.

Historically, religious minorities have generally been unable to successfully overturn restrictions on their freedoms in court. On the occasions when courts issued positive ruling in such cases, the executive branch did not always enforce these verdicts.

Today, mounting such a challenge comes with an additional layer of risk as the regime is on the defensive following the Arab Spring revolts. Thus, any objection to its actions from any group or individual, regardless of context, is perceived as an existential threat. This means that those who complain run the risk of harassment.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

Religious diversity currently faces two main threats: one from communal violence and one from organized, extremist Islamist terrorist groups, particularly the so-called “Islamic State” affiliates in Egypt.

Communal violence against Christians has been on the rise since 2013 when the military forcibly overthrew the Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, following widespread protests. Morsi’s supporters fixated on and inflated the role of the church in the move, focusing much of their anger on Coptic Egyptians. In the immediate aftermath of the forced dispersal of Morsi supporters about six weeks thereafter, over 70 churches were attacked nationwide.

This was followed by an uptick in violence in Upper Egypt where it has been reported that simple arguments, or a rumour about a Christian man having an affair with a Muslim woman, could end with several Christian homes and businesses burnt to the ground. This continues today.

On the organized level, so-called “Islamic State” affiliates in Egypt have bombed several churches full of people and assassinated priests, killing over 120 people. At least 100 Christian families had to flee the threat of similar violence from North Sinai in recent years.

In recent years religiously inspired radicalisation has also occasionally resulted in violence and harassment towards Muslims who practice Sufism or belong to other sects of Islam and are deemed to be heretical by extremists. The most noteworthy case is that of a mass shooting at a mosque affiliated to a Sufi order in North Sinai, which killed over 300 people in 2017.

Though aware of the threat of radicalisation, the state prioritises state security. Police often arrive late and have been reported to be reluctant to get involved in disputes.

The state’s campaign to combat terrorism has been accused of fuelling the crisis, as it has been exploited by extremist groups to recruit more people to their cause. Egyptian prisons have reportedly become a prime venue for recruitment. Egypt has also exported over the years many “foreign fighters” to Syria, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan, but there seems to be little evidence of them returning to radicalise more people in Egypt.

Islamist extremism has long been the main threat to diversity since the foundation of Israel in 1948 when officials pushed a narrative that Christians and Jews were working for Israel. Matters only got worse after President Gamal Abdel-Nasser banned the Muslim Brotherhood group, accusing them of an attempted assassination, and launched a crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamists.

Religious diversity governance assessment

Egypt's current framework does not include sufficient measures to ensure that religious minorities have an equal role in governance. However, Christian students are not required to attend the usual compulsory Islamic religious classes and have Bible classes instead. Christians are also allowed to establish their own educational institutions.

There are no mechanisms for communal power-sharing among communities or to ensure that non-Christian religious communities are recognized by the state. Articles 180 and 243 of the Constitution, which addresses the issue, state that there should be "appropriate representation of Christians" in parliament and municipal councils, without further elaboration. 36 seats in Egypt's 596-seat parliament are occupied by Christians, and they do not have communal political parties of their own. There are pro-government and small quasi-liberal parties that address some of their concerns, however.

Christians reportedly occupy few senior positions in government, and Christian groups complain they are generally only allowed to occupy lower positions in the judiciary and the security and defence sector.

Egypt also does not have a national body for minorities, but in 2013 it established a special body called "The Family House" which is staffed by Christian priests and Muslim clerics whose job is to informally address the social impact of bigotry. In practice, however, it has hitherto failed to do so.

Complaints of discrimination or violence generally fall to the police or parliament whose track records when it comes to these matters have been reportedly found wanting. Both institutions seldom conduct serious and transparent investigations into discrimination or hold aggressors suitably accountable. Officials have been reported to pressure people who come forward with complaints to drop them.

This response is not limited to complaints related to sectarianism. Both the Egyptian House of Representative and the security agencies are often accused of being neglectful of matters outside of business or cracking down on dissent.

Since 2013, the state's official Islamic institutions, Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta, have launched several initiatives, mostly online, to combat radicalisation. They received little traction, partly because they lacked imagination and resources, but also because both bodies lost much of their credibility due to their perceived co-option by the state.

Even healthy and established democracies need to continuously renew their efforts to protect religious minorities from discrimination, harassment and violence. It is thus little surprise that Egypt with its primary interest in closing the space for political dissent and attracting business, has not done sufficiently well in this regard.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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