

VIOLENCE AGAINST COPTS IN EGYPT

JASON BROWNLEE

The Egyptian Orthodox Christian community—the Copts—has been the target of violence and discrimination since the 1970s and especially following the revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian state has done little to remedy the situation and has at times enabled the conflict between Muslims and Christians. Achieving religious freedom and equality depends on building state institutions that can guarantee all citizens' constitutional rights.

The Conflict

- Regime-church relations deteriorated in the 1970s under President Anwar Sadat, who embraced Islam and Islamists as a counterweight to the left.
- Churches are flash points for anti-Coptic attacks. The construction and renovation of churches is a highly political process in Egypt that has historically required presidential approval to proceed.
- When Copts are physically attacked, the army and police frequently do not intervene to ensure public safety, enabling the spread of assaults. On occasion, such as an incident at the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (Maspero) in October 2011, security personnel have even used lethal violence against unarmed Copts.
- While attacks by Muslims on Copts have a sectarian element, confessional differences are not the primary source of tension. Egypt's outdated laws and authoritarian institutions have made Copts a target of social conflict.

Recommendations for the Egyptian Government

Broaden the political transition process to include a wider range of participants. Appointment of Coptic elites to ministerial posts or to the subset of unelected parliamentary seats may strengthen the voice of Christians in government and remedy institutional shortcomings. But this does not do away with the need to address inequality in the rest of the country.

Undertake security reforms that put police in the service of local communities. A relic of authoritarian rule, the police currently serve the Egyptian state instead of the Egyptian people. Police should protect all Egyptian citizens, including the Copts, not just the interests of the state.

Investigate the failure of security forces to defend churches and other sites targeted because of their connection to Coptic communities. Prosecution of assailants and broader policy changes must be informed by a careful evaluation of recent events, including the negligence of security officials at all levels to provide basic security for Egyptian citizens of all faiths.

Revisit the recommendations of the al-Utayfi Committee's report. Released after a wave of sectarian clashes in 1971–1972, the report recommended that the government clarify procedures for church construction. Passing a unified law on construction of houses of worship and enforcing it can help alleviate a recurrent source of conflict.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Brownlee, an associate professor of Government and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of two books and dozens of articles on comparative politics, Middle Eastern politics, and U.S. foreign policy.

CONTACT

Christopher Dockrey
Government Affairs Manager
+1 202 939-2307
cdockrey@ceip.org

Clara Hogan
Media Manager
+1 202 939-2241
chogan@ceip.org

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2013 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

CarnegieEndowment.org



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/
CarnegieEndowment