

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sent the following letter on July 19, 2012:

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), I wish to express our support for the comments you made during your recent visit to Egypt urging the civilian government to uphold universal values and respect the rights of all Egyptian citizens, including women and religious minorities. There is much political uncertainty ahead in Egypt. It is vital that the U.S. government, at the highest levels, encourage the new Egyptian government to undertake reforms to improve conditions for freedom of religion or belief.

Since Hosni Mubarak was ousted from power in February 2011, Egypt has seen both backsliding and progress during its democratic transition, and conditions for religious freedom are no exception.

Longstanding and serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations continue, including against members of religious minorities and disfavored Muslims. Violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians increased significantly and the transitional government has failed to protect religious minorities from violent attacks at a time when minority communities have been increasingly vulnerable. This high level of violence and the failure to convict those responsible has fostered a climate of impunity, making further violence more likely. Last year, military and security forces used excessive force and live ammunition, particularly during the October 2011 Maspero violence, targeting Coptic Christian and Muslim demonstrators and places of worship resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries. The government also continues to prosecute, convict, and impose prison terms on Egyptian citizens charged with blasphemy, impacting a diverse group of Egyptians, including dissident Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadis, and Quranists as well as Christians.

For Christian groups, government permission is required to build a new church or repair an existing one, and the approval process is time-consuming and inflexible. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces repeatedly pledged to issue a new law that would apply equally to all religious groups' places of worship, but it was never adopted. In addition, the government has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media. Implementation of previous court rulings – related to granting official identity documents to Baha'is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for converts to Christianity – has seen some progress but continues to lag, particularly for Baha'is. Furthermore, presidential decrees issued more than 50 years ago remain in place banning Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their faith.

During the transition, there also have been some positive developments for religious freedom. In May 2011, the government began to re-open more than 50 churches that had been closed, in some cases for years. In the aftermath of the October Maspero violence, the government took steps to reduce discrimination in the penal code. In July 2011, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that reconverts to Christianity would be permitted to obtain new national identity documents indicating their Christian faith without having to be listed as former Muslims. Finally,

over the past year, the Grand Sheikh at Al-Azhar spearheaded a number of initiatives and published statements expressing support for some aspects of freedom of religion or belief in Egypt.

The success of Egypt's democratic transition hinges on full respect for the rule of law and compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief. During this important period of change, the U.S. government should work with the new Egyptian government to ensure that a portion of military assistance is used to help the Egyptian police assess security needs and develop and implement an effective plan for dedicated police protection for religious minority communities and their places of worship. The U.S. government also should press the new civilian government to undertake a series of reforms, including repealing blasphemy laws in Egypt's penal code, repealing decrees banning religious minority faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing a unified law for the construction and repair of all religious groups' places of worship. In addition, the United States should press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence and to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not placed under the jurisdiction of a restructured domestic security agency. Finally, the U.S. government should encourage the Egyptian government to include robust protections for freedom of religion or belief in a new constitution.

Madam Secretary, just over a year ago, President Obama committed to prioritizing support for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in U.S. policy toward the Middle East and North Africa: As he stated, "Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest...it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal." We wholeheartedly endorse that view and with Egypt at such a critical juncture in its democratic transition, we strongly encourage the Administration to implement the concrete actions suggested above.

We thank you for your consideration of these recommendations and stand ready to assist in

any way.

Sincerely,

[Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

Chair

cc: Beth Jones, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Steve Pomper, Acting Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs, National Security Council