

## May 17, 2005: Egypt: Show the way to democracy

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges President George W. Bush, when he meets tomorrow with Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, to repeat his message in his 2005 State of the Union Address, urging Egypt to "show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." In its just-released 2005 Annual Report, the Commission expressed serious concern about ongoing violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Egypt, including widespread problems of discrimination and intolerance against members of minority Muslim, Christian, and other religious communities. These concerns have led the Commission to include Egypt on its Watch List again. There is also a growing sense that Islamic extremism is advancing in Egypt with detrimental effects on the prospects for democratic reform, religious tolerance, and the rights of women and girls. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood has used the group's ideological roots as a platform to engage in terrorist activity in the past, and some Islamists persist in advocating violence. The United States has a close relationship with Egypt, including cooperation on regional stability and the war against terrorism. With nearly \$2 billion in economic and security assistance, Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world. USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal said, "The Commission views the strength of the bilateral relationship and repeated calls for reform by the United States as an opportunity for the two countries to increase cooperation significantly to advance protection for the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights as an important aspect of U.S. policy to promote freedom and democracy in the greater Middle East." The Commission has made specific recommendations for U.S. policy. The U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to: Establish a timetable and specific steps to be taken to make progress on political and legal reforms. If the deadlines are met in a timely manner, the U.S. government should consider, within the boundaries of its overall aid to Egypt, providing economic assistance to areas where significant progress had been made. If deadlines are not met, the United States should reconsider the dimensions and direction of its economic assistance; Shift de facto responsibility from religious affairs from the state security services, with the exception of cases involving violence, and establish an entity or position (e.g., an ombudsman) in the office of the President to oversee religious affairs in Egypt; Allow full access to the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating Section 98 (f) of the Penal Code, which "prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife," instead of having those cases heard by the State Security Courts; Repeal the 19th century, Ottoman-era Hamayouni Decree - which requires non-Muslims to obtain a Presidential decree to build a new place of worship - and ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient criteria and procedures for construction and maintenance; More actively investigate societal violence against any individuals or groups on the basis of their religion, particularly the targeting of Coptic Orthodox Christians, to bring those responsible for such violence to justice, and to ensure compensation for those targeted; Take all appropriate steps to prevent and punish acts of anti-Semitism, including condemnation of anti-Semitic acts, and, while vigorously protecting freedom of expression, counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities; and Repeal a 1960 presidential decree banning the Baha'i community from practicing their faith. More extensive recommendations for U.S. policy are in a policy brief on Egypt that the Commission will release at a June 1 event at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. The Commission traveled to Egypt in the summer of 2004 to discuss with Egyptians the nation's efforts to advance the right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights in accordance with the international human rights instruments to which Egypt is a party.

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