

For Your Information

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The following op-ed, *Swett: Egyptian Tolerance Is Democracy Barometer, The Treatment of Coptic Christians and Other Religious Minorities Poses a Cause for Concern*, appeared in Roll Call on July 16, 2012.

Since its inception almost 15 years ago, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which I serve, has been deeply concerned about conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Egypt.

Among its concerns is the deteriorating status of Egypt's religious minority communities, including its population of Coptic Christians.

It began when President Hosni Mubarak was still in power; it continues today under the new government. How Egypt treats this challenge going forward may be a telling indicator of its commitment to a full transition to democracy.

From the evidence we've seen, the central problem Copts face remains of impunity. Simply stated, for decades, Egypt's government has fostered a climate conducive to acts of violence against its Coptic citizens, as well as members of other minority communities.

It has done so in at least two ways.

First, Cairo's long history of restrictive laws and policies — from blasphemy codes to an emergency law to open, across-the-board discrimination — has marginalized religious minorities and led to violent words and deeds by intolerant individuals as well as by radical religious groups.

Second, the government's continued failure to protect innocent individuals from these attacks and to convict those responsible has served to encourage further assaults.

For years, Mubarak's government tolerated widespread discrimination against religious minorities and disfavored religious groups, from dissident Sunni and Shiite Muslims to Baha'is, as well as Copts and other Christians, while allowing state-controlled media and state-funded mosques to deliver incendiary messages against them.

After Mubarak's departure, a breakdown in security and a rise in sectarian violence made 2011 one of the worst years for Copts and other minorities. Violent sectarian attacks killed about 100 people, surpassing the death toll of the previous 10 years combined. As during the Mubarak regime, Copts were the primary target, and most of the perpetrators still have not been brought to justice.

Last October, Egypt's state media falsely accused Copts of attacking the military when Muslim and Christian protesters marched toward the state television station.

After the state media's call on civilians to counter this supposed threat, on Oct. 9, armed men attacked peaceful demonstrators in downtown Cairo, killing at least 26 of them, most of them Copts, while injuring more than 300.

In response to the violence, Egypt's military used live ammunition and also deployed armored vehicles that deliberately crushed and killed at least 12 protesters.

This is not to say there has been no progress since the end of the Mubarak regime.

To be sure, there have been a number of hopeful developments.

Last year, Al-Azhar University published statements expressing support for freedom of religion or belief. In May 2011, the government began to reopen more than 50 churches that had been closed, in some cases for years. Last July, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that reconverts to Christianity could obtain new national identity documents indicating their Christianity but not their former Muslim faith. After the October violence, the transitional government took steps to reduce discrimination in Egypt's Penal Code.

Yet despite such evidence of progress, the bottom line is this:

Copts need to be protected, Copts aren't being protected, and Copts must be protected, along with every other member of Egyptian society. They have a right to order their lives and practice their beliefs in dignity and peace.

So long as the problem exists, we will continue to highlight it and recommend that the U.S. government take strong action in support of religious freedom.

First, the United States should press Egypt's government to reverse long-standing policy by repealing discriminatory decrees against religious minorities, removing religion from official identity documents, abolishing the blasphemy codes and passing a unified law for the construction and repair of places of worship.

Second, Washington should urge Cairo to prosecute government-funded clerics, government officials or any other individuals who incite violence, while disciplining or dismissing government-funded clerics who fan the flames of intolerance and hatred.

Third, it should increase pressure on Egypt to bring to justice those who have committed violence against fellow Egyptians on account of their religion.

Fourth, the U.S. government should press the Egyptians to include robust protections for

freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief in a new constitution.

Fifth, Congress should require the Departments of State and Defense to report every 90 days on the Egyptian government's progress pertaining to religious freedom and related rights.

Sixth, until genuine progress occurs, USCIRF renews its call for the United States to designate Egypt a "country of particular concern" as one of the world's most serious religious freedom abusers.

Finally, if Egypt demonstrates a commitment to progress on freedom of religion and related rights, the United States should ensure that a portion of its military aid to Egypt be used to help Egypt's police improve protection for religious minorities and their places of worship.

Today, as Egypt confronts the rigors of democratic transition, will it embrace the rights of Copts and other religious minorities and commit to a truly democratic future, characterized by respect for rule of law and the full panoply of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion?

The world awaits an answer.

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