



Strengthening National Unity: Religious Freedom and Diversity In Egypt

Since taking office in 2014, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi has made promoting greater religious tolerance and strengthening unity amongst Egyptians a cornerstone of his agenda. In 2015, the president made history when he became the first Egyptian head of state to attend Christmas mass at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. In 2016, while attending Christmas mass again at the same location, President El Sisi vowed to rebuild and restore all churches that had been damaged by acts of terrorism on 56 churches and other Christian properties by the operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in summer 2013. In addition to legislative action and national directives, the last six years have yielded significant gains for the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance by both government and religious communities.



President El-Sisi at a Coptic Christmas service

National Legislation and Initiatives Enhancing Religious Freedom and Tolerance

- ▶ The **three major Christian Churches in Egypt** were represented in the drafting of the **2014 Egyptian constitution** through the Committee of Fifty.
- ▶ The **constitution includes principles ensuring peaceful coexistence and guaranteeing freedom of religion**, including citizenship (Art. 53), rule of law (Art. 94) and freedom of religion and the construction of places of worship (Art. 64). Furthermore, the constitution foresees application of these rules that respect of each religious sect in personal status affairs (Art. 3).
- ▶ The constitution prescribes **equitable representation for Christians in the House of Representatives** in its first elections, resulting in 39 Christian deputies. An April 2019 referendum made this stipulation permanent.
- ▶ A 2017 presidential decree established the **National Council for Combating Terrorism and Extremism**. This body is headed by the President with members including the Prime Minister, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, the Pope of the Orthodox Coptic Church, the Minister of Defense, Members of Parliament, and other prominent figures.
- ▶ A 2016 law on church construction was adapted to **facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches** (see p. 2).
- ▶ The Egyptian government, through a national project, **promotes the journey of the Holy Family from historical Palestine throughout Egypt**. In 2017, Pope Francis recognized the journey as an official Christian pilgrimage.
- ▶ A **Supreme National Committee to promote religious tolerance** was formed by presidential decree in 2018 to combat sectarian conflict by developing awareness campaigns and other strategies.
- ▶ In 2020, a law was passed establishing **endowment authorities for Catholic and Anglican churches**.
- ▶ **Meritocracy in the civil service leads Christians to senior government positions**. One minister, two governors, one deputy minister, several female judges, and top diplomats and Ambassadors, and 39 members of parliament are Christian.
- ▶ **The denigration of religions is a criminal act**. These acts have been criminalized to ensure public safety as well as preserve national harmony. This stipulation applies not only for Islam, but for Christianity and Judaism as well.
- ▶ **Administrative courts offer flexibility for Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses**. The Egyptian constitution guarantees the right to adopt a religion of one's choosing and stipulates that the State shall construct places of worship for the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, this does not include Baha'is nor Jehovah's Witnesses. However, the Council of State, Egypt's administrative court system, issued a 2009 verdict permitting Baha'is to refrain from proclaiming any specific faith in identification documents.



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Church and synagogue restorations have been prioritized. Egypt has undertaken significant efforts to restore and license Christian churches as well as strengthen Jewish community infrastructure.

In August 2016, Egypt's House of Representatives passed a law helping facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches. The law was passed by a two-thirds majority and supported by the leaders of Egypt's Coptic, Catholic and Anglican churches. The legislation delegates the power of issuing permits to Governors and sets up an administrative committee to license religious services facilities. The law also eliminated many of the bureaucratic and legislative obstacles that previously delayed progress. The administrative committee has licensed over 1,800 churches to-date.

Making good on his 2016 promise, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi oversaw the restoration and rebuilding of 55 houses of worship damaged or destroyed by acts of terrorism in the summer of 2013. The multi-phase effort, launched in 2014, is almost halfway complete; 29 more religious facilities are to be fully restored in the coming months.

In January 2020, renovation of the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, one of the oldest and most cherished synagogues in the Middle East, was completed. In partnership with Tipat Halav, a Jewish welfare and historical organization, and U.S. Jewish organizations, Egypt's government invested over \$6 million dollars in the renovation. The government has also worked to restore Jewish cemeteries in Egypt, including the Fustat cemetery.

Religious communities have launched initiatives aimed at combating extremism and promoting religious tolerance. The Al-Azhar Observatory for Takfiri Fatwas was established in 2015. Two years later, the Al-Azhar Observatory organized the Citizenship and Coexistence Conference. Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church have also launched the "Egyptian Family Home" initiative, a cultural communications campaign to facilitate religious tolerance.

Customary Councils prevent litigation and facilitate conflict resolution. Customary Councils exist in local communities in remote areas of the country. Rather than resorting to lengthy litigation, which is also difficult in remote areas, these fora facilitate resolutions between individuals. These councils are not substitutes for the courts in criminal cases.



The Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria

Teaching Religious Freedom and Tolerance

Government Initiatives

The Ministry of Education has created a joint committee of instructors of Islamic and Christian studies to revise Islamic and Christian educational curricula taught at public schools. Their mandate is to mainstream doctrines that promote tolerance, mutual understanding and co-existence. The Ministry, in collaboration with Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, also holds seminars to discuss issues related to combating extremism and to sensitize students on common values between people of different religions. The Ministry of Education has also launched initiatives such as "Diversity without Disputes" and "My Values, My Beacon" to combat discrimination and intolerance as well as promote social cohesion and the rule of law.

In the Public Education System

Public educational curricula are rooted in the main aspects of Egyptian identity: tolerance; perseverance and openness; and affirming the necessity of national cohesion. Ethics has been introduced as an educational topic for Muslim and Christian pre-schoolers. Since the 2018-2019 academic year, all public elementary schools must incorporate principles of human rights in their curricula, and higher education institutions must include the topic "Human Rights and Combating Corruption" in their curricula.

In the Al-Azhar Education System

Al-Azhar educational curricula now include content on human rights and religious tolerance. A new curriculum for primary schools focuses on the principle of citizenship and teaches the relationship between Muslims and Christians. In secondary schools, the component "Citizenship and Human Rights" has been added to encourage religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.