

CSW Egypt Assignment, August 2018

CSW's Africa and Middle East (AME) Team conducted a fact-finding visit to Egypt from 9 to 15 August 2018, during which they met with church leaders, civil society and human rights activists, youth activists and diplomats.

Purpose of the Visit

The aim of the visit was to develop a better understanding of the current political and socio-economic situation and its impact on human rights generally, and on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in particular. The team also wanted to explore the possibilities of organising focused training in the areas of FoRB, advocacy, media and strategic communication without jeopardising the wellbeing of local partners, given the government's crackdown on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights activities. In addition, the assignment provided an opportunity to meet with CSW's existing network of contacts and establish new ones.

Socio-political and religious context

Since the revolution of 25 January 2011, the human rights situation in Egypt has progressively worsened against a backdrop of rising terror attacks throughout the country. The threat of terrorism is largely concentrated in the Sinai Peninsula, where the government is engaged in counterinsurgency operations against terror groups including Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis, an affiliate of Islamic State (IS, Daesh). This terrorist threat regularly claims the lives of police personnel, army officers and civilians in this area, and often entails deadly hit-and-run attacks outside of it.

The special measures that have been introduced in the name of counter-terrorism have occasioned a grave deterioration in the human rights climate, including restrictions on FoRB, freedom of association and freedom of expression. The repression of human rights has included a crackdown on civil society, with NGOs and human rights defenders experiencing what some Egyptian activists, journalists and analysts have described as the worst assault in history. At the time of the visit the NGO law was not being implemented in its current form, neither is it being rescinded, leaving civil society organisations in a form of limbo.

A prominent evangelical figure informed CSW that many Egyptian Christians held the former president, Mohamed Morsi, and his followers responsible for violence and attacks against their churches and clergy, which intensified when militant Islamists went underground after Morsi was overthrown. 2017 saw an increase in attacks on Christians, including the fatal stabbing of a priest in Cairo in October, the killing in May of 28 pilgrims traveling to a monastery near the city of Minya, and Palm Sunday bombings at churches in Alexandria and in Tanta that killed 44 people in April. Furthermore, the murder of seven Christians in El Arish by the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate in February 2017 resulted in the mass exodus of hundreds of Christians from the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula.

Issues related to discrimination and the building or renovation of churches remain the main causes of sectarian tension in Egypt. During the last week of August 2018, CSW reported on attacks in three separate villages in Upper Egypt sparked by rumours that local Christians were attempting to transform buildings into churches. The reported abduction of Christian girls is another source of tension.

The re-election of President Sisi in March 2018 has intensified the debate within Egyptian society, and the Christian community in particular, about the president's policies and plans to tackle terrorism, extremism, sectarianism, corruption and inflation. Many Christians believe that he is the right person to rule Egypt at this moment. For example, the Coptic Pope Tawadros II and several Christian leaders from other denominations have announced their backing of President Sisi on several occasions. A distinguished Christian figure told CSW that they support Sisi because "he genuinely cares about Christians, their lives and their rights. He has been promoting an inclusive national identity and changing how the society perceives and treats Christians. He also gave licenses to many churches and allowed them to operate." Another church-based contact pointed out that, in 2016, Parliament approved a law that aimed to make the process of building and restoring churches much easier. The government also granted approval for 53 churches and service buildings to carry out religious rituals. This contact proceeded to inform CSW that:

'Egypt needs a strong leader who can make brave decisions, reforming the economy requires unpopular measures. The Egyptian society is not ready for a Western-style democracy and therefore there will always be a compromise between security and stability on one hand and human rights in the other. Concepts of democracy and human rights should not be seen from a Western perspective.'

The contact, who had been sceptical during previous visits, added: "In general, I am encouraged about Egypt today in spite of the many challenges, as there is hope on the horizon." They pointed out that the president was putting in place economic reforms that were long overdue and that were essential to return Egypt to being the prosperous market economy that it was before the late President Nasser instituted unsustainable subsidies that led to a loss of initiative. "You can't have a viable economy and live beyond your means. There is no alternative to removing subsidies." They acknowledge that life was more expensive, especially for the poor, and that "no-one wants to tighten their belt." However, "this generation has to sacrifice for the next generation to survive."

While President Sisi is viewed by many Egyptian Christians as having delivered them from the Muslim Brotherhood, not all Christians support him, and many only voted for him due to the lack of alternatives. One female university student said: "our generation started a revolution without considering the right steps, suddenly we were facing problems, like terrorism and the Muslim Brotherhood. We are voting for Sisi because he is our only option – at least he accepts Christians so he is better than the Muslim Brotherhood."

Government disregard for human rights

The AME team met with a senior representative of one of the few human rights organisations still working in Egypt, who raised serious concerns about the government's flagrant disregard for human rights, which they believe has led the country into one of its worst rights and political crises in decades. Many human rights organisations monitoring Egypt have documented numerous violations, including travel bans and repressive legislations targeting NGOs. Restrictions have also been placed on the ability NGOs have to register, work or obtain funding, and a number of prominent human rights defenders have been arrested and/or prevented from travelling.

There has been a rise in defamation cases with Christians and Atheists and Muslims being targeted. The team was informed of a Christian who had become an atheist and had started a Facebook page under a different name. The security services sent him a message with an offer of employment from a company and arrested him when he turned up for a meeting. He was subsequently jailed for eight months.

The team was also informed of the arrests of Ahmadiyya and Shi'a adherents, and of severe human rights abuses by the armed and security forces in North Sinai, including the torture of detainees and extrajudicial killings.

The representative also raised concerns about the authorities' continuous use of reconciliation sessions to resolve sectarian conflicts in Upper Egypt, rather than punishing perpetrators of this violence. These sessions generally deprive victims of true justice, preventing them from seeking restitution in court, and reifying a culture of impunity. Moreover, for the most part security agents are still unwilling to uphold the right of religious minorities to FoRB, and in several instances, have forced Christian communities to close churches, ostensibly to save them from danger.

While the current quota of 28 Coptic members of parliament is encouraging, the downside is that they have to be cleared by state security. Consequently, during the last three sectarian incidents Christian parliamentarians did and said nothing in support of the affected communities.

On a positive note, inciting speech from officials has lessened. In another positive development articulated by a different contact, while the maltreatment of converts to Christianity from Muslim backgrounds continues unabated in rural areas in particular, the government is now less inclined to interfere in these cases. In the past converts would receive jail terms. Now they remain free as long as they are not deemed to pose a security risk.

The NGO representative expressed a degree of sympathy with the president: "He wants something but doesn't know what, or how to do it." Nevertheless, it is vital that his government recognises and enacts international human rights standards.

With regard to abductions, AME was informed that while they do indeed occur and are regularly practiced by the Salafi movement, not all cases involve abduction. In some

instances, and particularly in areas where the Christian community is severely oppressed, some girls feel they will improve their lives by converting.

The representative also stated that the clergy benefits from their relationship with the state. However, the clergy in Cairo has a different mentality to the clergy in Minya, where more violations occur. Moreover, the reason sectarian tensions break out more frequently in Minya is because Christians constitute 30-35% of the population and are therefore more concerned about securing their rights.

Future Action:

Given the prevailing political climate, CSW will continue to work collaboratively with local partners and explore the most discreet and effective ways of providing joint training for religious leaders on FoRB.

Discrimination at local level

Several Coptic activists and human rights researchers expressed grave concerns about the continuing discrimination experienced by religious minorities in work places and in educational and military institutions, despite the efforts of President Sisi and higher-level government officials to address this ongoing problem. They told the team that non-Muslims continue to be viewed as second-class citizens within wider society and lower-level administration. For example, Christians are dissuaded from applying for or training in fields such as political science, obstetrics and gynecology at university. What is more, students applying to study at Cairo University are requested to state their religion and sect in their application forms. This has led to many Christian, Shi'a and Nubian students being rejected. Even when some students complained and had their applications approved by the University's president, they were intimidated and treated unfairly by some lecturers and other university staff. The spread of antisemitism and conspiracy theories within the education system was also repeatedly mentioned by many of CSW's interlocutors.

A foreign journalist told CSW there is a gulf between statements from the national leadership regarding the Christian community, and actions at a local level:

'You hear the president speaking about Christians with a lot of respect and sympathy. He was the first Egyptian president to visit St. Mark's Cathedral on Coptic Christmas day in 2015. It looks like the state is supporting the church and the Christian community, and doing everything it can to improve the situation, but then you have the local authorities in villages and towns, police, judges and business owners and it is obvious that many of them are infected with a rejection of Christianity. You see this in daily practices not usually violence, but discrimination: Christians were overlooked for jobs or promotion, university students were given bad grades or failed, schoolchildren were made to sit at the back of the class, shop owners were boycotted and hospital patients were not given proper treatment. There is only a minority of violent extremists, but the culture in Egypt cherishes the perception that Christians are infidels.'

Meeting at St Mark's Cathedral

The team also visited St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo and met with the Director of the Papal Office for Relations and Projects. The director informed the team of Pope Tawadros' vision to increase the church's involvement in providing good-quality education and health services to the public, regardless of their religion. "Good education is the key to a dignified life".

Pope Tawadros believes in the importance of having more schools that do not merely offer the new generation knowledge, but also provide a modern and enlightened education that reflects the Church's interest in serving the community, especially in the fields of health and education. This vision re-establishes the Coptic Church's role in re-designing the Egyptian society, a role that is integral to bridging gaps between different sectors in Egypt. Five schools have been completed and three are under construction. There is also one staffed nursing school, one completed hospital and three additional hospitals under construction. The majority of students at the schools are Muslim, and there have been requests from several governors for schools and hospitals to be constructed in their areas. However, the pace of construction is dependent on donations received from Coptic communities worldwide.

The director also gave an overview of the Church's programme that supports women through income generating projects. Prior to this programme widows would receive cash in hand, which was not sustainable and did not enhance their dignity. Under the programme women are assisted with sewing machines and embroidery – underwear made by those in this project is now being exported – and opening small kiosks.

The director also gave the team an overview of the historic contributions the Coptic Church has made to the promotion of an inclusive national identity and dialogue about peace and development. The director highlighted the Pope's commitment to the promotion of national unity by engaging positively with the State and with Al-Azhar: "the Family House is a project established by the Coptic Church and Al-Azhar University, carrying out a number of national programmes."

Future Action:

The team also discussed ideas about further cooperation with the Papal office, which offered to facilitate any projects that CSW intends to implement in Egypt in the future. Potential programmes will be discussed in further details during CSW's next visit. There is a possibility of acting in tandem with CSW Nigeria, which also has an income generating programme for widows.

Division within the Coptic Orthodox Church

While visiting the Papal Office, the team offered condolences for the loss of Bishop Anba Epiphanius, the 64 year-old abbot of St. Macarius Monastery who was murdered on 29 July 2018. As a theologian, Bishop Epiphanius was respected for his Arabic translations of early Christian sources written in ancient Greek and in the pre-Islamic Coptic language. He had also been Pope Tawadros II's point person in efforts to reconcile the Coptic Orthodox

Church with the Vatican. Pope Tawadros II and Pope Francis had jointly explored steps towards mutual recognition of baptism rituals, pilgrimage sites and even reconciling liturgical calendars.

The murder of Bishop Epiphanius highlighted the strains over ecumenism within the Coptic Orthodox Church. Bishop Epiphanius was perceived as posing a threat by the traditionalists after he used manuscripts from St. Macarius Monastery to prove that the Egyptian Church did not re-baptise Catholics until the 19th century. Four months before he was murdered, hard-line monks and other traditionalists began to criticise the Bishop for saying the re-baptism requirement was a relic of competition between the Roman and Egyptian Orthodox churches that only began when European Catholic missionaries arrived in the 1800s. In court filings submitted on 3 September 2018, Alexandria's public prosecutor alleged that the monks had murdered Bishop Epiphanius due to "ideological and financial disagreements."

In the immediate aftermath of the murder, Pope Tawadros II ordered monks to deactivate all social media accounts. Many traditionalists who opposed reformists had expressed this hostility on the Facebook page of the "Association of Faith Protectors", a group that emerged in opposition to Pope Tawadros' reforms. The group encouraged online trolls to attack, harass and accuse the Pope and his allies of heresy.

A senior Catholic news producer working for the national TV told CSW that "Bishops in Upper Egypt who find local Catholic churches attempting to proselytise among the Coptic Orthodox community in the countryside tend to have a different view of this issue than Bishops who live in the West"; the former tend to be more uneasy about these efforts than the latter. "It's vital that Pope Tawadros seeks unity, but the proselytising issue is making it difficult to reach a mutual recognition of sacraments and the calendar."

Meetings with Coptic Orthodox Youth and Journalist

The AME team met with young Coptic Orthodox activists, university students and members of the Maspero Youth Union, who all expressed concerns about the relationship between the Church and the State, as well as about the tensions and divisions within the Coptic Orthodox Church.

A Coptic university student and a journalist specialising in FoRB told the team about a "communication problem between the pope and younger generations". They both believe that Pope Tawadros "has gone too far in his public support for President Sisi, not taking into consideration the potential consequences of this political stance". However, they also appreciated the Pope's recent efforts to reach out to the youth and his willingness to engage with and listen to them.

Meetings with the Diplomatic Community

The AME team met with senior diplomats from the UK, US, European Union and African Union missions. These conversations highlighted the tensions within Egypt's foreign relations, with Western countries feeling pressured to compromise on international human

rights standards in an attempt to increase security and stability in the nation. Diplomats commended CSW's work on Egypt and the accurate reporting it provides, which is particularly helpful for them because their movement within the country is restricted.

Egypt's foreign policy and diplomacy have been heavily criticised by Western countries and media. Foreign policy has been heavily geared towards convincing the world of issues that lack substance and practical solutions, sometimes using conspiracy theories and formulating the entire policy within the framework of a single challenge (terrorism), and expecting Western countries to endorse this.

The state's complete control of domestic media prevents it and the rest of the nation from appreciating the dividends of religious freedom and freedom of expression in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, domestic political activities have often triggered international media channels to report on unpleasant realities. Several international media chains have critiqued Egypt's claim of having its own version of democracy that the West is misperceiving. Also highlighted was the government's current policy of warning the West against interfering in Egypt's internal affairs, while simultaneously urging Western nations to continue providing economic assistance.

As a member of the Human Rights Council, Egypt has either sponsored or lent its support to several regressive resolutions. Also during this tenure Egypt has been censured for human rights violations by several UN independent experts, including criticism of the mass trial and excessive sentencing of 739 people convicted on charges of illegal gathering, involvement in violence and incitement to break the law, and of the systematic targeting of human rights defenders, and the rights of detained persons.

A major issue that is raised regularly with regard to human rights in Egypt concerns the killing by security services of scores of Morsi supporters in Rabaa in August 2013. AME raised the issue with a contact who had previously been sceptical of the president. The contact highlighted a dimension missing from most coverage. The leaders of the protest had said they would disperse in 45 days. When they did not, an army general using a loudspeaker asked them to move. Almost immediately he was shot dead by a sniper, causing the soldiers to panic and open fire. Instead of transporting the injured to the largest free hospital in Cairo, which was situated five minutes away and had "state of the art machinery", protest leaders set up a field hospital and broadcasted to Western-based television stations from there, as people were dying from inadequate treatment. The contact added: "It wasn't a non-violent protest. It was violent and very provocative, with the mosque in Rabaa being used as a torture centre."

The contact said that, in an attempt to provoke Christians into a fight that would lead to loss of life on their part, 80 Christian institutions were destroyed and the streets were "strewn with destroyed bibles." However, Christians did not respond to the provocation.

Future Action:

CSW will continue to work closely with foreign missions and use international platforms to promote equal citizenship and respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief for every faith community in Egypt.

Future Assignments

The team is planning to undertake a fact-finding visit to the governorate of Minya and elsewhere in Upper Egypt within the next few months.

This is particularly significant, as the majority of FoRB violations occur in this region.