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Shot Copt dies on New Year's Eve after hospital 'negligence'

Christian reportedly shot by Muslim Brotherhood protesters, then refused treatment

World Watch Monitor (06.01.2014) - A Coptic Christian man died on New Year's Eve from a gunshot wound to the head after three hospitals in Cairo are reported to have turned him away.

Ihab Ghattas, 23, was shot outside Mar Girgis (St George's) Church in the Ain Shams area of Cairo after celebrating mass. The Maspero Youth Union (MYU), a Coptic activist group, claims he was shot by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood following a protest outside the church by the Islamist group.

In a statement released on New Year's Day, the MYU claimed that Ghattas died because of "negligence" on the part of the hospitals which refused to treat him.

[Mideast Christian News \(MCN\) reports](#) that Ghattas was denied access to one hospital because it was deemed not to be an emergency and another due to a lack of beds. The third hospital refused to treat him due to the absence of an intensive care unit, according to the MYU.

A fourth hospital, St. Peter's in Heliopolis, admitted him but he died soon afterwards. The MYU said that by this stage he had been "bleeding for three hours". The group has called for an investigation.

Muslim Brotherhood supporters were reported by MCN to have fired birdshot at St. George's Church, after which a group of young people from the church, including Ghattas, had joined police in defending it.

Other protests reportedly took place across the country, but police used tear gas to disperse them.

Egypt gunmen open fire on Coptic Christian wedding in Cairo

BBC News (21.10.2013) - Three people, including a girl aged eight, died when gunmen on motorcycles opened fire on a wedding party outside a Coptic Christian church in Cairo.

At least nine others were wounded in the attack in Giza, officials said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Egypt's Coptic Christian community has been targeted by some Islamists who accuse the Church of backing the army's overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi in July.

The unidentified attackers fired indiscriminately as people left the church.

A man and a girl were killed outside the church and a woman died on her way to hospital.

"We heard a very loud sound as if something was collapsing," one eyewitness said.

"I found a woman seated in a chair with lots of bullet wounds, covered in blood. Many other people had fallen around her, including a child," he added.

Coptic priest Thomas Daoud Ibrahim said he was inside the church when the gunfire erupted.

"What happened is an insult to Egypt, and it's not only directed against Coptic Christians. We are destroying our own country," he said.

Another priest, Beshay Lotfi, told Egyptian media that the church had been left without a police guard since the end of June.

The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of Christianity's oldest, founded in Alexandria around 50 AD.

Christians make up about 10% of Egypt's population of 80 million, and have generally coexisted peacefully with majority Sunni Muslims for centuries.

However, the overthrow of Mr Morsi by the military has been followed by the worst attacks on churches and Christian properties in years.

When head of the armed forces, Gen Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, went on television to announce that the Islamist president had been deposed in the wake of mass opposition protests demanding his resignation, Pope Tawadros II appeared alongside him.

Pope Tawadros said that the "roadmap" mentioned by the general had been devised by honourable people, who had Egypt's best interests at heart.

He has since received death threats, while several Christians have been killed. Christian shops, homes and businesses have also been targeted.

See video: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24605130>

The European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief condemns the Coptic Church attack in Cairo

EPWG on FoRB (22.10.2013) - The European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (EPWG on FoRB), co-chaired by Dennis de Jong (SP) and Peter van Dalen (ChristenUnie), strongly condemns the most recent Coptic church attack in Cairo on Sunday, October 20, killing four and injuring nine people. The EPWG on FoRB expresses its sincere condolences to the families of all victims.

The EPWG on FoRB welcomes the statements made by the Egyptian authorities denouncing the attack and welcomes the efforts to take immediate steps in conducting the investigation and bringing to justice those responsible for the violent action.

EPWG on FoRB urges the Egyptian government to ensure the safety of Egypt's largest and the oldest minority and adequate protection of their institutions (places of worship, churches), to stop discrimination against Coptic Christians.

The EPWG on FoRB calls on the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton to condemn this attack on the Christian community in Egypt and to follow up with the Egyptian authorities regarding a thorough and transparent investigation, identification of the perpetrators of the attack and holding all those responsible to account.

EPWG on FoRB: www.religiousfreedom.eu

Coptic Bishop survives assassination attempt

CSW (02.10.2013) - The General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Minya survived an attempted assassination on 30 September, when unknown gunmen opened fire on his entourage in the village of Al-Sarw (el Sario) in Abu Qurqas, Minya Province.

The assassination attempt occurred as His Grace Bishop Makarios was travelling by car to offer condolences to the family of Karim Samir Lamaee, who was killed during recent attacks on the Christian community. As assailants opened fire on the vehicle, the driver managed to reach the home of a local Copt, where the bishop and his entourage took refuge. However, the attackers pursued them and fired at the house for over an hour, damaging doors, windows, and walls. The police were called, but arrived 90 minutes after the gunmen had left the scene. All involved, including Bishop Makarios, were unharmed.

In a comment to His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, Bishop Makarios described his ordeal as "an indication that while steps are being taken towards reconciliation, there are those who still want to delay us." In a statement, Bishop Angaelos reiterated "the need for a sufficient level of

law and order be restored because every Egyptian deserves to receive equal protection under that law.”

The attack on Bishop Makarios has been condemned by the Maspero Youth Union, a Coptic rights group and by the Al-Kalema Centre for Human Rights, which called on the Minister of Interior to “arrest the perpetrators and bring them to speedy trial.”

The Governor of Minya described the attack as an isolated incident and not a sectarian one. However, sectarian violence has escalated as a direct consequence of hate speech by Muslim Brotherhood supporters, who accuse the Coptic community of playing a prominent role in the removal of former President Morsi despite the participation of Muslims, Christians, atheists, and others in the massive protests that led to his departure. Christian homes, businesses, and churches have been targeted, looted and destroyed, while in some villages Copts have been forced to pay jizya tax. Direct threats have been made against Coptic Pope Tawadros II and other public figures. The interim government’s preoccupation with constitutional and economic matters, as well as a focus on combating Islamist extremism in the Sinai region, may have contributed to a continuing lack of adequate protection for Copts and other religious minorities, particularly in Upper Egypt.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, “CSW condemns the attack on Bishop Makarios in the strongest terms, and applauds the spirit of reconciliation demonstrated yet again by the Coptic community in the face of great hardship. We are also encouraged by early signs that the country’s new Constitution will protect the right to freedom of religion and belief, and hope for an inclusive political process to ensure peaceful transition to democratic rule in which every Egyptian can enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship. However, while the fact that none were injured in the sustained and violent attack on the Bishop’s entourage is a cause for thanksgiving, it is deeply worrying that adequate and timely protection is still not available to communities under siege. CSW urges the interim government to ensure that security forces respond quickly and effectively to sectarian incidents, and to act swiftly to silence the hate speech that generally precedes and incites such incidents.”

What do the Copts want in the Constitution?

AWR (01.10.2013) - When former president Morsi (Mursī) was ousted on July 3, the Political Road Map announced by General Abdul Fatāh Al Sīsī called to amend the 2012 Constitution, which was widely seen as the Constitution of the Muslim Brotherhood rather than Egypt’s Constitution.

Coptic groups have different aspirations for the Constitution based on their different visions for the new Egypt. Though they were active in the 2013 uprising, Copts have been targeted by Morsi supporters, as well as thugs, in order to stifle these ambitions. Recently, though, their participation in the Constituent Assembly (the 50-man committee for amending the Constitution) has given a voice to the many diverse perspectives of Copts concerning their relationship to the state.

There are three main camps of Coptic political groups vis-à-vis the Constitution: a Coptic political mainstream, willing to accommodate opposing opinions concerning constitutional articles; a Coptic left, calling for quick and fundamental change for the relationship of the Copts and the state; and a political right, calling for further restrictions on religious liberties to ensure the control of the Church over its own affairs.

The Mainstream View

The Coptic mainstream perspective to the constitutional amendments can be viewed by the Coptic Orthodox Church in its memorandum on the constitutional amendments released in late July 2013. This viewpoint sees a moderate amendment to the articles, which takes into consideration the cultural and political realities in contemporary Egypt. The Church is decisive in abolishing Article 219, which installs a strict code of Islam.

Still, as a moderate conservative entity, they assert that Article 2, which states that Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic its official language and that principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation, should remain in the Constitution.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has also requested amendments, carefully contouring the role of Islam in the public affairs. This includes Article 4, which it requested to be reworded to read that the Azhar scholars are consulted in Islamic affairs, rather than Islamic law, in order to limit the jurisdiction of the Azhar scholars on public affairs. Article 43, which pertains to freedom of belief, should be amended to reflect that the article is absolute, in order not to have their own faith compromised. In addition they requested a specification in Article 33 stating, "equality before the law without discrimination" to specify that the "state takes upon itself to combat all forms of discrimination in addition to the traditional customs that lead to it", due to the traditional norms that discriminate between the different creeds in society, and leads to a number of sectarian misunderstandings and thus clashes. Pertaining to Article 11, which reads "The State shall safeguard the cultural and linguistic constituents of society, and foster the Arabization of education, science and knowledge," it requested to add "which leads to the scientific progress and supports social cohesion and national attachment". This is to ensure that the "cultural constituents" of society will not be an impediment to its national unity.

The Coptic Orthodox Church, however, due to its moderate conservative position, was hesitant on taking a stance on Article 3, unlike the Catholic and Evangelical churches.[1] Bishop Bola insisted that he requested Article 3 to remain. It reads: "The canon principles of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of legislation for their personal status laws, religious affairs, and the selection of their spiritual leaders". The Catholic and Evangelical Churches, on the contrary, took a different position on Article 3, requesting the re-wording of the phrase "Christians and Jews" to be replaced with "non-Muslims".

Dr. Safwāt Al Bayādī, the head of the Coptic Evangelical Community Council, assured that there is nothing to fear from amending Article 3. In addition, Bishop Antonius Azīz, representative of the Coptic Catholic Church, assured that the amending the article to include "non-Muslims" will remove all forms of discrimination against Egyptians of different religious affiliations. He assured that it is not a grant but a right that has been highlighted by all religions.[2]

In spite of their differences, all Coptic churches have decided to present clergymen as representatives of "Copts" in the Constitution. A number of Coptic movements, such as Copts without Restrictions[3] stated that the representation of the Church in the Constituent Assembly should not be considered as intervention of religion in politics, but rather that the Church has the right to be represented in the Constituent Assembly. Such movements have supported the role of Coptic religious leaders in politics, and thus support the old fashioned domination of religious leaders in politics, as in the Constitution. This stands at odds with left-leaning Copts.[4]

The Leftist Copts

The leftist Coptic groups, akin to the political left, staunchly reject any reference to Article 2 in the Constitution, insisting that it would institutionalize a discriminatory state.

The Coptic left, which is made up of youth organizations, are movements that are restructuring the political scene with demands of equity, freedom, and nondiscrimination.

The Maspero Youth Union, which was formed in the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution and after the sit-ins in front of the Maspero building, includes both Muslims and Christians. They call for a strict inclusion that Egypt is a civic state and removing article two which states that the "Islam is the main source of legislation." The group also proposes that an article is included that states that Egypt is a "civil state."

The Coptic left refuses the institutionalization of religion in the Constitution. Stressing complete equality and nondiscrimination, they insist on a civic state that respects all of its citizens, regardless of their religion. These Coptic movements have criticized the absence of Coptic civil representation in the assembly and that seats are limited to the leaders of the three Churches, meaning that the representation goes only to the Churches as religious institutions and not to the Copts as civilians.

By the same token, the proposed amendments by some international Coptic organizations, such as the U.S.-based, Coptic Solidarity, fall under this category of the left. Coptic Solidarity's list of constitutional amendments includes allowing citizens with dual nationalities to run in the parliamentary elections. They see it pertinent to amend Article 2, and stated in no uncertain words that it is an "idol that everyone fears of changing".

The Coptic Right

The Coptic right constitutes voices from within the Coptic churches requesting a tightening of religious liberties. Bishop Jeremiah, head of the Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center in Cairo, has stated on the 23rd of September that he refuses to amend Article 3 of the Constitution. He argued that amending it to be from "Christians and Jews" to "non-Muslims" will hurt both Muslims and Christians. He stated that if such a change was made, Christians would not be protected from the requests of Jehovah's Witnesses and other denominations that are not recognized by the churches. The only way to ensure the interests of the nation is to tighten the religious liberties in the face of less acceptable religious groups by the Church. This position, unsurprisingly, stands in congruence with the positions of both the Azhar, which stated that amending it may threaten the pillars of society and disrupt public order, as well as give rights to the Shiites[5] and Baha'is[6] in Egypt. The Member of the Nour Party High Board, Sha'ban Abul Alīm, made a similar statement expressing his fear that the amendment of the third article to read "non-Muslims" might allow the "marriage of homosexuals".[7]

Coptic leftist activists have organized a number of protests against the statements of Bishop Jeremiah, assured that it results in Copts becoming *dhimmi*s, rather than full citizens. The same group has organized protests against the choice of a member of the clergy, Bishop Bola, as the representative of Orthodox Copts in the Constituent assembly.[8]

The Coptic Quota

The idea of the Coptic quota was presented by The Egyptian Union for Human Rights headed by Najīb Jibrāil, who requested an amendment to Article 38 in the 2012 Constitution, which states that all citizens are equal before the law, to state that Copts and women are to constitute 30% of the Parliament, ministerial positions, and governors. The justification for this idea is that it will enable society to accept the idea of a Copt in power as it is now largely unthinkable. However, the institutionalization of positive discrimination for the Copts is viewed by many Copts as problematic.

In January, when this idea was first presented, scores of Coptic activists denounced the proposal. The representatives of the Coptic Churches similarly refused the concept of

quota due to its sectarian basis. The Maspero Youth Union on the other hand, stands firmly in support of the idea of a temporary Coptic quota, as a form of positive discrimination, to increase the number of Copts in the Parliament. They are demanding a swift change in the representation of Copts with little or no regard for the harmful precedent this could set within the system.

What the Future Holds

As explained above, Copts are not a monolithic unit; there is nothing such as an abstract political "Copt". The demands of the Copts are diverse, differing according to their political outlooks. Copts, in that respect, reflect the different colors of the political spectrum in Egyptian society. More conservative elements of the Copts have very similar views to the conservative Islamists. Similarly, the leftist Copts share ideas with their left-leaning counterparts. Copts, with respect to their demands in the Constitution and their political views at large, cannot be taken as a single political block.

With such disparate voices, it is not likely that the controversy among the Copts on the relationship between church and state as well as their relationship to the state will end soon. The revolutionary dynamics have accelerated the motion of groups of Coptic left-leaning youth to go out to the streets and protest, not only against state policies, but also against the policies of the Church. It is likely that this will increase in the near future as these pertinent issues are raised in public discussions on the forthcoming constitution.

[1] In particular articles 3, 4, and 11 are among the articles of contention of the Churches with al-Azhar.

[2] Mīra Tawfīq, "Mumathil Al Kanīсах Al Kātholīkīyah bil khamsīn: Ta'dīl Al Madah Al Thālīthah Laysa Hibah Min Ahad wa Inamā Haq kafīlathu Al Adyān," *Al Balad*, 13 September 2013. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

[3] Māykal Fāris, "Aqbāt Bilā Quyūd: Al Kanīсах Lahā Haq Ikhtīyār Mumathīlīha Blagnit Ta'dīl Al Dustūr," *Al Yūm Al Sābi'*, 11 August 2013. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

[4] 'Abd al-Wahāb Sha'bān, "Al Aqbāt Yu'aliqūn Amāl Madaniyat Al Dawlah 'ala lagnit al khamsīn," *al-Wafd*, 4 September 2013, p. 5. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

[5] Sabrī Abdil Hafīz, "Al Islamiyūn: Mādah Bil Dustūr Tubīh Zawāg Al Mīthliyīn Wa 'Abadat Al Shaytān," *Elaph*, 25 September 2013. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

[6] Cornelis Hulsman, Editor-in-chief Arab-West Report, knows from Egyptian media and previous meetings with Azhar officials that the Azhar does not recognize Baha'is

[7] Author not mentioned, "Al Nur: Ta'dīl Al Mada Al thalīthah Syasmah bzawag Al Mithliyeen Wal Shawaz," 18 September 2013, *Aswāt Masriyah*. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

[8] Māykal Fāris, "Shabāb Maspero Yarfud 'Udwīyīt Al Anbā Bola Blagnit Ta'dīl A Dustūr", *al-Yawm al-Sābi'*, 11 August 2013. [Read original text in Arabic.](#)

Yosra El-Gendi
Arab-West Report
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Sarkha: A new Christian protest movement

Ra'ed al-Sharqawi (01.10.2013) - Since the Revolution of July 23, 1952, Christians have been marginalized. This became visible when no Copt was elected for Parliament and only two MPs and one governor were nominated by Nasser. This is very marginal in comparison to the period before the 1952 Revolution. It is also incomparable to the later years of the Presidents Sadat and Mubarak when the state made Christians more visible.

But it was propaganda that served to complete the decoration of the state by including all its citizens.

Coverage of the Christian image in Egypt has been largely focused on agony and tragedies, with some hardships added by a wave of extremism in the 1980s and 1990s that targeted mainly Christians.

President Mubarak, unlike Nasser or Sadat, who were formed in cells of the Muslim Brotherhood,[1] was not influenced by Islamists. However, particularly in the last decade of his reign, Mubarak left internal affairs to be run by amateur politicians, headed by his son Gamal Mubarak and helped along by Safwat el-Sherif. El-Sherif decided it was easiest for the state for Christians to be represented by the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who relished the position and sought more supremacy over Christians.

The burden on Christians has worsened dramatically since the 1970s with the burning of churches, sectarian incidents and violence, and neglecting the real representation of Christians in the Peoples' Assembly and the Shura Council. Christian members appointed by the president were first recommended by the Church for reasons of relevance to the church, nothing more.

During the January 25 uprising in 2011 Christians took part in the revolt against the antiquated system. Christians, like all Egyptians had great dreams. The order was shifted, but this resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt and the development of a weak state that is unable or perhaps even unwilling to take care of its own people. The Muslim Brotherhood made promises for more justice based on verses mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. Initially, this brought the Copts hope, but excluding the Christians from social life and even from the demonstrations at Tahrir Square was a sign that the change would not come so easily.

The Maspero massacre (October 9, 2011) and massacres in many different villages showed the same faces of those in power of the state who wanted no change and with this defeated Christian interests.

The Constituent Assembly founded after June 30 witnessed added suffering on the list of the Christians' tragedies when Bishop Bola focused on issues such as a proposal for a harsh Christian Personal Status Law making divorce virtually impossible and thus blocking possibilities for remarriage. The agenda of Bishop Bola did not represent the hopes of the Christians. This furthered the fears of the Copts of being isolated from the real citizens of Egypt.

There is a trend among Islamists of being involved in the increasing disappearance of Christian girls, the continuation of assaults on the houses and the properties of Christians, burning churches, forceful displacement of Christians out of their homes followed by *urfi* (customary law) sessions that result in more injustice and pressuring the Christians in their daily life activities. This has become a routine in daily Christian life in many villages and suburbs of Egypt.

Christians then began to scream (in Arabic: "sarkha") during Christian protests. In these marches they asked the state for more consideration and care for the urgent issues concerning the life and the pride of the Christians, but all activities had thus far been in vain. Michail Armanius, the founder of the Sarkha movement, is one of the young men who had taken part in all of the demonstrations that happened since January 25, 2011 and on July 3, 2013, his dream was realized.

In the first week after Morsi's ouster, the army of Egypt stated that they can never fail the dreams of all Egyptians or neglect the suffering of the Egyptian people with a regime that separates the unity of Egypt giving hope to Armanius and many other Christian

Egyptians. From this, however, arose the calling for a new constitution and the state preferring the Church to be the sole representative of the Christians despite the refusal expressed by the majority of the Christians who wished the Church to be involved in spiritual issues only and for politics to be left to the politicians.

Again, we see a glimpse of the vanishing dreams of the Christians whose dreams were reduced by the codes that concern the Church authority and leadership. This adds legality and validity to the Sarkha movement, following the full negligence of the state of Christian Egyptians, while claiming full equality and citizenship for all Egyptians. The calls for Sarkha (which in practice means demonstrating) should continue until the constitution is completed and state and church have responded to the real demands of Christians, asking for separation of church and state, instead of dividing the views of the Christian members of the Constituent Assembly into views representing the church and Christians as Egyptian citizens.

[1] The Muslim Brotherhood is formed of thousands of cells or small groups. In these small groups members of the MB are formed according to the ideology of the MB.

The changing face of Egyptian Constituent: 5 women and 20 Christians

Asia News (03.09.2013) - The Egyptian interim president Mansour Adly announced the composition of the new Constituent Assembly, after the fall of President Mohammed Morsi and the suspension of the interim constitution of 2012. Appointed last September 1, the organ is commissioned to write a new document that will replace the text launched during the Islamist majority government.

Made up of 50 members, the assembly houses a number of non-political representatives of Egyptian society, including trade unionists, lawyers, judges, students and religious authorities. Compared to the previous assembly (dominated by Islamists), the current one is more open to the women - with five representatives of various associations - and religious minorities reserving 20 seats to active Christian people in the Egyptian society and representatives of all Christian denominations, including Catholic and Protestant.

So far the only criticism of the new body comes from Islamist movements. Yesterday Bassam El Zarka, leader of the Salafist al-Nour, called the formation of the Constituent an "evil that reflects the domain of the faction of the left". The Islamists criticize the will of the constituents to delete items of the previous Constitution concerning the sharia. "Such a move - said El Zarka - means Egyptians would move away from their Islamic identity."

The committee will begin its work on September 8 and should deliver the draft within 60 days. The draft constitution will be approved in a referendum.

Egypt's new draft constitution undermines religious freedom

The Christian Post (29.08.2013) - Egypt's 2012 constitution, drafted and adopted under President Morsi, reflected the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist goals, giving prominence to Sunni sharia and restricting the rights of non-Muslims. As my colleague and Egypt

analyst Samuel Tadros observed on NRO last December, it was a "clear setback for religious freedom."

Undermining religious freedom, of course, is not a small matter, not a mere nuisance to a few outliers. In Egypt, Morsi's Islamist constitution helped provoke a popular uprising by a broad range of groups opposed to the state's forcible imposition of Islamism, which in turn led to the military overthrow of the government on July 3.

The constitution was immediately suspended. "Suggested" articles for a new one, determined by a ten-member government-appointed committee, have been drafted and, over the past few days, have leaked out.

So what does this preliminary draft have to say on the critical issues of a civil, secular state and of securing rights to religious freedom, not only for the Coptic minority but for all Egyptians who resist religious compulsion under a sharia state?

As an article The Washington Post points out today, the preliminary draft "repeals a move by Morsi to strengthen the role of Islamic law in Egypt." This refers to the dropping from the new draft the notorious Article 219 of the 2012 constitution which had defined "the principles of sharia" to include "its total evidence, its fundamental and jurisprudence basis, its accepted sources in the doctrines of Sunnis." Also axed were an article establishing a Shura council, an Islamic political structure; another article providing that Al Azhar University, an ancient (founded in the tenth century) Sunni center of learning, was to be consulted on matters of sharia; and a clause (in article 44 of the 2012 constitution) that raised to the constitutional level Islamic anti-blasphemy codes, though such codes remain enshrined in law.

On the other side of the ledger, Article 2 of the draft constitution continues to provide "the principles of sharia" as the "main source of law."

Rights, freedoms, and gender-equality provisions continue to be conditioned on whether they are curbed by other laws.

And Article 44 specifies that houses of worship can be constructed for the "heavenly religions" (Muslims, Jews and Christians) with what it now euphemistically terms government "facilitation." This no doubt means that building churches would continue to be restricted by the state, even now, after rampages by Muslim Brotherhood supporters and their allies this past month have left scores of churches in dire need of reconstruction. It also means that Baha'is, Hindus, and other adherents of religions, as well as disfavored Muslims, would have no constitutional right to build houses of worship.

The Washington Post makes much of the fact that the draft eliminates political parties based on religion, but such bans were seen before in Egypt's constitution, and laws and didn't stop the Muslim Brotherhood from establishing its Freedom and Justice Party, or Salafists from forming Al-Nour and other Islamist parties.

The media site Al Monitor, whose reports are drawn from news outlets around the Middle East, has a more detailed analysis of the leaked preliminary draft.

The draft next goes to a 50-member committee appointed from various sectors of society, which has 60 days to finalize it. It will then be voted on in a popular referendum later this fall.

A constitution should express the highest aspirations of a nation. But what if the people of that nation hold competing and even irreconcilable visions of society? The Egyptian answer seems to be a fudge factory.

37 churches destroyed in Egypt, authorities do 'little or nothing,' according to Human Rights Watch

The Christian Post (23.08.2013) - A new report from Human Rights Watch has revealed the extremity of the bloodshed against Egypt's Coptic Christians. Since Aug. 14, 37 churches have been either destroyed or badly damaged, and at least five others were attacked, leaving at least four people dead. In addition, scores of Christian businesses and schools have been looted, vandalized and torched.

But the egregiousness nature of these actions is only matched by the lack of response by Egyptian authorities themselves, said Joe Stork, the acting Human Rights Watch Middle East Director.

"For weeks, everyone could see these attacks coming, with Muslim Brotherhood members accusing Coptic Christians of a role in Mohammad Morsy's ouster, but the authorities did little or nothing to prevent them. Now dozens of churches are smoldering ruins, and Christians throughout the country are hiding in their homes, afraid for their very lives," said Joe Stork in a statement.

Tamara Alrifai, the Human Rights Watch Advocacy and Communications director for the Middle East and North Africa Division, explained that before last week's confrontation between the military and pro-Morsi supporters, there were signs that the Copts would be targeted.

"Over the past few weeks there has been an incitement discourse against Christians from political leadership and there have not been enough measures taken by police and security," Alrifai told The Christian Post. "The attacks seemed inevitable. The government is responsible for protecting its own population when the signs are clear."

In some instances, the threats that the Copts' aggressors utilized were blatant; in the city of Minya, residents told Human Rights Watch that Coptic-owned storefronts had been marked with a black "X" and they were subsequently targeted for attack.

Indeed, Human Rights Watch asserted that "in the vast majority of the 42 cases [we] documented, neither the police nor the military were present at the start or during the attack," suggesting that the passivity of the security forces served to embolden and encourage acts of terror.

In many instances, individuals notified security officials, only for them to be dismissed. In one situation, a resident begged a police officer to help him defend his business, only for the officer to refuse to leave, saying he was only charged with protecting his station.

John Sameer of Minya told Human Rights Watch he witnessed a crowd vandalizing and burning a church before following a gang of men who performed the same on "approximately 20 shops, three other churches, the Coptic boys' school complex, the Saint Joseph's girls' school, the Gunud al-Maseeh orphanage, and the Jesuit community center."

Despite calls for to emergency vehicles, Sameer said that security never arrived.

However, Human Rights Watch also documented some episodes of violence against security forces in the same towns that Copts were attacked.

In Minya, the same town that Sameer watched gangs torch businesses, schools and churches, Major General Abdelaziz Qura, head of the Minya security directorate, told Human Rights Watch that on Aug. 14, when news of the sit-in dispersal reached the city, "groups simultaneously attacked police stations and some churches in Minya. They were shooting live fire at security forces, and the security forces did not leave their positions because they didn't want anyone to free the prisoners [held in police stations], like what happened in January 2011."

The group also burned six police stations to the ground and killed 13 police officers.

Human Rights Watch hopes that their documentation motivates the international community to pressure Egyptian authorities to clamp down on the violence against the Copts.

"The international community does have a responsibility to curb violence altogether [but] there must also be a strong message against incitement to violence and hatred of the others," said Alrifai. "The Copts are part and parcel of Egyptian society. They should be treated as equal citizens under law, equal to everyone else. They belong to Egypt as every other Egyptian and there should not be a way forward in Egypt without them."

Ravaged churches reveal sectarian split feeding Egypt's violence

The Washington Post (20.08.2013) - The fire burned all night long. It was only after desperate town residents borrowed the keys to a firetruck that they were able to quell the blaze. By then, the evangelical church was all but destroyed.

It was one of more than 60 churches that have been attacked, vandalized and in many cases set aflame across Egypt in a surge of violence against Christians that has followed the bloody Aug. 14 raid by Egyptian security forces on two Islamist protest camps in Cairo.

The attacks, most of them in Egypt's Nile Valley, have lent legitimacy to the military-backed government's claims that it is fighting a war against terrorism.

But one week after the attacks, the Egyptian government has yet to investigate any of the incidents or provide any additional security to most churches, Christian activists and church officials said.

Visits to flame-ravaged churches and interviews with activists and Western officials also cast doubt on whether the Muslim Brotherhood, blamed by the government for carrying out the violence, was actively involved.

"We have seen zero indication that the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization is organizing these attacks," said a high-ranking Western official who was not authorized to speak on the record. The official said the blame more likely rested with Islamist vigilantes rather than Brotherhood members acting on orders.

Adversaries and abettors

In places such as Beni Mazar — a town on the Nile about 160 miles south of Cairo in Minya province, which is riven by sectarian tensions — Christian residents made clear their sense of fear and anger. They said they believed Islamists had attacked the churches in retaliation for the police raids on Islamist protest camps in Cairo and also to punish Egypt's Christian minority for its support of the July 3 coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi. On the day of the raids, Islamists also attacked police stations across the country.

But in interviews Monday and Tuesday, many residents suggested the police had been complicit, at least through a failure to respond.

"Until now, we have not heard about any real or serious investigation," said Mina Thabet, an activist with the Maspéro Youth Union, a Christian activist group, which has charted the attacks that have taken place nationwide since Aug. 14.

Some "five or six" bearded Islamists with assault rifles broke through the evangelical church gate in Beni Mazar around midday Aug. 14, the owner of a Christian bookstore next door said in an interview this week. But he also said those Islamists worked in coordination with dozens of "thugs" who arrived in pickup trucks and didn't look like Islamists.

The accomplices carried off thousands of dollars' worth of computer, video and audio equipment, as well as air-conditioning units, before setting the church on fire, according to the owner, who for security reasons would permit the use of only his first name, Ayman.

Later, in the same neighborhood, plainclothes police officers armed with assault rifles came running up to two Washington Post reporters as they moved to inspect the damage at a Christian charity that had been torched next to the police station. The station's police chief, who gave his name as Gen. Samir, pointed out that his forces had also come under attack in the violence of Aug. 14, and he provided a thick stack of pictures to document one such assault, on a local headquarters for the traffic police.

But Samir said his men had not visited the three churches and other Christian properties that were attacked within blocks of their headquarters. "To do what?" the police chief said, adding that an investigation was the district prosecutor's job.

The evidence of anti-Christian attacks remained fully on display across Minya, in places such as a Jesuit school in the provincial capital, also called Minya, where vandals had scrawled "Egypt is Islamic" on the gate. The Mar Mina church, near a Brotherhood rallying point, had also been emblazoned with the word "Islamic."

Some witnesses said attackers had chanted against military rule, and one man said the group he saw attack a church had worn green headbands marked by the Muslim Brotherhood's crossed-swords insignia.

Ahmed al-Behairy, a Muslim Brotherhood official in Minya who is now on the run from police, said in a telephone conversation that "families" in the province had opened fire on police targets last week in retaliation for the deaths of peaceful Islamist protesters. "Those who know the nature of the Upper Egyptian people know that they believe in revenge," he said.

But Behairy said it was "absolutely not true" that protesters had attacked churches, and he blamed those assaults on thugs determined to "cause problems."

A history of conflict

Egypt is overwhelmingly an Islamic country, and Christians make up only about 10 percent of the national population. But in the conservative Nile Valley, in cities such as Beni Mazar and Minya, Christians account for a far larger percentage of the population. For decades, sectarian rivalries between Muslims and Christians have frequently spilled over into violent clashes — a phenomenon exacerbated by the 2011 uprising that brought Islamist groups to power as nationwide security collapsed.

Egypt's security forces have rarely stood in the way of the country's explosive sectarian violence, and the senior Western official said it was not out of the question that the security forces — who typically do not wear uniforms and sometimes carry weapons concealed in their long, flowing galabiyas — had played a role in stirring last week's violence.

Some residents interviewed in Minya province said they believed the Brotherhood has blamed Christians because of the support voiced by Pope Tawadros II, the Coptic Church leader, for the July 3 military takeover that ousted Morsi.

Among the attacks in the provincial capital was one that led to the burning of the 95-year-old Amir Tadros church, several blocks from the governor's office.

Those present at the time included Michael Kastour, a church member, who said men armed with machetes had hurled stones and molotov cocktails over the wall before forcing their way through the metal gate.

Kastour fled up a staircase to the church's roof, he said, and then leapt to a lower stone dome and onto the street. He said that he and his father, a church official, called the military and police several times while the church was being looted and then set ablaze, but that neither had proved willing to respond.

"We believe the military didn't interfere that first day so that the Muslim Brotherhood could show all their cards and appear before the world as they truly are — terrorists," Kastour said. "Normally it takes time" for the police to respond to reports of sectarian violence, he said. "But that day, they refused entirely."

Sharaf al-Hourani in Minya contributed to this report.

Sectarian attacks mount as violence continues

CSW (19.08.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned at the continuing violence in Egypt, which has left more than 830 people dead, including 70 policemen. At least 60 churches have been targeted, along with Christian schools, homes, businesses and even an orphanage.

In Minya, Beni Suef, Fayoum and Assiut, Christian homes and businesses are reported to have received leaflets warning them to leave or face reprisals by Islamists. There are also reports of Christian homes and businesses in Minya being marked with black X's to single them out for attack.

In a particularly disturbing incident reported by Associated Press, Islamists who attacked and looted a Franciscan school in Beni Suef paraded three nuns "like war prisoners", while two other female employees were sexually harassed and abused. Churches that

were attacked or destroyed during the recent violence were unable to hold Sunday services yesterday, while others cancelled their services for fear of attack. The Egypt Independent reports that Virgin Mary and Priest Ibram monastery in Degla, south of Minya, did not hold prayers on Sunday for the first time in 1,600 years. Nevertheless, there are increasing reports of moderate Muslims coming to the assistance of Christians.

At least seven Christians have being killed and many more injured since the ousting of former-President Morsi by the military on 3 July. Islamists have blamed Copts for conspiring in the removal of the former president, with some calling for retaliatory attacks. A Facebook page purporting to belong to the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Helwan, Cairo, stated: "The Pope of the Church is involved in the removal of the first elected Islamist president. The Pope of the Church alleges Islamic Shari'a is backwards, stubborn, and reactionary." It went on to say: "After all this people ask why they burn the churches." The FJP has denied inciting sectarian violence, denouncing a number of Facebook pages as fake.

Egyptian authorities have confirmed that 36 Islamists died in police custody, while at least 24 policemen were ambushed and killed in the Sinai region yesterday.

In other news, judicial authorities have ordered the release of former President Hosni Mubarak, who has been detained on a variety of charges since 2011.

CSW's Press Officer Kiri Kankhwende said, "We send our condolences to those who have lost loved ones, regardless of their religious or political affiliation. The sectarian targeting of the Coptic community by Morsi supporters, in misplaced retaliation for the actions of the army, cannot be divorced from the continuing campaign of defamation and disinformation emanating from key Brotherhood figures regarding the Church's role in Morsi's ousting. Both the violence and the disinformation that fuels it are unacceptable and should be condemned in the strongest terms. While it is deeply encouraging to hear of moderate Muslims coming to the assistance of their Christian neighbours, the responsibility to protect lies ultimately with the Egyptian authorities. We therefore renew our call for the interim government to ensure comprehensive security to all Egyptians, and also urge and pray for peace and reconciliation."

Egypt mosque stormed by security forces

AP (17.08.2013) - Witnesses say that Egyptian security forces have stormed a Cairo mosque after firing tear gas at hundreds of Islamists supporters of the country's ousted president barricaded inside.

Local journalist Shaimaa Awad told The Associated Press on Saturday that security forces rounded up protesters inside al-Fatah mosque, located in Cairo's central Ramses Square.

The sound of gunfire could be heard in the background.

Egypt's official news agency MENA reported that gunmen opened fire on security forces from the mosque's minaret. Local television stations broadcast live footage of soldiers firing assault rifles at the minaret.

The mosque served as a field hospital and morgue following clashes Friday in the area. The protesters barricaded themselves inside overnight out of fears of being beaten by vigilante mobs or being arrested by authorities.

Egypt bloodshed: UN pleads for restraint as Muslim Brotherhood calls for 'Friday of anger'

Australian Broadcasting Company (16.08.2013) - The UN Security Council called on all sides in the Egyptian conflict to show "maximum restraint" this morning as the Muslim Brotherhood called for a huge show of strength after Friday prayers later today.

The official death toll from the crackdown on supporters of ousted former president Mohammed Morsi has risen to 638, but protesters say about 2,000 people were killed.

After an emergency Security Council meeting in New York this morning, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay called on all sides in Egypt to "step back from the brink of disaster".

Ms Pillay, a former UN war crimes judge, said the heavy death toll pointed to "an excessive, even extreme use of force against demonstrators".

Overnight Brotherhood supporters stormed a government building near Cairo and set it alight after the movement's leaders urged its members to take to the streets to fight a wave of "terror" unleashed by security forces.

Calling for a "Friday of anger" in Cairo, the Brotherhood urged people to head towards the city's Ramsis Square in a show of force after traditional Friday prayers.

But fears of more bloodshed have been heightened after Egypt's interior ministry authorised police to use live ammunition against protesters who attack security forces.

Egypt fires back at Obama over 'violent armed groups'

Egypt's military-backed government has accused US president Barack Obama of "emboldening the armed groups" by condemning the actions of security forces.

In his first statement since the crackdown, Mr Obama said: "We deplore violence against civilians. We support universal rights essential to human dignity, including the right to peaceful protest."

But a statement from the Egyptian government said: "The presidency fears statements not based on facts may encourage violent armed groups".

"The presidency appreciates US concern for developments in Egypt, but it wished it could have clarified matters. Egypt is facing terrorist acts aimed at government institutions and vital installations."

Turkey recalls ambassador, US cancels war games

On Thursday the US cancelled joint military exercises with Egypt, saying normal US cooperation could not continue in light of the armed forces' bloody crackdown, but stopped short of suspending more than \$US1 billion it donates in aid to Egypt every year.

Europe's leading powers, along with Iran, Qatar and Turkey, have strongly denounced the use of force by the interim government.

Turkey has recalled its ambassador to Cairo "to discuss the latest developments," and its prime minister has demanded the UN take action.

This morning Australia's Foreign Minister Bob Carr summoned the Egyptian ambassador in Canberra to express condemnation over the bloodshed in Egypt.

Senator Carr told ABC the World Today that whilst Australia does not advocate international intervention in Egypt, international help with mediation could be contemplated.

"Sometimes competing forces within a country need to be edged towards a consideration of a compromise towards reconciliation," Senator Carr said.

The Egyptian health ministry now says at least 638 people had been killed throughout the country, and the interior ministry says 43 security personnel have died.

Brotherhood supporters say the death toll is far higher, with hundreds of bodies as yet uncounted by the authorities.

Today there were reports that security forces had seized control of a Cairo mosque which had been used as a makeshift morgue to store dozens of bodies.

The army-backed interim government has imposed a month-long nationwide state of emergency with curfews in Cairo and 13 other provinces.

But Egypt's interim Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi praised the police for their "self-restraint" and said the government remained committed to an army-drafted roadmap calling for elections in 2014.

Christian anxieties mount as Muslim hostility increases

Coptic Pope cancels public appearances

WWM (13.08.2013) - Mass no longer is being celebrated at The Church of St. Mary. Police officers guard the entrance.

Throughout the Egyptian town of [Eastern Bani Ahmed](#) south of Cairo, the Christian-owned shops are closed. At least seven Christian homes, and even more of their vehicles, have been ransacked, burned, or both. At least 18 people are injured, and police have issued dozens of arrest warrants.

A disagreement over a song on the radio was all it took to set off the violence Aug. 3.

Since July 3, when the Egyptian military removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power, anti-Christian backlash has flared in pockets across Egypt. Though there have been many examples of Christians and Muslims breaking bread together and joining ranks to support moving the government off the Brotherhood's Islamist path, the crescendo of violence has heightened Christian anxiety.

It has proven worrisome enough that Coptic Pope Tawadros II last week backed out of public appearances he had planned for this week at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo. He determined his presence could endanger the congregation, according to Bishop Angaelos,

leader of the Coptic church in the United Kingdom, who [revealed the pope's change of plans to the BBC](#).

Also last week, 16 Egyptian human-rights groups issued a joint statement of "grave concern regarding the increasing sectarian violence which has targeted Christians and their churches since the June 30 uprising."

Two days after the July 3 government takeover by the Egyptian military, four Christian men were killed during daylong assaults on Christians in al-Dabayia, a town west of Luxor in southern Egypt. On July 6, gunmen shot and killed a Coptic priest, Mina Abboud Sharubim, in northern Sinai.

Five days later in Sheikh Zuweid, a remote settlement a few kilometres west of the Israeli border, the decapitated body of Magdy Lamei Habib, a Christian electronics merchant, was discovered.

The fuse that touched off the violence in Bani Ahmed on Aug. 3 was lit inside a cafe owned by Sherif Abdel Moneim Radi, a Muslim. It was early evening, before the *iftar*, the traditional evening meal during the month-long observation of Ramadan, at which Muslims break their day-long fast. According to a statement issued by the Diocese of Minya and Abu Qurqas, events unfolded this way:

Over the radio in the cafe could be heard the song "[Teslem Elayady](#)," a catchy pop tune that praises the Egyptian military. Radi moved to turn the music off. A customer, a Christian man named Hanna Dos Fahmi, asked Radi to keep the radio tuned to the song. The argument began. Cooler heads stepped in and broke up the argument.

After the *iftar*, however, a group of Muslim men appeared at the cafe. A group of Christians showed up in opposition. The confrontation escalated quickly as Muslims from neighbouring villages arrived in Bani Ahmed, chanting slogans against Copts, police and the military. Some carried guns and Molotov cocktails. The crowd grew to about 4,000 people.

A pharmacy, furniture store, auto-repair shop and other Christian-owned businesses were looted, according to the diocese statement. Several homes were set on fire. Clashes broke out in surrounding villages. Security forces did not arrive in force until 11:30 p.m., and used tear gas to disperse the rioters. The [Associated Press reported](#) that 18 people were injured, and that police issued arrest warrants for at least 35 people. The diocese said the riots caused damage estimated at nearly 3.4 million Egyptian pounds, or about US \$480,000.

On Sunday morning, Aug. 4, a group of Muslims barricaded the entrance to the Coptic Church in Bani Ahmed, preventing members from attending mass.

A Christian teacher in Bani Ahmed told World Watch Monitor that a tense calm has settled over the town during the days since the Aug. 3 disturbance. Security forces are visible in the town. On Aug. 9, the teacher said, Muslims burned an abandoned Muslim home in an attempt to accuse Christians of the act, but security officers moved in before the gathering crowd could lash out. In the meantime, the teacher said, shops and the church remain closed. World Watch Monitor is withholding his name to ensure his safety.

On Aug. 6, about 100 kilometres south of Bani Ahmed, thousands of Islamists marched through the streets of Assiut, chanting "Islamic, Islamic, despite the Christians." Christians shuttered their shops and retreated to the interiors of their darkened homes.

News service [Ahram Online reported](#) Aug. 7 that Egypt's prosecutor-general had ordered 11 people held in custody for 15 days while authorities investigated the Bani Ahmed violence.

On the same day, the coalition of 16 human-rights groups denounced the "continued negligence of the institutions of the state to provide the necessary protection to Christian citizens, to decisively confront sectarian attacks, and to enforce the law by holding those responsible for the acts of sectarian violence, which have been seen in several governorates, to account."

Egypt Christians on the defensive as Islamists wage hate campaign in south

CBS News (06.08.2013) - It was night time and 10,000 Islamists were marching down the most heavily Christian street in this ancient Egyptian city, chanting "Islamic, Islamic, despite the Christians." A half-dozen kids were spray-painting "Boycott the Christians" on walls, supervised by an adult.

While Islamists are on the defensive in Cairo following the military coup that ousted President Mohammed Morsi, in Assiut and elsewhere in Egypt's deep south they are waging a stepped-up hate campaign, claiming the country's Christian minority somehow engineered Morsi's downfall.

"Tawadros is a dog," says a spray-painted insult, referring to Pope Tawadros II, patriarch of the Copts, as Egypt's Christians are called. Christian homes, stores and places of worship have been marked with large painted crosses.

The hostility led a coalition of 16 Egyptian rights groups to warn on Wednesday of a wave of violence to come, and to demand that the post-coup authorities protect the Christians who are 10 percent of the population, and suffer chronic discrimination.

Nile-side Assiut, a city of one million people 250 miles south of Cairo, dates back to the pharaohs. The New Testament says Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus passed through as they fled the infanticidal King Herod. Today, its Christian fears are compounded by the failure of authorities to curb the graffiti-spraying and the Islamists' demonstrations, which have gone on almost nightly since the July 3 coup that ousted Morsi.

"They (the Islamists) will not stop as long as they are left to do as they please without fear of accountability," said Hossam Nabil, 38, who owns a jewelry store on Yousry Ragheb St. where the demonstration passed on Tuesday night. "They are many and one day they will trash our stores."

Like other Christians with stores on the street, Nabil shuttered his establishment until the protesters had passed. "They (the marchers) run their index finger across their throats to suggest they will slaughter us, or scream Morsi's name in our faces," he said.

A young couple arrived to shop while scores of marchers were still on the street. They froze in fear, the husband shielding his wife with his body.

Families living in apartment blocks above the stores stayed home, shutting windows and staying off balconies. Those outdoors kept their distance from the march.

Assiut's Islamists are strong because local authority is weak and religion is powerful in a region where poverty is widespread and envy of the relatively high number of well-to-do Christians runs high.

As for the graffiti, acting provincial governor Gamal Adam told The Associated Press the authorities have given up on washing it away because it quickly reappears. He also said municipal cleaners might be roughed up if caught in the act by Islamists.

For the 40 percent of Assiut people who are Christian, life has changed radically. They find their apartment blocks disfigured by painted crosses with a red X painted over them. They stay at home at night. Churches have cancelled afternoon activities. Some of the wealthy have left town.

"We had never experienced the kind of persecution we suffer now. We are insulted every day," said Nevine Kamal, a 40-year-old Christian pharmacist and mother of two teenagers. "We are angry and frustrated but we are not leaving Assiut," she said, seated at her desk at the St. George Pharmacy on Youssry Ragheb Street. Under her desk's glass is a poster of the Virgin Mary and on the wall is an image of St. George slaying the mythical dragon.

"Sadly, my children are angry with Egypt and want to leave and they don't believe us when I and my husband tell them that things will get better soon. But, personally, I have faith that all this will yield something good for us and the country. We thought the Muslim Brotherhood will rule for 80 years and they are out after just one year. Who would have believed this?" Morsi is a longtime leader of the Brotherhood.

At least seven Christians have been killed since the coup, one of them in Assiut. Scores have been injured.

This week, in a village in the province of Minya south of Cairo, a pro-military song playing on a coffee shop radio sparked an argument between a Muslim and a Christian, and the next day a mob of thousands ransacked Christian homes and stores and tried to storm a church. At least 18 people were injured and arrests warrants issued for 35.

Egypt's Christians used to shun politics, but since the Arab Spring of early 2011 they have started to demand a say in the country's direction. They took it to a new level during Morsi's year in office and the empowerment of his Islamist allies. Tawadros, the Coptic Christian pope installed last year, openly criticized the president and told Christians they were free to actively participate in politics.

It was a risky gamble for a minority that has long felt vulnerable, with its most concentrated communities, like the one in Assiut, living in the same rural areas where the most vehement Islamists hold sway.

During Morsi's year in office, some of his hard-line allies increasingly spoke of Christians as enemies of Islam and warned them to remember they are a minority. When the wave of protests against Morsi began on June 30, Media supportive of his Muslim Brotherhood depicted the movement as dominated by Christians.

Still, at the ancient convent marking the last spot where the Holy Family is thought to have stayed before it left Egypt, hundreds gathered this week for an annual festival in upbeat mood. Children played, families picnicked, people lined up to buy blessed bread.

"Those who hate us are misled," said a convent member named Martyra, speaking to the AP while standing in a cave where ancient Egyptians quarried stones to build their cities.

"I am safe here in the convent but I worry and pray for those who live outside and have children."

Islamist cleric sentenced to 14 years in Egypt after burning Bible, calling Christian women prostitutes

The Christian Post (16.07.2013) - Justice Ahmed Talaat, of the North Cairo Court, handed down the sentence this week resulting in the contempt of Christianity charge after a highly publicized trial.

Judge Assem el-Gebali of The Misdemeanor Court of Nasr City, previously sentenced the Salafi preacher, who is also the owner of Al-Ummah TV channel, to five years in prison with hard labor resulting from a contempt of Christianity charge, after the controversial preacher burned a Bible during demonstrations at the U.S. embassy.

That means the total years of imprisonment for Abu Islam is 14 years when all the cases are combined.

Lawyer, Girguis Bebawi, explained that the Cairo Court ruling against Abu Islam was a victory for Coptic Christians because Abu Islam had insulted Christianity, defamed Coptic women by calling them prostitutes, and additionally insulted Jesus Christ.

Bebawi expressed his hope that the appeal on Abu Islam's ruling would be fair, and that it should be remembered the cleric strongly insulted Christianity and its icons, burned the Bible in front of the U.S. embassy, and claimed that female protestors in Tahrir were Christian prostitutes who desire to be harassed.

Coptic priest shot dead in Egypt attack

Reuters (06.07.2013) - Gunmen shot dead a Coptic Christian priest in Egypt's lawless Northern Sinai on Saturday in what could be the first sectarian attack since the military overthrow of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, security sources said.

The priest, Mina About Sharween, was attacked in the early afternoon while walking in the Masaeed area in El Arish.

The shooting in the coastal city was one of several attacks believed to be by Islamist insurgents that included firing at four military checkpoints in the region, the sources said.

Saturday's attacks on checkpoints took place in al-Mahajer and al-Safaa in Rafah, as well as Sheikh Zuwaid and al-Kharouba.

The violence follows attacks in which five police officers were killed in El Arish on Friday.

Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood has fiercely criticized Coptic Pope Tawadros, spiritual leader of Egypt's 8 million Christians, for giving his blessing to the removal of the president and attending the announcement by armed forces commander General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi suspending the constitution.

Islamists press blasphemy cases in a new Egypt

New York Times (18.06.2013) - Egypt's prosecutors have been flooded with blasphemy complaints since 2011 as Islamists exercising their new societal clout have pushed for prosecutions and courts have handed down steep fines and prison terms for insulting religion.

This month alone, a Christian teacher in Luxor was fined \$14,000 for insulting the Prophet Muhammad in class, a writer was given five years in prison for promoting atheism and a Christian lawyer was sentenced to one year for insulting Islam — in a private conversation.

Blasphemy cases were once rare in Egypt, and their frequency has increased sharply since the revolution. More than two dozen cases have gone to trial, and nearly all defendants have been found guilty. At least 13 have received prison sentences.

The campaign is driven at the local level, where religious activists have also forced officials to suspend teachers and professors. In at least 10 cases, Christian families have been expelled from their homes after perceived insults, according to Ishaq Ibrahim of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

Blasphemy complaints have been lodged across the society, against poor teachers in villages, a deputy prime minister, Egypt's richest man, and some of its most prominent writers and journalists. A firebrand Muslim preacher who tore up a Bible at a protest was sentenced to 11 years in prison. His son received eight years on similar charges.

"Contempt of religion, any religion, is a crime, not a form of expression," said Abdel Moneim Abdel Maqoud, a lawyer for the Muslim Brotherhood, which has not been instrumental in filing the cases but does not oppose them. "Is setting fire to the Bible freedom of expression? Is insulting religion freedom of expression?" He attributed the rise in cases to abuse of the "unprecedented freedom of expression" since the revolution.

The increase in blasphemy lawsuits reflects how profoundly the old order has been upset since President Hosni Mubarak was ousted. Under Mr. Mubarak, the security services often dealt with Islamists and other dissidents outside of the courts. Blasphemy prosecutions were rare and usually aimed at prominent intellectuals.

Mr. Mubarak's overthrow in 2011 removed those constraints and allowed for deeply conservative currents in Egyptian society to assert themselves in public life. On the local level, Islamist groups now face few restrictions from weakened state institutions, and the vagueness of laws banning contempt of religion allows for wide interpretations.

Most blasphemy cases have been directed against Egypt's Christian minority and filed by ultraconservative Muslims known as Salafis. Many lack clear evidence.

Last July, a Christian teacher, Beshoy Kamel from Sohag in central Egypt, heard that someone had created a Facebook page using his name and photograph and was posting messages insulting Islam and President Mohamed Morsi, his family said.

Mr. Kamel told the police about the page, his family said, and posted a warning that still stands on his personal page that the other account was not his.

But when a local Salafi received a private message from the account insulting him and his religion, he filed a complaint against Mr. Kamel, who was arrested soon afterward. Local Islamists heard about the case and spread copies of the texts from the insulting page, causing protests that twice forced the police to delay hearings.

The day the trial opened, Mr. Kamel was sentenced to six years in prison: three for contempt of religion, two for insulting the president and one for slander, court documents say.

Islamists protested outside the court, and a video shows them rushing to attack Mr. Kamel as the police led him outside.

Mr. Kamel's family now worries that any perceived infraction could lead to prosecution.

"There was none of that before the revolution," said Mr. Kamel's father, Kameel. "The Salafis started to breathe after the revolution, and some of them are taking advantage of the situation."

Court documents show that prosecutors never tried to prove that Mr. Kamel had administered the insulting page, which has since been removed but whose contents were quoted in case files. Egypt's Interior Ministry filed a report saying it could not determine the page's owner.

That made no difference to Salah Khanous, a Salafi lawyer involved in the case, who said there was a "systematic campaign" among Egypt's Christians to insult Islam.

"They should have cut his throat for it," Mr. Khanous said.

Other cases, too, did not reach the courts until the Islamists mobilized. The ordeal of Makarim Saeed, a school secretary in Deir El Gabrawi, a poor Christian farming village in central Egypt, started in February 2012 with a conversation with two Muslim teachers and within earshot of the Christian principal.

According to court documents, all four, including Mr. Saeed, testified that he said he had denigrated the Prophet Muhammad.

But for two weeks after the conversation, no charges were filed, and Mr. Saeed continued to work alongside his Muslim colleagues, his family said.

Then word of the conversation reached another teacher who belonged to the Salafi Call, an ultraconservative group, whose members went to the police.

Mr. Saeed was arrested that night. Six days later, as hundreds of Islamists protested outside, he was sentenced to six years in prison. Chants of "God is great!" echoed in the courtroom.

A local spokesman for the Salafi Call, Mohammed Arafat, said Islamists could not press such cases before the revolution because of the security apparatus. "Before the revolution, if two guys with beards walked in the street together, that was a terrorist organization," he said.

He saw the case as a legal matter, saying Mr. Saeed had broken the law and probably would have been killed by local Muslims had he not been arrested. "When the issue touches the prophet, our beliefs, our religion or the Koran, a Muslim will go out to get justice or die," Mr. Arafat said.

In a written response to a request for comment, Mr. Morsi's office said it did not comment on judicial rulings. It said the "freedom to litigate" had been one of the revolution's benefits, but hinted at the need for reform.

Mr. Saeed's family does not know what he said in school that day, but guessed that he had been joking or asking a question. His family doubts he meant harm. His brother Wafdi said that Mr. Saeed had worked alongside Muslims for three decades, but that since the revolution, relations between Muslims and Christians had changed.

"It used to be that if you had a fight with a Muslim, you would reconcile with the help of a sheik or a priest," he said. "But now if there is a conflict, they use the law against us."

Sufis in Egypt thrive with more than 15 million despite attacks by Islamist hardliners

AP (14.06.2013) - Egypt's Sufi Muslims say their places of worship are under threat by rising radicalism, as shrines sacred to them are coming under attack by Islamist hard-liners who deem them heretical.

Sufis follow a mystical philosophy of Islam that has traditionally been popular in Egypt, with some 15 million people in the country of 90 million belonging to dozens of Sufi orders. Sufis say the figure is likely even higher since many who practice it are not registered with orders.

But many of their practices are denounced by ultraconservative Salafis who follow a more literal interpretation of Islam. In particular, hard-liners point to Sufis' reverence for saints and holy men and for the shrines where they are buried. Salafis and other hard-liners consider such reverence as idolatrous. And with hard-liners emboldened and given a freer hand since the 2011 fall of autocrat Hosni Mubarak, attacks on shrines have escalated.

The Secretary-General of the Union of Sufis in Egypt, Abdullah al-Nasser Helmy, says more than 100 attacks against shrines have taken place across the country in several Nile Delta provinces, the Mediterranean coastal city of Alexandria and northern Sinai Peninsula where radical extremists are active.

In the northern Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweyid, for example, extremists bombed the shrine of the saint who gives the town its name. The tomb was not totally destroyed, so a few months later, they bombed it again. In other places, shrines have been defaced or damaged.

"Egypt is being severely affected by the Salafi ideology, which is hard-line and forces women to wear the face veil," said Helmy, expressing fears that extremists want to do away with all tombs related to prophets and religious figures.

Amr El-Mekky, an official in the Salafi Nour Party, said his party is against such attacks. "This is not the way of dealing with different people," he said. "We criticize anything like that," he said, adding that all Salafis should not be painted with the same brush.

Sufism is rooted in the focus on one's soul, nurturing it through prayer and dhikr, a ritual of supplication that often includes recitation of God's 99 names in Islam. Whirling

dervishes who spin and pray with their hands stretched upward until they are lost in worship are also associated with Sufism.

One of the most popular Sufi rites is the mawlid – a mass celebration to mark the birthdate of a saint. There are some 120 such commemorations a year in Egypt alone, with some Sufis traveling across the country and camping outside mosques and shrines for the occasions. The food they make is available for all to eat and their circles of worship open for all to join. As with many of Egypt's antiquities and ancient sites, many of the country's Sufi shrines are dilapidated and neglected by the government.

Sufism, which first appeared in Egypt in the 9th century, is popular among leading sheiks in Al-Azhar, the Sunni Muslim world's oldest seat of learning based in Cairo.

Some Sufi parties emerged after the country's uprising, though Sufis have largely stayed on the peripheries of politics while Islamists plunged in to dominate politics. Salafis are now the second largest bloc in the interim parliament, after the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt's president, Mohammed Morsi, is a veteran of the Brotherhood.

Helmy says Sufis are concerned that the new government and Salafis are slowly trying to encroach on mosques and force out moderate scholars.

Still, he says it is not in the nature of Sufis to be politicized or be consumed by worldly problems.

"Sufis only tremble from God's majesty, though they are being fought by the current government.

Amnesty condemns rise of blasphemy cases

The Daily News (12.06.2013) - Amnesty International released a statement on Tuesday condemning the rise of blasphemy cases in Egypt.

The international human rights advocacy organisation said blasphemy trials in Egypt are targeted mainly against bloggers, media professionals and Coptic Christians, especially those living in Upper Egypt.

According to the statement, the conviction of Demiana Abdel Nour, a 24-year-old teacher in Luxor accused of defaming Islam and insulting the Prophet Muhammad, "bodes ill for others in Egypt who have been facing trial on similar charges."

Parents of students at the Sheikh Sultan Primary School in Luxor had filed a complaint against Abdel Nour after she allegedly compared Prophet Muhammad to Pope Shenouda III, claiming that he performed more miracles than the prophet. On Tuesday she was fined EGP 100,000

Abdel Nour was taken into custody on 8 May, which Amnesty International had condemned in a statement two days later and demanded her "immediately release and the criminal case against her dropped."

The human rights organisation added that the goal for such cases is to condemn and criminalise criticism of religious beliefs.

"Slapping criminal charges with steep fines and, in most cases, prison sentences against people for simply speaking their mind or holding different religious beliefs is simply outrageous," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa director, in the report.

Luther added that defamation of religion charges should not be used to "trample over people's right to freedom of expression and conscience" and demanded that all charges be dropped.

The statement also condemned the verdict against Rumany Murad, a 25-year-old Christian lawyer, which sentenced him in absentia to one year imprisonment, in addition to an EGP 500 fine and EGP 100,000 compensation for the plaintiffs.

Two of Murad's fellow lawyers in Assiut had filed a lawsuit against him, accusing him of insulting Islam, according to the Amnesty statement.

The statement also said none of Murad's lawyers attended the opening of the court case on 27 April since they were threatened by Al-Jamaa Al-Islamiya's political wing, the Construction and Development Party.

Murad is expected to appeal the sentence and ask for the case to be transferred to the court in Cairo.

Egypt's worrying rise in criminal blasphemy cases

Amnesty International (11.06.2013) - Criminal "defamation of religion" charges must be dropped in a number of cases across Egypt, Amnesty International said today after a teacher was convicted for insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in the classroom.

A Luxor court on Tuesday fined Coptic Christian teacher Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour 100,000 Egyptian pounds (approx. US\$14,000) for allegedly insulting Islam and the Prophet Muhammad during one of her classes. It also referred compensation claims to civil court.

Her criminal conviction bodes ill for others in Egypt who have been facing trial on similar charges which the organization said are aimed at criminalizing criticism of or insult to religious beliefs.

"Slapping criminal charges with steep fines and, in most cases, prison sentences against people for simply speaking their mind or holding different religious beliefs is simply outrageous," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

"So-called 'defamation of religion' charges should not be used as a pretext to trample over people's right to freedom of expression and conscience, and all such charges should be dropped, and the resulting convictions overturned."

In another recent case, a 25-year-old Coptic Christian lawyer, Rumany Mourad, was also convicted on the charge of "defamation of religion". On 1 June a court in Assiut – 360km

south of Cairo – sentenced him in absentia to one year in prison, in addition to a 500 Egyptian pounds fine and 10,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$1,400) in compensation to the plaintiffs.

The case against him is based on a complaint lodged by two fellow lawyers in Assiut, who accused him of insulting Islam during a private conversation they had with him at the library of the Lawyer’s Syndicate in Assiut in July 2012.

One of the plaintiffs had apparently asked Rumany Murad’s opinion on “miracles” in the Bible. Despite trying to avoid the question, a few days later he discovered he had been accused of “defamation of religion”.

On at least two previous occasions, in an online debate and in person, Assiut lawyers had warned Rumany Murad to keep his views to himself after he had expressed disappointment at the results of the first round of presidential elections which saw the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi – who went on to become President – pitted against Ahmed Shafiq.

When his court case opened on 27 April, Rumany Murad’s lawyer did not attend because of threats to his safety. Lawyers from the Construction and Development Party, the political wing of the Gamaa Islamiya Islamist group, warned Rumany Murad on the safety of any lawyer attending court proceedings in Assiut.

Hearings in the case were reportedly characterized by a heavy presence of Islamist lawyers and their supporters.

During the second hearing on 11 May, one of the lawyers allegedly asked the judge to refer the case back to the prosecution to demand the application of the death penalty. Some of those present to hear the sentencing on 1 June reportedly complained that the punishment had been too lenient.

He is expected to appeal his in absentia conviction. His lawyers are seeking to transfer his trial to Cairo given concerns that the general climate in the court in Assiut is not conducive to upholding fair trial guarantees, including the right to adequate defence.

Before the latest two convictions, Amnesty International had received numerous recent reports of others accused and convicted of blasphemy in Egypt. Bloggers and media professionals whose ideas are “deemed offensive” as well as Coptic Christians – particularly in Upper Egypt – make up the majority of those targeted.

Another teacher from the Upper Egypt governorate of Souhag is facing trial on charges of “defamation of religion” on 25 June.

Teacher in Egypt sentenced for 'defaming' Islam

Christian fined beyond ability to pay; civil trial looms

Morning Star News (11.06.2013) – A judge in Upper Egypt found a Christian teacher guilty of defaming Islam today and levied a massive fine against her after prohibiting her lawyers from presenting a single witness during the trial.

Dimyana Obeid Abd Al-Nour escaped jail time, but she was fined 100,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$14,270), far beyond her ability to pay.

She is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, her father, Ebed Abd Al-Nour, told Morning Star News. He said his daughter did nothing wrong.

"I am very upset right now by the sentence," he said. "My daughter is innocent and should not have been given such a sentence."

He then became overcome with emotion and declined to comment further.

Al-Nour a 24-year-old, first-year teacher in Egypt, made less than US\$300 a month before she lost her position in the wake of the accusations against her. Her family is poor, and she could be sent to jail for failure to pay a court-ordered fine if unable to find the money.

Muslims created a clamor in the courtroom that put intense pressure on the judge, said a human rights advocate who was surprised that the guilty verdict did not send her to prison.

"I personally was expecting a prison sentence, but thank God she was only given a fine," said Mohammed Noubi, a human rights advocate with the Luxor office of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). "There was a lot of pressure and uproar inside the courtroom."

On April 10, three elementary schoolchildren at Sheikh Sultan Primary School in the village of Al-Edisat, Luxor Province, along with their parents and some teachers, complained to the school administration that Al-Nour had made blasphemous comments while teaching. Two days earlier, while teaching a class about history and religion, she discussed pharaoh Amenhotep IV, later known as Akhenaten, who did away with all other Egyptian gods in favor of sun worship in ancient Egypt (see Morning Star News, May 15).

Al-Nour also reportedly expressed her admiration for the former head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the late Pope Shenouda III, in class. In some versions of the alleged incident, she also made comparisons between Shenouda and Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Three students said she made a gesture expressing disgust with Muhammad.

When the complaint was made, a group of head teachers and parents, known as the School Council, conducted an investigation into the allegations. They found there wasn't any reliable evidence that Al-Nour had committed any offense, according to EIPR sources.

When the students were questioned, three of them said she had said or done something wrong. But the three students' versions of what gesture Al-Nour allegedly made and what she allegedly said did not match up, according to EIPR. Also, the rest of the students in the class, 10 in all, said Al-Nour was blameless and never even mentioned the late pope or Muhammad.

A survey of the staff at the school revealed that she was widely respected by her colleagues, according to EIPR.

The School Council's report was turned into the provincial governor's office and to the legal department of the local office of the national Ministry of Education, which then conducted its own investigation; like the School Council, it found no crime had been committed. By chance, a school inspector happened to be monitoring the class Al-Nour was teaching but found nothing wrong with her instruction.

The case likely would have been dropped, but two attorneys representing the parents of one student went directly to the prosecutor's office, obligating officials to conduct their own investigation. In what are known as "hisba cases," Egyptian law allows citizens to file lawsuits against anyone who has transgressed the "exalted right of God." Many blasphemy cases are filed in such a manner.

In court, Al-Nour's lawyers were prepared to bring three crucial witnesses, including Mustafa Mikki, principal of the school. In an interview with the Coptic weekly Al-Watani, Mikki, a Muslim, said that those who brought the charges against Al-Nour were "fanatics."

He also confirmed that none of the stories of the three children who accused Al-Nour matched. But the judge in Al-Nour's case, Muhammad Al-Tamawy, would not let Mikki or anyone else testify on her behalf.

Noubi, who has helped Al-Nour's legal team for EIPR, said that in addition to the fine, Al-Nour has now been referred to a civil court, as one of the complaining parents has filed a lawsuit against her. In order for damages to be awarded in the civil case, Al-Nour first must have been convicted of a crime. It is unknown how much money is sought in the civil case.

Al-Nour, who has attended only one of her hearings, remains in hiding. According to EIPR, the courtroom and surrounding area was swarming with conservative Muslims protesting against her during the hearing she attended.

Since then, she has been too sick to attend any of the hearings, according to human rights activists and her family. Al-Nour was arrested and held for two days, until her family was able to post bail with the help from the church.

Noubi said her lawyers plan to appeal.

The accusations against Al-Nour reflect a growing trend in Egypt of disproportionate use of the nation's blasphemy statutes against members of Egypt's Christian minority since the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi came into power in June 2012, according to human rights advocates.

Egypt teacher fined LE100,000 for insulting Islam

Luxor misdemeanors court finds teacher guilty of insulting Islam and Prophet Mohamed, fining her LE100,000 for blasphemy

MENA (11.06.2013) - Coptic teacher Demyana Obeid Abd El-Nour was found guilty on charges of insulting Islam and the Prophet Mohamed by a Luxor misdemeanors court on Tuesday. She now faces a LE100,000 fine.

The sentencing took place amidst rigid security and chanting from Islamists who believe Abd El-Nour should receive a harsher verdict for her crime.

Last April, parent sof students at a primary school in South Luxor accused Abd El-Nour of showing contempt for Islam during a talk about religion.

The verdict is not the first of its kind.

Bishoy Kamel, another Coptic teacher, was sentenced to six years in prison last September for insulting Islam on Facebook.

It is expected that Abd EL-Nour will appeal the verdict in an attempt to reduce the fine.

More attacks on Coptic Orthodox community, two churches set on fire

The two attacks targeted the church of St. Mary in a suburb of Alexandria and that of the small village of Menpal in Upper Egypt. In subsequent clashes one person died following a heart attack

(AsiaNews / 20.05.2013) - The Egyptian Coptic community faces a new escalation of attacks by Islamists. On 17 May, two churches were attacked with Molotov cocktails in the district of Dakhela, west of Alexandria, Egypt, and Menpal in Upper Egypt.

In Alexandria over 20 thousand Muslims attacked the church of St. Mary setting fire to the entrance of the building and shattering windows. A man died of a heart attack in the attack. In response to the violence, hundreds of Copts left their homes to create a human wall around the building. According to witnesses some Islamists armed with pistols and knives fired on the crowd, causing some injuries.

At the origin of the clashes is a dispute between two neighbors. Basem Ramzy Michael, a Coptic Christian, is reported to have behaved inappropriately towards the sister of Alloshy Hamada, a Muslim with a criminal record. In a short time the dispute between the two erupted into a sectarian clash.

A similar incident occurred last May 13, in the village of Menbal, Matay district, north of the province of Minya, where a Muslim mob stormed the church called the Tadros el-Mashreki and assaulted one person inside. The assailants threw stones at the building, looted Christian shops nearby and burned cars. The Coptic minority has been threatened with expulsion from the village. Once again the violence was sparked by a trivial quarrel between two young people. Some young Muslims are reported to have made advances to a group of Coptic girls, as they entered the church. Irritated at having been ignored the group waited for the young Christian girls to leave the Church and threw bags filled with urine at them. The young people were rescued by some Christians peers who have started a heated argument with Muslims. As in other cases, the news spread across the village. In a short time a crowd of Islamists rallied in front of the church, forcing young people to take refuge inside.

Ehab Ramzy, a Coptic Christian, prosecutor in the province and former member of parliament, said Menbal has a Muslim majority, while Manshiet Menbal, 10 kilometers away, has Coptic majority. "The Christians of the two villages - he explains - have nothing to do with the fight that took place in Manshiet Menbal. The young people were attacked just because they are Christian." Two young Muslim men were arrested by police in Menbal. In the coming days there will be a reconciliation meeting between the two communities. "Now - he adds - the security forces are trying to arrest some young Copts. They have become a bargaining chip to seek reconciliation."

AsiaNews sources underline that the attacks against the Coptic community are now a daily occurrence and are being ignored by the police, who because of the climate of chaos, let communities resolve disputes among themselves, although this can result in dead or wounded. The most serious incident took place on April 7 in front of the Cathedral of St. Mark in Cairo, where a group of Islamists attacked funerals of four Christians killed in sectarian clashes that took place on April 5 in the district of Khosous, on the outskirts of the capital, with stones and Molotov cocktails. The assault, which took place before the eyes of the police, left two dead and over 80 injured. A church building caught fire.

Christian teacher accused of insulting Islam detained in Egypt

Barnabas Fund (14.05.2013) - A 24-year-old Christian teacher in [Egypt](#) detained over allegations that she defamed Islam during a school lesson has gone on hunger strike.

Demiana Ebeid Abdelnour, who teaches social science in Luxor, was arrested on 8 May after the parents of three children accused her of insulting Islam and Muhammad.

She was initially ordered to be held for four days, but this period was extended on Saturday (11 May) to a further 15 days. Demiana started a hunger strike on 10 May; she has not been allowed to be transferred from prison to hospital.

Amnesty International has called for the Christian's immediate release and for the criminal case against her to be dropped. Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director, said:

It is outrageous that a teacher finds herself behind bars for teaching a class. If she made some professional mistake, or deviated from the school curriculum, an internal review should have sufficed.

The accusations against Demiana, who taught at three different schools, were made following a lesson she gave at one school on 8 April about religious life at the time of the pharaohs. Two days later, she was told that she could no longer teach at this particular school because she had been accused of defaming Islam.

Demiana was questioned by three committees, to which she denied the allegations and was absolved. But the local education department nevertheless suspended her pending further investigation.

The teacher's union has upheld her innocence and said that it has assembled a team of lawyers to defend her.

Since the Egyptian revolution, a number of Christians have been jailed for defaming Islam.

[Makram Diab](#), a school secretary, was given double the maximum sentence for Defamation of Religion following a dispute with a Muslim colleague in February 2012.

[Gamal Abdou Massoud](#) (17) was jailed in April 2012 for three years for posting cartoons deemed insulting to Islam on his Facebook page. This followed a similar case in November 2011 involving 23-year-old Christian, Ayman Youssef Mansour, who was also

sentenced to three years in prison for comments he wrote on his Facebook page that were considered derogatory to Islam.

Amnesty's Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui said:

Any laws barring such speech violate freedom of expression, and are in breach of [Egypt's](#) international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Four Coptic Christians detained for St. Marks Cathedral attack in Egypt

The Christian Post (15.04.2013) - In the wake of the attack on Coptic Christians attending a funeral at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, an Egyptian Oppositions Court judge decided that four Christians should remain in detention for 15 days pending an investigation into who participated in the attack.

Amir Nassif, an attorney for the accused Copts, expressed disbelief at the ruling, given that recordings taken from the attack show security forces had in fact attacked the cathedral.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide stated that it appeared that the four Christians were detained for the sole reason of being at the cathedral during the attack, according to the Coptic Maspero Youth Union.

The four men were among hundreds of people who attended the funeral at St. Mark's Cathedral for several Coptic men who were killed in sectarian violence in Khosous a few days previous. The town is only 10 miles from Cairo.

"These arrests come at a time when the Coptic community in Egypt is still coming to terms with an unprecedented attack on the headquarters of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the violence in Khosous," Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at CSW, said in a statement.

"Two Copts were killed during the attack on the Cathedral; four more died in Khosous, yet not one of their attackers has been arrested. Such discrepancies in the discharge of justice contribute to impunity, and can only foster more sectarianism," he added.

Local reports indicate that as mourners left the funeral they were hit with rocks, petrol bombs, and Molotov cocktails. The attack forced the funeral goers to seek cover inside the cathedral. The violence went unimpeded for hours as security forces stood idly by as aggressors threw objects from the roofs of surrounding buildings and by people who had climbed the walls of the Cathedral.

Egyptian Religious Ministry bans interactions with Evangelical church

The Christian Post (15.04.2013) - Sabri Ebada, undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf in Gharbiya, said the ministry issued a written order to stop dealing with the Evangelical Church in Egypt for reasons that were not immediately revealed.

The Ministry of Awqaf's decision was signed by Sheikh Mohamed Abdel Razik Abdel Hadi, the undersecretary for mosques, and Dr. Abdu Ali Meklad, senior undersecretary of the ministry. The decision prevents all departments across the country from having dealings with the Evangelical Church of Egypt.

According to Sada el-Balad's website, Ebada said the written decision was issued by Dr. Meklad, deputy of the Minister of Awqaf and head of religious affairs.

"This takes place in the context of what is called 'Brotherhooding' and 'Salafizing' of the ministry," added Ebada, who pointed out that the Muslim Brotherhood challenges their opponents with decisions issued by the head of the religious affairs department of the Ministry of Awqaf.

"Remarks by the spokesperson of the ministry are made to media outlets without official review and are intended to mislead public opinion," Ebada said in a statement.

Ebada noted that Awqaf's department in Gharbiya will organize a protest in solidarity with the Evangelical Church and demand disclosure of the reasons for the decision, which he described as "strange."

For his part, Dr. Ikram Lamie, the spokesperson for the Evangelical Church in Egypt, said he would immediately contact the community leader, Dr. Safwat el-Bayadi, and his deputy, Dr. Andrea Zaki, to discuss the ministry's reasons for issuing such a resolution to its departments in Gharbiya.

"The situation is a warning sign of a possible repeat of what happened under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser when he seized lands belonging to the Evangelical Church. Part of these lands were recovered under President Anwar Sadat, and the remainder were recovered under former President Hosni Mubarak," Dr. Lamie added.

Dr. Lamie said that anything is a possibility after this decision, and he did not rule out the possibility that the decision is a precursor to seize lands that are held by the Evangelical Church.

"No discord has recently occurred between the church and the Ministry of Awqaf which would justify such a decision," noted Dr. Lamie, who said that the decision was made while the community leader was in the U.S.

Muslim Brotherhood has soured Americans on Egypt, per poll

The Huffington Post (15.04.2013) - The Islamic political party known as the Muslim Brotherhood has soured American attitudes towards Egypt, arguably America's most important Arab ally, since its candidate Mohamed Morsi won presidential elections there in June 2012.

That's according to a poll released Friday (April 12) by the Arab American Institute in Washington D.C.

Morsi's term has been dogged by charges that he opts for authoritarian measures such as martial law. Muslim-Christian clashes have also shadowed his term; there were

clashes on April 5 in the town of Khosus that killed four Coptic Christians and one Muslim, and violence also marred the April 7 funeral for the Copts who were killed in that conflict.

According to the Institute's poll of 2,300 likely voters, only 36 percent of Americans had favorable views of Egypt, down from 66 percent in 1997. At least some of the decline has been attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood, which won Egypt's parliamentary elections in January 2012, and to Morsi himself, who won the presidency last June by a 52-48 percent margin.

The poll, which was conducted in March, also found a huge gap in Americans' favorability ratings of the Muslim Brotherhood and Muslims themselves.

Americans had far more favorable views of Muslims than the Muslim Brotherhood. The survey found that 40 percent of Americans had favorable views of Muslims, while only four percent of Americans saw the election victories of the Muslim Brotherhood as a positive development.

Other key findings from the survey:

* More than half of Americans (53 percent) believe the Muslim Brotherhood is not committed to democracy while 15 percent said they were.

* Nearly one-third of Americans,(32 percent) said they would be less likely to visit an Egypt governed by the Muslim Brotherhood, compared to five percent who said they would be more likely to visit.

* Almost half of Americans (47 percent) said the U.S. should stop providing financial aid to Egypt while it is governed by the Muslim Brotherhood, while 22 percent the aid should continue.

"President Mohamed Morsi needs to acknowledge the deep and longstanding problem of sectarian violence in Egypt and take decisive steps to address it before it escalates further," said Nadim Houry, deputy director for the North Africa and Middle East program at Human Rights Watch.

In a statement, Houry also called on the Egyptian government to reform laws that discriminate against Christians' right to worship.

Egypt's new constitution, which took effect in December 2012, explicitly recognizes the right of Christians to have their own places of worship. But the Morsi government has not erased an earlier law that requires Christians, and no other religious group, to obtain a presidential decree in order to build a new church.

Copts arrested following attack on St Mark's Cathedral

CSW (12.04.2013) - Egyptian authorities have arrested four Coptic men who were present in St Mark's Cathedral when it was attacked last weekend.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) was informed Shadi Sami was arrested at 4 am, while Michael Morcos was arrested at 6 am by Special Forces who stormed the back entrance of his apartment. It appears the men were detained for being in the grounds of

St Mark's Cathedral when it was attacked last Sunday. Two other Coptic men were also arrested in the early hours of today, according to the Coptic Maspero Youth Union.

The men were amongst hundreds of people who attended Sunday's funeral at St Mark's Cathedral for four Coptic men who were killed in sectarian violence last Friday in Khosous, a town 10 miles from Cairo.

As mourners left the funeral, they were pelted with stones, petrol bombs, and Molotov cocktails, forcing them to seek shelter in the grounds of the Cathedral. As stones and other missiles continued to be hurled from the roofs of surrounding buildings and by people who had climbed the walls of the Cathedral, young Coptic men took up sticks and rocks to retaliate. Two Coptic men were killed during the violence, and 84 were injured, including Michael Morcos, who required sixteen stitches to the head after being hit by a glass bottle. When police eventually arrived at the scene, they fired teargas into the grounds of the Cathedral and nothing to end the attack, which continued for at least five hours.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at CSW, said: "These arrests come at a time when the Coptic community in Egypt is still coming to terms with an unprecedented attack on the headquarters of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the violence in Khosous. Two Copts were killed during the attack on the Cathedral; four more died in Khosous, yet not one of their attackers has been arrested. Such discrepancies in the discharge of justice contribute to impunity, and can only foster more sectarianism. They also sends a clear message that Christians are not viewed as equal citizens, despite the government's verbal protestations to the contrary, and the fact that Egypt is party to international covenants that prohibit discrimination. Being in the Cathedral identifies these men as victims, not perpetrators. CSW therefore urges their immediate release, and calls on the Egyptian authorities to focus instead on apprehending assailants caught on camera as they attacked the Cathedral with stones and guns."

Leading Egyptian political figures condemn attacks on St. Mark's Cathedral

The Christian Post (08.04.2013) - In the wake of the unprovoked attack on mourners during a funeral service at Cairo's St. Mark's Cathedral, numerous leading political figures have come out and denounced such acts of violence and blamed complicit security forces for choosing who does and does not get protection under Egyptian law.

"What happened yesterday in El-Khosos City in Qaliubiya [Greater Cairo Governorate], and today in front of the St. Mark Cathedral in Abbasiya, is an unfortunate tragedy that points to the failure of the society and the state to deal with citizenship issues and protecting citizens' lives," Amr Moussa, a former presidential candidate, said in a statement.

Others denounced the rise in sectarian violence that has been fostered under Egyptian President Mahmoud Morsi, which is predominantly targeting Coptic Christians.

"What is happening in front of the cathedral is a crime and a fall for the rule of law ... what's happening is the result of escalating sectarian strife caused by extremism that violates Copts' rights," Dr. Amr Hamzawi, chairman of the Free Egypt Party, told Mideast Christian News.

There are several reports suggesting that Egyptian police were aiding the attackers, who were seen by witnesses throwing stones and discharging live rounds towards Coptic Christians at the cathedral.

"The attacks on those mourning at the Khosos martyrs' funeral and the injury of so many people, without resolving the issue, is a weakness and complicity of security forces," Sayed Abdel Aal, head of the Assembly Party, told MCN.

"What is occurring in front of the cathedral is a national catastrophe with the approval of the Ministry of Interior and the backing of the ruling regime," Abdel Aal continued. "They promote sectarian strife and support it in order to distract people from the political crisis with a sectarian one."

"When people who use racial slur against Christians are being rewarded with a place in the constitutional committee, and when the person who tore the Bible is granted bail, then there's no reason to be astonished at what's happening," popular satirist Bassem Youssef recently stated.

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Egypt's Islamic authority asserts role, clashes with Brotherhood

Reuters (29.03.2013) - Egypt's leading Islamic authority Al-Azhar said on Thursday its clerics must be consulted on a law allowing the state to issue Islamic bonds, setting it at odds with the Muslim Brotherhood which drove the legislation through parliament last week.

It marks the first time Al-Azhar, a thousand-year-old seat of Islamic learning, has said its Senior Scholars Authority should be consulted on issues pertaining to Islamic law as set out in Egypt's new, Islamist-tinged constitution.

Al-Azhar's intervention could set a precedent for clerical oversight of other affairs of state. The Salafi Nour Party has said Al-Azhar must also approve an agreement Egypt is seeking with the International Monetary Fund because it includes a loan upon which Egypt will pay interest.

The Islamic bond, or sukuk law, will allow Egypt to issue debt compliant with Islamic principles, allowing the state to tap a new area of finance as President Mohamed Mursi's administration grapples with an unaffordable budget deficit.

The sukuk law has been a source of friction between the Brotherhood, whose Freedom and Justice Party leads the upper house of parliament, and more hardline Islamists who say it should first have been approved by Al-Azhar.

At a meeting on Thursday, Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Institute chaired by Grand Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb said it shared the view that the law should have been referred to the Senior Scholars Authority, in line with the new constitution.

"The Institute is of the opinion that the draft should have been referred to the Senior Scholars Authority for discussion and so it could give its legal opinion, in line with its duty," it said in a statement.

It criticized the law approved by parliament last week, saying it empowered the prime minister to form the body entrusted with issuing the Islamic bonds. It said this "disregarded the Senior Scholars Authority of the noble Azhar".

The Nour Party, a hardline Salafi group, had demanded the upper house of parliament refer the law to Al-Azhar before MPs voted on it. But the FJP used its majority to pass the law despite a fierce row with Nour Party members during the session.

The law must now be ratified by Mursi.

Abdullah Badran, head of the Nour Party's parliamentary bloc, said in a phone interview the group was now urging Mursi not to ratify the law without first presenting it to the Senior Scholars Authority for review.

The Nour Party believes Al-Azhar must sign off on a deal Egypt is seeking with the IMF because it includes a \$4.8 billion loan on which Egypt will pay interest. The payment of interest is deemed as impermissible in Islam.

Al-Azhar's role in affairs of state is embedded in article four of the new constitution. It says the Senior Scholars Authority must be consulted on all matters pertaining to sharia.

It does not, however, say whether Al-Azhar's view is binding on the government, nor does it make clear the scope of Al-Azhar's role - ambiguity which critics say will cause future political and legal conflict.

Egypt book blasts Brotherhood, becomes best-seller

Reuters (05.03.2013) - An Egyptian lawyer whose dissenting voice got him thrown out of the Muslim Brotherhood examines what he calls the group's hidden radicalism in a book that has become a best-seller in Cairo.

Tharwat al-Khribawy's "Secret of the Temple" has been dismissed by Brotherhood leaders as part of a smear campaign.

But its success points to a deep mistrust harboured by some Egyptians towards a once-outlawed movement that has moved to the heart of power since Hosni Mubarak was toppled and its candidate secured the presidency.

In its 12th print run since November, the book is being sold in upmarket shops and on street corners, pointing to a thirst for information about a group whose inner workings remain a mystery months after President Mohamed Mursi came to power.

Expelled from the group a decade ago, Khribawy says he aims to expose dictatorship and extremism inside the Brotherhood. In the process, he has joined a media war being waged to shape views in Egypt's deeply polarised political landscape.

Asked to comment on the book, one senior Muslim Brotherhood leader dismissed its content as "fallacies". Another said that to comment on such a book would be a waste of time.

"I want to make all people know the reality about the Brotherhood," Khirbawy said in an interview with Reuters.

Khirbawy sees the way he was kicked out of the Brotherhood as an illustration of the group's authoritarian streak.

He was disciplined in 2001 at a "Brotherhood court" for publishing three articles that criticised the group for not engaging with other opposition parties - a criticism still levelled at the Brotherhood today. "The Brotherhood does not know the virtue of differences of opinion," he said.

Demonised for decades by Egypt's military-backed autocracy, the Brotherhood sees such attacks as propaganda concocted by opponents who have struggled to get organised and carve out their place in the new order.

But Khirbawy's arguments resonate among those Egyptians who believe the Brotherhood aims to subvert new freedoms for their own ends to set up a new Islamist autocracy - a view hardened late last year when Mursi unilaterally expanded his powers.

Mursi defends Qutb

Khirbawy has been extensively interviewed by independent Egyptian media that are broadly critical of the Brotherhood.

In his book, he explores the ideology of Mursi and the small group of leaders at the top of the movement, examining their devotion to Sayyid Qutb, a radical ideologue executed in 1966 for plotting to kill president Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Qutb, a Brotherhood leader, formulated some of the most radical ideas in political Islam. These included the idea that modern-day Muslim societies were living in a pre-Islamic state of ignorance. His most radical work, written while he was in prison, advocated violence to bring about change.

Mursi is on the record as defending Qutb as a thinker "who liberates the mind and touches the heart". In a 2009 talk show appearance posted on YouTube last year, Mursi said Qutb "finds the real vision of Islam that we are looking for".

Among Brotherhood watchers, it is no secret that the Brotherhood's current leadership were heavily influenced by Qutb, who also wrote more broadly on Islam.

But "trying to give the impression that Mursi is a Qutbist is an exaggeration" said Khalil al-Anani, an expert on Islamist movements. "Yes they are influenced by him in terms of the purity of ideas, but not in terms of believing in violence or judging people as non-believers," he said.

Brotherhood spokesman Ahmed Aref said the movement, like all groups, had rules that must be respected, adding that it was not the first time a member had left over the years and spoken out. "The difference this time is the media," he said.

A well-oiled campaign machine and grass-roots support base helped the Brotherhood sweep the first post-Mubarak parliamentary vote at the end of 2011, but the assembly

was disbanded in June when Egypt's highest court declared the election rules unconstitutional.

Suspicion that the Brotherhood plans to dominate Egypt means the group may find it harder to win votes as fresh parliamentary elections near.

"They don't have people who can explain themselves in a good way, particularly those who talk to the Egyptian public," said Anani. "There is a huge gap of mistrust."

Two Coptic Orthodox children aged 9 and 10 risk jail on blasphemy charges

Asia News (01.03.2013) - Yet another case of violence and abuse against Coptic Christians. On 26 February, the Court of Bani Suef (Upper Egypt) dismissed the appeal of the families of the two children Rzik Nagy, aged 10, and Mina Farag, 9, accused of desecrating the Koran. They have been detained in a juvenile prison since April 2012. The case has attracted a lot of criticism in the country. Many claim the trial was illegal and devoid of any logic.

Sami Harak, a lawyer and member of the *Egyptian Movement Against Religious Discrimination*, points out that "the Bani Suef case is a sad precedent and in the future there may be others for religious defamation, especially against children of the Christian faith."

[On 9 April 2012](#) the two were stopped by a local imam who accused them of having urinated on the Koran. Before calling the police, the Muslim cleric led Nabil and Nady to the local church demanding the priest punish them. At the priest's refusal the Imam took the two children to the local court with three other Muslims of the village. Without a trial, the judge detained the two children in a youth detention center on charges of religious desecration. Their parents' appeals and those of the local Christian community to local authorities have proven fruitless. Nabil and Nady are both illiterate and according to the parents could not have known what was written on those pages, found in among rubbish.

If they are convicted, the case will mark a serious precedent for the country. For Saaid Abdel Hafez, a Human Rights lawyer, a double mistake has been committed. Given their age and the fact they are Christians they can not be punished under Sharia law. Local Muslims should seek compensation from parents and representatives of the local Coptic community. The second and more serious mistake was the trial by a civil court under pressure from a religious leader.

Fr. Rafic Greiche, spokesman for the Egyptian Catholic Church, launches an alarm over the growing Islamization of the country. "The Muslim Brotherhood - he says - are quietly replacing all local officials in governorates with people loyal to them. Egypt is increasingly becoming an Islamic country, with serious risks especially for the Christian minority." According to the priest these changes are occurring silently and far from the eyes of the media. Islamists are replacing second and third rank officials, which act as "advisors" to the leaders of the various sectors of the economy and Justice system. "The general population - he says - notice nothing strange. But dozens of people are being laid off and replaced with others who are openly close to the extremist establishment." Thanks to this "infiltration of the most intransigent wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis act without the fear of being punished."

[On 24 February](#), a group of Islamists had surrounded the church of Abu Maqar in the Shubra al-Kheima district of Cairo, stopping for a second time the construction of the building. The extremists raided the site undisturbed, claiming that there was no necessary permit. Last July 6, hundreds of Salafists has laid siege to the site for more than 24 hours and hoisted a banner reading "Mosque Ebad al-Rahman", telling Christians to leave the place. Many of them were armed. (S.C.)

Muslims riot in southern Egypt looking for woman suspected of converting to Christianity

AP (01.03.2013) - Dozens of Muslim residents threw firebombs and rocks at police on Friday as they tried to storm a church in southern Egypt in search of a woman suspected of converting to Christianity, security officials said.

Clashes between Copts and Muslims usually are sparked by disputes over rumors of conversion, Muslim-Christian love affairs and the construction of churches. Violence between Egypt's Christians and Muslims has risen in the past two years in the wake of the country's uprising that ousted long-time President Hosni Mubarak, but also weakened security across the nation.

Officials said 11 policemen were wounded in the clashes in the town of Kom Ombo, which is near Aswan High Dam, about 980 kilometers (608 miles) south of Cairo. Coptic Christian activist Ibrahim Louis said 12 Christians also were wounded, including one man who was in serious condition.

The fighting erupted late Thursday night when hundreds of Muslim residents tried to get inside the church. Police used tear gas to keep the crowd from storming the church as some of the residents burnt tires along a major highway and cut off traffic. The clashes erupted again Friday afternoon when dozens of residents again threw firebombs and rocks at police. In anticipation of renewed clashes, police had set up checkpoints and increased their presence around the church.

Tensions rose after a 36 year-old Muslim woman, who has been missing for five days, was allegedly seen outside the church with a female Christian friend on Thursday. Some residents believe the woman, who is a teacher, converted to Christianity and is hiding inside the church. Others suspect she was forced into conversion and is being held against her will inside the church.

Egypt's Coptic Christians, who make up about 10 percent of the country's 85 million people, have long complained of discrimination by the state. They are the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

Muslims attack Coptic Christians, church in Egypt

The Washington Times (18.02.2013) - Muslims in Egypt set fire to a Christian church in Fayoum Province over the weekend, the second such assault against the village's Coptic Christian population in just more than a month.

Attackers also tore down the church's cross and threw stones at the Christians, according to a report in Morning Star News.

Four people, including the priest, were injured, the report said.

"It was an ordinary day, starting with the liturgy and Sunday school," said one 30-year-old Coptic Christian who attends the church, according to the Morning Star News. "As usual, most people leave after services, but a few people stayed at the church. While we were sitting, we saw all these people coming like they do on the television at Tahrir Square — coming to attack the church."

Between 20 and 30 Muslim villagers attacked the church, according to the report. They started with rocks, and smashed windows and pelted church-goers. But one finally tossed a Molotov cocktail-type bomb into the building. The mob then pushed into the church and destroyed crosses, icons and the building's support structure, the Morning Star News reported. Ultimately, the dome collapsed.

The attack is the second Muslim-on-Christian incident since Jan. 15.

In mid-January, hundreds of Muslims fueled by calls to defend Islam attacked a community center with ties to Coptic Christianity that was built in Fanous village, Morning Star News said.

Egypt Copts get death in absentia over film

Eight people convicted on charges linked to anti-Islam film that sparked riots in parts of the Muslim World.

Al Jazeera (28.01.2013) - An Egyptian court has convicted in absentia seven Egyptian Coptic Christians and a Florida-based American pastor, sentencing them to death on charges linked to an anti-Islam film that sparked riots in parts of the Muslim world.

The case was seen as largely symbolic because the defendants, most of whom live in the United States, are all outside Egypt and are thus unlikely to ever face the sentence.

The charges were brought in September during a wave of public outrage in Egypt over the amateur film, which was produced by an Egyptian-American Copt.

The low-budget "Innocence of Muslims," parts of which were made available online, portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, womaniser and buffoon.

Egypt's official news agency said the court found the defendants guilty of harming national unity, insulting and publicly attacking Islam and spreading false information - charges that carry the death sentence.

'Insulting Islam'

Maximum sentences are common in cases tried in absentia in Egypt. Capital punishment decisions are reviewed by the country's chief religious authority, which must approve or reject the sentence. A final verdict is scheduled on January 29.

The man behind the film, Mark Basseley Youssef, was among those convicted.

He was sentenced in a California court earlier this month to one year in federal prison for probation violations in an unrelated matter.

Youssef, 55, admitted that he had used several false names in violation of his probation order and obtained a driver's license under a false name. He was on probation for a bank fraud case.

Multiple calls to Youssef's attorney in Southern California, Steve Seiden, were not returned on Wednesday.

Florida-based Terry Jones, another of those sentenced, is the pastor of Dove World Outreach, a church of less than 50 members in Gainesville, Florida, not far from the University of Florida.

He has said he was contacted by the filmmaker to promote the film, as well as Morris Sadek, a conservative Coptic Christian in the US who posted the video clips on his website.

In a telephone interview on Wednesday, Jones said the ruling "shows the true face of Islam" - one that he views as intolerant of dissent and opposed to basic freedoms of speech and religion.

'Freedom of speech'

"We can speak out here in America," Jones said. "That freedom means that we criticise government leadership, religion even at times Islam is not a religion that tolerates any type of criticism."

A reporter for the AP news agency knocked on the door of Sadek's home in Chantilly, Virginia. No one answered.

The connection to the film of the other five sentenced by the court was not immediately clear.

They include two who work with Sadek at a Coptic group in the US that has called for an independent Coptic state, a priest who hosts TV programmes from the US and a lawyer living in Canada who has previously sued the Egyptian state over riots in 2000 that left 21 Christians dead.

The other person is a woman who converted to Christianity and is a staunch critic of Islam.

The official news agency report said that during the trial, the court reviewed a video of some defendants calling for an independent Coptic state in Egypt, and another of Jones burning the Quran, Islam's holy book.

The prosecutor asked for the maximum sentence, accusing those charged of seeking to divide Egypt and incite sedition. All the defendants, except Jones, hold Egyptian nationality, the agency added.

Upper Egypt, thousands of Islamic extremists attack a Christian village

The second case in less than a week. The attack took place yesterday in el-Marashda, predominantly Christian, in the province of Quena (Upper Egypt). Muslims burned at least six homes of Coptic Christians and tried to demolish the local church. Wrath unleashed at the alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Christian. Village Iman calls on youth to protect Christian shops.

AsiaNews (19.01.2013) - More attacks against the Coptic minority in Upper Egypt. A thousand Muslims attacked the predominantly Christian village of el-Marashda (province of Quena, Upper Egypt). Incited by outside religious authorities, extremists burned down homes and shops and tried to demolish the local church. The attack, which took place yesterday, was interrupted by the arrival of the police, who arrested 10 Muslims. Since yesterday evening, a crowd of radical Islamic have blocked access to the city, to prevent the police from taking those arrested away. The police responded by firing tear gas. For safety, the authorities ordered the Christian population not to leave their homes and the local parish has canceled the celebrations for the Coptic Orthodox epiphany. In solidarity with christian community, the Iman of the village calls on muslim youth to protect Christian shops.

Anba Kyrillos, Coptic Orthodox bishop of Nag Hammadi, said the group of extremists, including many Salafis, attacked the village in revenge for a Christian accused of abusing a Muslim girl of 6. The rumors about the pedophilia case had emerged in recent days, sparking tension between the two communities, but police investigations have cleared the man. The girl did not suffer any kind of violence. The Salafis have attacked the Christian village all the same, in spite of outcome of the inquiry.

Local sources say that the representatives of the Christian and Muslim communities, met this morning for a reconciliation. However, the police continue to patrol the town for fear of attacks.

Yesterday's was the second attack in less than a week. [On 15 January](#), hundreds of Islamists demolished a building owned by the Coptic Orthodox Church of St. George Taymah in the diocese of the Fayyum (Egypt central 133 km south of Cairo).

After the fall of President Mubarak and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, attacks against churches and Christian buildings have increased. In the poorest areas of the country, but also in the capital, cuts to public security and the army have left them powerless in the face of these attacks instigated by Salafis. With their money and their promises, the extremists urge residents to drive Christians out to take over their lands, taking advantage of the absence of a clear law that regulates the construction of religious buildings.

Coptic church building destroyed

CSW (17.01.2013) - A building in a village south west of Cairo housing a reception hall and nursery was destroyed yesterday by a mob following a rumour that it was a church.

According to Watani Newspaper, around 5,000 Islamist extremists armed with hammers axes and old electricity poles descended on the building in Fanous Village in Tamia District and razed the structure to the ground.

The building was owned by a Coptic society affiliated to Mar-Girgis (St George's) Church and had been erected on land donated to the church by a Coptic villager. Construction began two months ago, after all official permissions had been secured. The first floor had been completed and the second floor was under construction when the attack occurred.

According to Coptic villagers, the violence was preceded by calls from local mosques to defend Muslims against Christians who were building a church. The attack is said to have occurred despite an earlier meeting between the village mayor and Muslim and Christian elders, at which it was agreed that only the second floor of the building would be demolished.

Security services arrived after the social services building had already been demolished. A report was filed with the police by local Copts, accompanied by priests from St George's Church, but so far no one has been arrested. Coptic residents in Fanous village are reportedly staying indoors for fear of further attacks on their homes and businesses.

A representative of the Maspero Coptic Youth Organization told the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) that the Coptic Church had warned the security services of the possibility of orchestrated sectarian violence in Tamia District and neighbouring areas, which are home to a large Islamist population.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said: "The incident in Fanous Village follows a chronic pattern of injustice that has contributed to the emergence of a culture of impunity with regards to sectarian violence. Once again a falsehood has been used to stoke religious sentiment, resulting in wanton destruction that the security services have failed to prevent. The Egyptian government is seeking to restore international confidence in the nation and improve its image amongst investors. However, in order to progress and be respected as a thriving state with a dependable government, it is vital for Egypt to ensure the security, equality and fundamental freedoms of all of its citizens."

15 years in jail: Egyptian family charged for attempting to restore Christian names

Russia Today (16.01.2013) - An Egyptian mother and her seven children have been given lengthy jail sentences for illegally changing their names on official documents. The family wanted to use their Christian names again after a conversion following their Muslim father's death.

Nadia Ali Mohamed was born Christian but converted to Islam when she married her husband Mustafa Mohamed Abdel-Wahab. When he died in 1991, she wanted to go back to being a Christian, and pushed her seven children to convert.

In 2004, after the family had converted back to Christianity, they replaced their Muslim names on their identity cards with their Christian names. They had also moved to a different city of residence, which was changed on the documents as well.

Two years later, one of Mohamed's sons was arrested by police at the information Center of Beni Suef, a town about 115 kilometers south of Cairo, where they were living at that time. Officials suspected that the boy's documents had been forged.

The boy confessed his conversion to Christianity, and said that the subsequent name changes in the documents were at the behest of his mother. When the police passed the case on, judges decided to bring charges against the mother and all of her children, as well as the seven clerks from the registration office who had changed the family's documents.

The entire family now faces 15 years behind bars for violating the Egyptian laws governing name changes; the clerks will be jailed for five years, Asia News web portal reported on the ruling Tuesday.

Christians in Egypt who convert to Islam often complain they face enormous difficulties if they decide to convert back to Christianity, particularly in changing their names on official documents.

According to Wikislam, Christian converts Naglaa and her husband Malak were arrested in February 2011 for trying to leave Egypt for Cyprus, and were held in custody until at least June 2011 while police tried to force her to renounce her Christian faith.

Muslims demolish church building

Assyrian International News Agency (16.01.2013) - Hundreds of Muslims came out of mosques today with hammers and destroyed a social services building belonging to the Coptic Church while chanting Islamic slogans. Security forces arrived after the building was completely razed. The 100 square meters social services building in the village of Fanous, Tamia district in Fayoum province, 130 KM south west of Cairo, had all the necessary government permits; it had a reception hall on the first floor and a kindergarten on the second.

But the Muslims insisted that it would become a church.

A meeting had taken place beforehand between the village mayor and elders from Muslim and Coptic sides and it was agreed that only the first floor was to remain and the second be demolished.

Mosques in surrounding villages called on their microphones this afternoon on Muslims to go and help their Muslim brethren in the village of Fanous, because Christians were "building a church." According to rights activist Nader Shukry of Maspero Coptic Youth Organizations, nearly 5000 Muslims took part in demolishing the church property with their hammers, while shouting "Allahu Akbar." He said no one was arrested, not even the imams who called on Muslims to demolish the building; their calls fall under the crime of "enticement to violence."

The district of Tamia and neighboring Senousen is home to a large congregation of Islamists. Shoukry said that the Coptic Church had previously warned the security authorities of the danger of the Islamists provoking sedition in Tamia and neighboring areas.

A witness from Fanous village said they were working on the building site, which had started two months ago, removing the wood which was intended for the second floor when a Muslim man started insulting the Copts, then they were assaulted by the village women. The mob of Muslim men followed with their attack saying that the whole building has to be demolished. He said that the Muslim elders pretended to be peacemakers, but to no avail. "The Muslims with their hammers and spare pipes were demolishing also the

walls of the ground floor, leaving nothing standing," said the witness. The village mayor and Muslim elders made excuses for not honoring their agreement of leaving the ground floor intact by saying the "youth take unreasonable actions."

Security authorities arrived after the social services building was demolished.

Some village Copts together with priests from St. George's Church went to the police station to have a report with the incident issued. No Muslim was arrested.

"Although we recognized the village youth who participated in the demolition work we could not name any of them," said a Christian resident, "as we are a minority in the village and we do not want to have problems because we fear for the safety of our children. We go away to work in Cairo leaving our families behind in the village. I believe that as Copts, we are destined to be always persecuted."

According to Shukry, the Copts are staying indoors, afraid to get into any confrontation which might lead to other attacks on their homes and businesses. "This incident will end like all other similar incidents, no one will be arrested and the building will never be rebuilt." He believes that the Copts should stand firm and insist on rebuilding this demolished services building, "otherwise it will be a green light to repeat this incident in the neighboring villages."

In 2007 in the village of Roda in Tamia Muslims demolished the fence of the Protestant church, security initiated a "reconciliation" meeting. The governorate promised to rebuild the fence at its own expenses, and the perpetrators were released. The fence has still not been built.
