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Egypt clamps down on religious ritual

Al-Monitor (06.07.2015) — The practice of itikaf, a period of retreat in a mosque where Muslims can distance themselves from worldly affairs and concentrate on religious activities, is most commonly observed during the last 10 days of Ramadan, in keeping with the example set by the Prophet Muhammad.

While many Muslims have come to anticipate the holy month as an opportunity to perform this duty, this year, some of those desiring to participate in these retreats might not get their wish. For the first time ever in Egypt, many new conditions on such activities have been imposed by the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf in response to the current security and political situation in the country.

On May 29, the Ministry of Awqaf issued a statement on its official website warning that not following these conditions would render a itikaf assembly an illegal meeting, and subject to legal action:

- An itikaf gathering must be held at a licensed mosque and not a neighborhood prayer meeting place or unlicensed local mosque.
- A religious retreat must be supervised by a Ministry of Awqaf-authorized imam or preacher.
- A report must be filed by the administrative director of the mosque, indicating that said mosque is suitable for holding such assemblies.
- Participants must be inhabitants of the neighborhoods adjacent to the mosque and known by mosque administrators.
- Names and national identity card numbers must be recorded by the supervising imam at least one week prior to the commencement of the assembly.
- Any disturbances during such assemblies fall under the purview of the Awqaf department to which the mosque belongs.

- The mosque must be authorized to hold these gatherings by the Ministry of Awqaf by submitting an application to the mosque's corresponding Awqaf department between June 6 and June 13.

The application must include the name of the mosque, its address, location of the assembly, number of participants, the name of the Ministry of Awqaf-approved imam or preacher who will oversee the religious aspects of the assembly and the name of the person in charge of organizational duties. The names of mosques approved to hold such assemblies will be publicly available.

On June 17, the Ministry of Awqaf announced the names of 3,781 mosques authorized to hold these assemblies during the month of Ramadan throughout 27 governorates — including 296 in Cairo governorate, the inhabitants of which, according to 2014 information by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, total about 9.2 million people.

Tarek el-Sehri, chairman of the Salafist Nour Party's Supreme Council and deputy head of its dissolved Shura Council, told Al-Monitor, "Organization is welcome, but complicating matters is not acceptable. The Ministry of Awqaf has now assumed a security role at the expense of one revolving around preaching activities. The ministry has thus adopted these arbitrary measures that make it difficult for Muslims to perform their religious duties, in a manner that contradicts the role to be played by the ministry — which must facilitate worship activities instead of putting up hurdles during this month of fasting.

"The condition stipulating that assembly participants be inhabitants of the neighborhood is impractical. The addresses on the national ID cards of many citizens are different from their actual places of residence, particularly for those who came from outlying governorates to work in Cairo, where groups of young men rent a single apartment close to their work and refrain from changing their ID card addresses to make it easier for their families to register their children in convenient schools, for example. In addition, what if a neighborhood resident, known to area inhabitants, loses their ID card? Would they have to wait until Ramadan of next year to receive a replacement national ID card?"

Sehri added that the Ministry of Awqaf would have done better to organize campaigns promoting this duty and introducing Muslims to the benefits of itikaf. Its role should revolve around encouraging Muslims to perform this act, instead of imposing arbitrary conditions.

Sehri further indicated that enforcing these conditions would prove to be difficult due to the Ministry of Awqaf's lack of resources and the existence of large numbers of mosques that do not fall under its purview and are built and maintained by local residents.

Sehri also warned that such conditions might backfire, for while the Ministry of Awqaf is adopting these measures to combat extremism, they might convey the wrong message to citizens — especially young people — in a country that is widely devout. Many could feel that restrictions are being imposed on observance of religious rituals.

Furthermore, the secretary-general of the Salafist Nour Party in Giza governorate and a member of the Salafist Dawah Shura Council, Ahmad Shukri, told Al-Monitor, "Due to the sensitive stage through which the country is passing, the Salafist Dawah is keen on avoiding any conflict with the Ministry of Awqaf. Therefore, despite our objection to the conditions imposed by the ministry on itikaf assemblies, we shall abide by those conditions and endeavor to satisfy them all in our mosques."

The undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf for Mosque Affairs, Sheikh Fuad Abdul Azim, told Al-Monitor, "The controls established by the ministry to organize itikaf assemblies aim to protect attendees and the country, for infiltrators may join participants and steal their personal belongings. In addition, there are political parties and movements that

exploit mosques for their own benefit. As a result, the ministry strives to prevent religious rituals from being used for political and partisan motives. That is the reason why the ministry stipulated the use of the national ID card number to determine the identity of itikaf assembly attendees and the extent of the threat posed by them to security."

The chairman of the Egyptian Imams and Preachers Syndicate, Mohammed Bastousy, endorsed the Ministry of Awqaf's decisions, telling Al-Monitor, "Nationwide, 3,781 mosques is more than enough, because the numbers of people wishing to attend itikaf assemblies is low. The ministry has chosen mosques in proportion to the number of people who have submitted their information and are desirous to attend itikaf assemblies.

Egyptian TV presenter sentenced to prison for contempt of religion

CSW (02.06.2015) - Egyptian TV presenter Islam al-Beheiry has been sentenced to five years in prison with labour for "contempt of religion."

Islam al-Beheiry presented "With Islam", a religious talk show that debated such topics as punishment for apostasy (leaving Islam), early marriage and the teachings of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's foremost religious institution, filed accusations against Beheiry that included propagating extremist ideology, insulting Islamic scholars, attempting to destabilize national peace and broadcasting ideas that affect "the fundamentals of religion".

On 30 May, an Egyptian misdemeanours court sentenced al-Beheiry in absentia to five years in jail with labour for "contempt of religion". According to the head of the Old Cairo prosecution, Tamer al-Araby, the charge comes with the right to appeal, however Beheiry has yet to do so. In addition to this sentence, Beheiry also faces a further two trials for the same charge, one of which was also filed by the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar.

In his defence, Beheiry, who describes himself as an Islamic researcher, stated that he was contributing towards renewing religious discourse and "preventing Islamic heritage from being a reason for extremism".

Also in May, a Shi'a Muslim doctor, Mahmoud Abdel Khaleq Mahoud Dahroug, was sentenced to six months in jail by the Talkha Misdemeanor Court in Daqahliya for "contempt of religion" and being in possession of books that incite religious sectarianism and threaten national security.

Noted convert from Islam in Egypt regularly beaten in prison, attorney says

Morning Star News (27.05.2015) - Authorities in Egypt are regularly beating and dragging across a concrete prison floor noted convert Bishoy Armia Boulous, formerly known as Mohammed Hegazy, his attorney said.

Imprisoned by Egyptian authorities on trumped-up charges for photographing Muslim attacks on Christians and then held illegally after his sentence was complete, Boulous is beaten several times a week, said attorney Karam Ghobriel.

Prison officials also have forcibly shaved Boulous' head, a punishment and harassment technique normally reserved for violent felons, he said.

The physical abuse has continued in addition to Boulous' illegal detention, Ghobriel said. Boulous remains in Tora Prison despite completion of a one-year sentence that should have ended in December for a charge of spreading false information meant to "cause harm or damage to the public interest" of Egypt, he said.

Ghobriel said he thinks the beatings were ordered from outside the prison and are meant to do one thing – break Boulous' spirit.

"They're beating him to humiliate him, hoping he will change his mind, hoping he will go back to the way he was instead of insisting on Christianity," he said.

In response to the beatings and a host of other legal irregularities, Ghobriel filed a formal complaint earlier this month with Hasham Barakat, Egypt's attorney general. The attorney identified Boulous' main assailant by name and called on Barakat to protect Hegazy's "rights and freedoms."

"The accused ended his sentence on the second of December 2014 by law, and he is now being kept in prison illegally," the complaint read. "In addition to that, he is being continuously beaten and dragged [over prison floors] in Tora Prison by Officer Ahmed Fauzy."

Ghobriel, who visited Boulous twice last week in prison, said the guards had beaten him recently. The attorney said he finds the treatment appalling.

"According to the law and the constitution, any accused person should be treated in a respectful way as a human, because the law does not tell prison workers to 'beat them, drag them or torture them,'" he said.

Egyptian authorities arrested Boulous on Dec. 2, 2013, at a café at the Agricultural Association in Minya, 260 kilometers (161 miles) south of Cairo, and accused him of working for The Way TV, a Coptic Christian-owned, U.S.-based television channel that broadcasts into Egypt via satellite. The government claimed that Boulous was contributing to a "false image" that there was violence against Christians in Egypt.

The arrest took place during one of the worst waves of anti-Christian attacks in the history of the country. The spree of violence, documented at length by numerous journalists, included public kidnappings, assaults, destruction of property and attacks on several church buildings that mobs of militant Muslims burned to the ground. Much of the violence took place in Minya Province.

From the start, human rights activists said the charges against Boulous were without merit. In another official complaint, filed with Barakat's office in March, 18 different human rights groups from Egypt and around the world stated that the charges were "clearly related to his religious conversion."

"Mr. Boulous' detention, treatment, and prosecution blatantly violate Egypt's recently established constitution, which clearly states that 'freedom of belief is absolute,'" their complaint read. "His case is also a violation of international agreements to which Egypt has been party for decades."

Internal documents from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) obtained by Morning Star News show that during the time of his arrest, the MOI was employing at least one informant to

follow Boulous, who was identified as a convert. The same documents showed that when officials arrested Boulous, they also arrested three female journalists. All of them, like Boulous, were documenting "sectarian attacks."

Unlike Boulous, however, all the other reporters were questioned and then released.

Boulous, 31, left Islam when he was 16 years old. In 2002, among other instances of persecution, he was jailed and tortured by the Egyptian government's internal police, known as the State Security Investigations Services (SSI).

On Aug. 2, 2007, when Boulous was 25 and he and his wife, also a convert from Islam, were expecting their first child, Boulous filed a lawsuit to force the Ministry of Interior to change the religious affiliation listed on his state-mandated national identification card from Muslim to Christian. Boulous said in 2007 that he filed the case mainly to protect his soon-to-be-born child from being forced to suffer the same persecution he experienced.

In response to the lawsuit, some Islamic leaders in Egypt called for Boulous' death, and he suffered through numerous attacks, including having his home set on fire by a group of militant Muslims.

In 2009, two lawyers supported by a group of Islamists sued Boulous for allegedly defaming Islam after he filed his lawsuit, which became highly public and controversial. The blasphemy charge was based on his accusers' assertion that the very act of leaving Islam cast the religion into ill repute. The lawsuit was never settled and, according to Ghobriel, passed the Egyptian statute of limitations and became inactive.

Human rights groups in Egypt and around the world have complained that Boulous' current case has been riddled with legal irregularities.

Six months after he was arrested, a judge on June 18, 2014 found Boulous guilty on three charges stemming from the 2013 arrest, sentenced him to five years in prison and levied a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds (US\$70) against him. Ghobriel immediately filed an appeal and petitioned for bail for Boulous, who remained imprisoned the whole time he was awaiting trial.

On July 20, 2014, a judge found in Boulous' favor and ordered he be released on bail, but in the 24 hours that state prosecutors had to comply with the judge's order, the SSI took Boulous into custody to be interrogated in Cairo for the 2009 charges.

On Dec. 28, while Boulous was in SSI custody, an appeals judge upheld the charge of spreading false information meant to "cause harm or damage to the public interest" and sentenced him to a year in prison. He dismissed the two other charges against him.

Because Boulous had already spent more than a year in prison waiting for his trial to take place and his appeal to be heard, he should have been immediately released at the conclusion of the appeal hearing, his attorney said. Instead, the SSI held him, officials said, because they were investigating the blasphemy charges filed against him – charges that the SSI itself revived. On Jan. 21, however, when the six-month time limit allowed under Egyptian criminal procedure to investigate the charges expired, the SSI still refused to release Boulous.

"The investigation into the charges finished a long time ago," Ghobriel said. "And as his attorney, I am allowed by law to examine the charging documents before the case goes to court; however, the investigator in charge is refusing to let me see or copy the documents related to the blasphemy case."

Safwat Samaan, chairman of Nation Without Borders and leading human rights activist in Egypt, said the persecution of Boulous shows the hypocrisy of the Egyptian government. Officials proclaim freedom in speeches and on paper, he said, while they deny rights in practice. The government speaks of religious freedom and equality while enforcing religious homogeneity upon the Egyptian people and stifling any religious dissent.

"Article 64 from the 2014 Constitution guarantees freedom of belief, freedom to worship, and the right to build places of worship for the 'Heavenly Religions,'" Samaan said. "This is a right provided by the law, and we cannot discuss Hegazy's case away from the Egyptian Constitution that was voted on in January 2014."

The Constitution is higher than the government, but several government departments stand against Boulous's case, "as if its role is to protect a certain religion and lead the citizens into paradise, 'Al Janna,' or throw them into hell," Samman said. "Religion is an issue of individual conscience, and everybody in Egypt has the right to choose what religion to believe or not to believe. Belief in God cannot be enforced or organized by law."

Egypt sentences 69 to prison for church attack -judicial sources

Reuters (29.04.2015) - Sixty-nine suspected Muslim Brotherhood supporters were each sentenced to 25 years in prison in Egypt on Wednesday for attacking and burning a church in a village near Cairo in 2013, judicial sources said.

The church in the village of Kafr Hakim, near Kerdasa just outside Cairo, was burnt in August 2013 in a wave of violence that rocked the country after the army toppled elected Islamist president Mohamed Mursi following mass protests against his rule.

Egyptian authorities have jailed thousands of suspected members of Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood and the courts have sentenced hundreds to death.

The Brotherhood says it is committed to peaceful activism. Since taking office in 2014, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has identified Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to national security.

Judge Mohamed Nagi Shehata also sentenced two other juvenile defendants to 10 years in jail each without parole, the sources said.

All the defendants were convicted on charges that included deliberately setting fire to a church and looting it, they added. The 69 were also fined 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2,623) each.

"There is no proof against the defendants... even the church's priest said he didn't see any of the defendants after the incident," Hany El-Sayed, a defence lawyer for some of the defendants, told Reuters. The verdict can be appealed.

Judge Shehata has played a prominent role in the Egyptian judiciary's mass jailings of Islamist and liberal demonstrators.

Separately, another court sentenced 63 people to jail terms ranging from one to seven years in a case related to violence inside Al Azhar University's campus in Cairo in Dec. 2013, state news agency MENA reported.

The university has witnessed repeated clashes between pro Brotherhood students and police. Another 13 defendants were acquitted, including a photo journalist.

The convicted were fined a total amount of 2.16 million Egyptian pounds. Their verdicts can also be appealed. (\$1 = 7.6250 Egyptian pounds) (Reporting by Mahmoud Mourad and Ahmed Tolba; Editing by Yara Bayoumy and Andrew Heavens)

Egypt's religious book burning backfires

Al-Monitor (22.04.2015) - The Directorate of Education in Giza, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education, [burned 82 mostly religious books](#) in the yard of the [Fadl Modern School](#) in the Faisal area of al-Haram, Giza governorate.

The ceremonial burning [to the tune of patriotic songs](#) took place on the grounds that the books incite extremism and terrorism and that some of their authors, such as Rajab al-Banna and Mohammad Mohammad al-Madani, belong to the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). The act [triggered anger](#) among Egyptian popular and human rights circles.

Al-Monitor spoke with Buthaina Khashak, the first undersecretary of the Ministry of Education in Giza and the "heroine" of the book-burning scene that shook the Egyptian public. She defended herself and asserted that what she did was with the full knowledge of the Ministry of Education and the security agencies.

Khashak added that there is no serious oversight on private schools, especially those [affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood](#). "After the June 30 revolution, these schools were taken over by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice. Their names were changed to the 'June 30 schools' and we have been instructed by the Ministry of Education to fulfill our educational role by following up on children within those schools," she said. The Ministry of Education formed boards of directors to [manage these schools](#), which included the Fadl Modern School owned by Adel Fadl, the brother-in-law of Muslim Brotherhood official Essam al-Erian.

Khashak said that based on information she received from Tariq Hussain al-Khudri, the director-general of al-Haram Educational Management, there are books inside Fadl Modern School that violate the rules forbidding the incitement of violence or sex or the defamation of religions. She asked the general manager to form a committee under his chairmanship to remove these books and to list their names.

The committee confirmed that the books [violated the rules](#) for school libraries. She said, "And when I examined the list, I told them there are still books that are not authorized for schoolchildren. I have those books in my home library, such as 'The Approach to Islamic Reform' by former Al-Azhar Sheikh Abdul Halim Mahmud. They told me that the book's outside cover has the name of the honorable Sheikh Abdul Halim Mahmud but that the book's content was distorted and that the Rabia symbol appears inside the book. So I personally went to the school to make sure of the matter. I spent four hours browsing these books and then I contacted the security authorities and informed them that there are distorted books. I asked the security official whether I should send these books to the Security Directorate or to the Ministry of Education. He told me that they

would revert back to me. I was contacted by a security official, who asked me to form a committee to destroy the books and write a report about their contents.”

She added, “I contacted the education minister’s office on the morning when the books were to be destroyed. Then I was surprised when the minister referred me to be [investigated](#) in order to absorb the public anger. He has the right to refer me to be investigated, and I have the right to defend myself.”

Khashak explained that the book burning was a patriotic moment, accompanied by patriotic songs in the presence of children. She said that it was one of the happiest moments in her life, because burning these books saves the children’s minds from extremism and terrorism.

Kashak told Al-Monitor that the school’s owner, Adel Fadl, and his son, Amro, were detained by al-Haram police department on charges of [inciting parents and students to protest](#) and for trying to forcibly enter the school with journalists to cover the event. Fadl and his son have now been released after questioning.

Ahmed Salim, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Information and the chairman of the agency that monitors publications and foreign newspapers, told Al-Monitor that the book burning in the schoolyard in the presence of children and the celebration of the act was an ugly scene that no cultured person would accept. He said, “The lady, who is the ministry’s undersecretary, could have [protested] those books, discussed their contents with the children and refuted the [books’] ideas. Regarding burning books in front of children to prevent extremism, I think that this action would help spread extremism. How we can teach our schoolchildren to fight ideas with ideas while at the same time we celebrate the burning of books in front of them?”

The [Egyptian Publishers Union](#) condemned the incident in an official statement, describing it as a "pathetic" scene. The undersecretary read the statement, was accompanied by a group of officials from the Directorate of Education in Giza, who celebrated the burning of books to the sounds of patriotic songs and carrying the Egyptian flag. The Egyptian Constitution, whose flag they waved and to which they sang their love, states in Article 67, "No literary or intellectual work may be confiscated without a court order regardless of its content." So according to the constitution, these books cannot be confiscated or burned. Instead, legal action may include informing the public prosecutor or consulting the relevant authorities, such as Al-Azhar, about the content of these books.

The Egyptian Publishers Union denounced this irresponsible behavior and said that it was awaiting the investigation ordered by the minister of education, and that it hopes the matter will end in punishment for an act that violated the constitution.

For its part, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture issued a statement denouncing the book burning in Fadl Modern School, saying that the act recalled the burning of Ibn Rushd’s books in Andalusia in 1198 under the pretext that they [incited heresy](#). The statement described the incident as a form of “intellectual terrorism” and called it an act that ran “against freedom of creativity and thought.”

The contradiction in the views of the Egyptian Ministries of Education and Culture reveals that there is no coordination between the Egyptian ministries. It is as though each ministry is working as part of a different government. Even stranger, there is no coordination within ministries. The undersecretary of the Ministry of Education confirms that the incineration of books happened with the knowledge of the minister of education. However, the latter issued a decision to refer the undersecretary for investigation.

Allowing political scores to interfere in education may have grave consequences on the children, who are the hope of this nation for a better future.

Egypt closes 27,000 places of worship

Al-Monitor (03.03.2015) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/egypt-endowments-decision-close-worship-places.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm_campaign=46b637824b-March_04_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-46b637824b-102366221# - An Egyptian administrative court on Feb. 18 upheld the Ministry of Religious Endowments' decision issued in September 2013 to close down [neighborhood places of worship](#) of less than 80 square meters (861 square feet), a move intended to protect young people from the militancy and extremism that can prevail in such places, which lack the legal standing to hold Friday prayers.

This move sets a precedent that raises many questions about the [fate of mosques](#) in many Egyptian villages, the grounds of which are usually less than [80 square meters](#). In reply, opponents of the decision such as the [Salafist Nour Party](#) claimed that closing down places of worship without providing a larger alternative serves to further bolster extremist ideology, considering that the larger existing mosques cannot accommodate Friday worshippers who line surrounding streets to pray. On the opposite end of the spectrum, supporters of the decision such as intellectuals and scholars say that those [mosques are time bombs](#) that threaten national security, as they fall outside the purview of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and are used to spread subversive ideologies.

At the same time, the ministry has [awarded 400 preaching permits](#) to Salafist leaders without requiring [oration tests](#), despite the ministry's previous and constant [accusations](#) that they spread extremism.

Ahmed Karimeh, a professor of Sharia at Al-Azhar University, told Al-Monitor that legal teachings and conventions specify that Friday, Eid and main prayers must be conducted in a mosque, and not in a neighborhood place of worship. The five daily prayers can be held at these informal sites, but not the special celebration prayers. In that sense, the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments upheld a recognized religious law.

Karimeh explained that closing those neighborhood places of worship, located in apartment buildings, commercial buildings or factories, would help mitigate the influence of extremist religious orators such as those affiliated with the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), [Salafist groups](#) or Shiites, who use those places of worship to take advantage of religious gatherings. As such, the Ministry of Religious Endowments' decision, while late, was the correct one.

But Karimeh warned that the move would be to no avail if the ministry allowed people without credentials to take to pulpits. Initially, in August 2013, the ministry allowed only [Al-Azhar imams](#) access to pulpits, a decision later reversed in February when, for political considerations, the ministry [allowed Salafists to preach](#), a disastrous decision that turned mosques into time bombs under the control of violent, Salafist-born militant factions, according to Karimeh. Allowing [Salafists](#) to preach for political considerations as an Islamic alternative to face the Islamic State ideology, at a time when hundreds of Al-Azhar scholars applied for but were denied preaching permits, runs contrary to the ministry's [repeated statements](#) that it would bar non-Al-Azhar imams from taking the pulpit.

Karimeh criticized the ministry's examination policy and said that it solely tested the applicant's memorization of the Quran, without evaluating his general culture. He added that closing down neighborhood places of worship would not be enough to confront extremism. Toward that end, attention must be paid to the preachers, who should be properly schooled and [financially compensated](#), so as to allow them to better educate themselves, instead of having to work as taxi drivers or vegetable vendors to provide for their families.

Karimeh also denied claims that some villages lacked proper mosques. It should be noted that neighborhood places of worship and mosques with surface areas of less than 80 square meters [numbered 27,000](#) in all of Egypt's provinces and villages.

Before the Ministry of Religious Endowments made its decision, the Egyptian Dar al-Fatwa issued a [September 2013 edict](#), endorsed by a majority of religious scholars, barring the multiplicity of mosques in villages and cities, unless when absolutely necessary, as a plethora of places of worship only serve to divide believers. It explained that group worship was required for all scripted prayers, as those were celebrated for the love of God, but Friday prayers were inherently different, in that they are a form of offering to God.

An estimated 400 permits were issued to Salafists, who pledged not to use Friday prayers for political purposes. A follow-up committee was formed by the ministry in February to [oversee new imams](#) during Friday prayers, cancel their permits and initiate legal proceedings against them if they failed to abide by their agreement with the ministry, as well as permanently bar them from taking the pulpit of any mosque in the country.

The Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments previously adopted numerous measures to combat extremism and control religious rhetoric, and continuously affirmed that imams not affiliated with Al-Azhar would never be allowed to preach, going as far as to close down 27,000 neighborhood places of worship. The sudden shift in position by the ministry was followed by it issuing preaching permits to 400 Salafist leadership figures that it considered extremist, a clear reflection of the state of confusion that prevails in Egypt today.

Shooting of witness threatens trial of Coptic Christian's murderers

WWM (19.02.2015) - It's happening several times a week now, particularly in the towns and villages of Upper Egypt. Just a brief news report, citing an isolated killing here and there of a Coptic Christian by "unknown gunmen." Another statistic, usually just the name of the Copt, listing his age and his town or village.

But in mid-January, the murder of still another Coptic Christian in Luxor province, 315 miles south of Cairo, has triggered widespread panic among the 4,000 Christians living in the area of Nag Hassan and its surrounding villages.

For 18 months, Nag Hassan's Christian community has lived under the shadow of the deadly wave of anti-Christian violence following the ouster of Mohammed Morsi. On July 5, 2013, four Coptic men had been killed in Nag Hassan's al-Dabayia village in a Muslim rampage that left 42 Christian homes and shops badly damaged, burned and looted.

So when Coptic Christian Shahid Nesemis Saroufim was killed in Nag Hassan on Jan. 13, it did not take long to connect the dots, to perhaps understand why.

The previous day, the Luxor Criminal Court had held a conclusive hearing in the months-long trial against accused suspects from the al-Dabayia attack. At the next hearing, to be set sometime in early April, a verdict is expected against the 17 jailed suspects.

Saroufim was a cousin of Emil Naseem Saroufim, one of the four Copts killed in 2013. "My husband was targeted because he was one of the witnesses in the prosecution," Saroufim's widow Heba Eskander Farid told World Watch Monitor.

Just 20 days before her husband was killed, relatives of the 17 accused approached Fr. Basilius Naim of the Mar Youhanna Church, asking him to arrange a reconciliation meeting with the families of the four victims, to persuade them to drop the charges.

According to Girguis Noushy Habib, older brother of two of the four victims, the Coptic priest told them, "We can forgive our material damages -- destroying, burning, and looting our properties. But we cannot forgive the blood of our four martyrs."

"We have been threatened with death ever since we testified in the prosecution," Habib said. "We live in a state of fear and terror, especially now after the latest killing of Shahid. Our lives are in danger. They killed Shahid to terrorize us and pressure us to drop the charges against their relatives."

Fr. Basilius himself was threatened personally, finally pushing him to leave the village the day after Saroufim's murder.

Habib said that one of his widowed sisters-in-law was threatened by several men a few days before Saroufim was murdered, while she was buying milk from the village supermarket. "We won't leave you. What happened to you before will take place [again] soon," they warned.

"They said many times before to my husband, 'If you don't drop the charges on our relatives, we will make the Christian women in the village widows,'" his widow Farid said, pregnant with their third child, after a son of 6 and a daughter aged 4.

Two murder suspects

Saroufim, 38, was shot and killed in al-Dabayia while riding his motorcycle just 500 meters from his home, past the house of two brothers, Mohammed and Hassan Baghdadi. According to an eyewitness to the shooting who requested his name be withheld, the gunfire came from the supermarket attached to the Baghdadi brothers' home.

When the eyewitness rushed over to see if Saroufim was alive, he said Mohammed Baghdadi told him, "I've called the ambulance. I saw two masked gunmen on motorcycles shoot at Shahid and flee."

"But I saw the shooting coming from their supermarket," the eyewitness told World Watch Monitor.

Although police arrested Hassan Baghdadi a day later with one of the murder weapons in his possession, Farid said the Luxor prosecutor had declared that the man was mentally ill and sent him to a psychiatric hospital in Cairo. "But he is a very sane man," Farid said.

"They did that to stop our rights, to drop the charges against him for killing my husband."

Despite a police warrant issued to apprehend Mohammed Baghdadi, he has so far eluded arrest.

A formal "reconciliation" effort led by the Egyptian Family House, an entity formed between Islam's Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Orthodox Church in 2011, continues to negotiate between the Muslim and Coptic parties in the Nag Hassan case.

"But there isn't any compensation agreement until now," attorney Ashraf Shakir told World Watch Monitor, although there have been ongoing individual attempts to forcibly "reconcile" the case. He noted that the repairs and rebuilding of the damaged homes and businesses have all been undertaken by the church.

"Our situation in the case is very strong, and there should be a fair judgment," Shakir said, in anticipation of the verdict expected in April.

But the tensions of life and death remain high in al-Dabayia village, as the Coptic Orthodox faithful continue their 40-day vigil of prayers for the dead after Saroufim's death.

"There is a situation of fear and panic among all the Christians here," Fr. Moussa Nabih told World Watch Monitor on Feb. 12. "They are afraid that violent attacks against them will recur, especially after the verdict of the next hearing. The situation has become so dangerous for us here."

In Egypt, atheists considered a 'dangerous development'

USA Today (01.02.2015) - In Egypt, there is seemingly no place where atheists or those thought to be non-believers are safe.

They've been targeted at cafes, harassed on the streets and fired as part of a broader backlash by society and the state against atheism and blasphemy.

"I have to keep my mouth shut when it comes to any criticism or satire about religion," said atheist Amr Mohammed. "If I wish to make a remark about religion or practice of religion regarding my own beliefs, I keep it to myself."

Dar al-Ifta, a government wing that issues religious edicts, released a survey in December claiming Egypt was home to exactly 866 atheists — a number deemed "a dangerous development." Days later, a Cairo coffeehouse described as an atheists' cafe was closed, media reported.

Since 2011, at least 27 of the more than 40 defendants tried on charges of defamation have been convicted in court, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

"There have been increasing attacks on citizens with minority views and others who tried to express an opinion on controversial religious issues," the organization said in a report in August.

An Egyptian court sentenced Karim al-Banna, a student characterized by his father as an atheist, to three years in prison last month for writing Facebook posts that insulted Islam, according to the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression.

"Whoever writes, comments or talks about subjects that are against religion face being charged with a criminal offense," said Fatma Serag, legal unit director at the association.

Though the nation's constitution guarantees freedom of belief, it limits freedom of practice to those who follow Christianity, Islam or Judaism. In cases regarding blasphemy, prosecutors often refer to an article in the penal code that addresses extremist ideologies and exploitation of religion.

Ayman Emam, an atheist who created the Egyptian Atheists Community Facebook page to monitor assaults on expression of belief, has been threatened for his views. In addition to being harassed online, Emam said he found a piece of paper on his car in the summer of 2013 with verses from the Quran saying apostasy should be punishable by death.

"You cannot do anything about it because what are you going to do about it — go to the police?" Emam said. "The police are not going to help you and will probably get you into trouble."

In September 2012, angry mobs of men surrounded the Cairo home of activist Alber Saber Ayad and accused him of heresy and atheism for allegedly promoting a film online that criticized Islam, Amnesty International reported. After his mother called police for protection, authorities arrested Ayad, who was sentenced for "defamation of religion."

Others have faced problems at work. In June 2013, a teacher at a middle school in the district of Giza was fired for being an atheist, Serag said.

Last year, Interior Ministry official Amin Ezz El-Din, who oversees security in the coastal city of Alexandria, said on Egyptian TV that a task force would be formed to arrest non-believers, according to news website Mada Masr.

The recent crackdown comes amid a broader discussion about religion. Atheists recently started appearing more frequently on Egyptian television shows. Days before the attack last month in Paris on satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called for a revolution in Islam to overhaul the religion — a significant act in a conservative country where the population of roughly 90 million is mostly Muslim.

During a speech on New Year's Day, al-Sisi stressed the importance of spreading moderate teachings of Islam and confronting misleading interpretations of the faith, according to the State Information Service. That doesn't appear to indicate impending acceptance of controversial views.

"There is no plan to protect freedoms," said Amr Ezzat, a researcher and head of the religious freedoms program at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "It's an abandoned topic."

Egypt urged to free kidnapped Christians in Libya

BosNewsLife (29.01.2015) <http://www.bosnewslife.com/34595-egypt-urged-to-free-kidnapped-christians-in-libya> - Rights activists have urged Egypt's government to help

free dozens of Egyptian Christians kidnapped in Libya, amid fears they may be executed by Islamic militants.

In a petition obtained by BosNewsLife, advocacy group International Christian Concern (ICC) asked Cairo to "immediately begin rescue operations on behalf of 27 Egyptian citizens", most of them Coptic Christians.

They were abducted in two separate raids in December and January, including by a group claiming to represent Islamic State militants, Christians said. The IS-linked group reportedly claimed responsibility for 21 of the victims calling them "Christian crusaders".

In the petition, ICC said it is concerned that if "swift action is not taken, the kidnapping victims could face the possibility of enslavement, torture, and execution."

Some Christians have already been killed, including on December 23, when Islamic militants broke into the home of Dr. Magdy Tawfiq in Sirte. The militants murdered Dr. Tawfiq, his wife, and his 13-year-old daughter, Christians told BosNewsLife earlier.

DEATH THREATS

After death threats, Dr. Tawfiq and his family had reportedly tried to secure safe passage back to Egypt, when the attack took place.

Yet, ICC's Advocacy Director Isaac Six told BosNewsLife that so far the Egyptian government "has apparently done little more than acknowledge that the kidnappings took place."

Rights investigators have also expressed concern about minority Christians remaining trapped in dangerous areas of Libya, including many Egyptian Christians also known as "Copts".

Egyptian Christians with relatives in Sirte and other parts of Libya say "many" of their family members remain trapped, with no way to travel without risking further abductions.

INCREASE PROTECTIONS

ICC urged Egypt's government to help increase "protections for the expatriate Coptic community" in Libya "and to facilitate the expeditious return home of Coptic Christians in Libya currently under threat."

Six stressed "It's time for action, not only on behalf of those currently in the hands of [IS] affiliates and other radical groups, but for all of the Coptic Christian workers in Libya who are undeniably at risk of being killed or abducted simply because of their religious identity."

The official hopes "the Egyptian government will heed this call to action and take immediate steps towards rescuing the abductees and securing Coptic communities in Libya."

Egyptian authorities have not yet indicated when and if a rescue operation will be launched.

Bureaucratic delays put Egyptian convert's appeal at risk

World Watch Monitor (29.01.2015) www.worldwatchmonitor.com - After weeks of judicial runaround, Egyptian lawyer Karam Ghobrial has managed to find and visit his client, Egypt's most publicly-known Christian convert Mohammed Hegazy, in Cairo's Tora Prison.

The whereabouts of Hegazy, the first Egyptian Muslim to, in 2007, [fight a legal case to change his religious identity](#) to Christian, had become a puzzling concern to his defense lawyer.

Hegazy is now appealing against a conviction by a lower Egyptian court on three misdemeanor charges, all linked to his arrest in the city of Minya, 135 miles south of Cairo, in December 2013.

The last time Ghobrial saw Hegazy was at his Dec. 28 appeal hearing in the Misdemeanor Court in Minya.

Imprisonment for "filming Muslim demonstrations"

On that day, Hegazy was acquitted on two of the charges, which overturned the initial court's five-year jail sentence, but he was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on the third: "filming Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations without permission and spreading false news harmful to national interests". In fact, Hegazy had already served more than a year in jail since his arrest, so he was immediately eligible for release, but the judge's written verdict, expected within 40 days, is still pending.

But Hegazy still has one final right of appeal before the nation's top judicial body, the Court of Cassation. In order to file for that appeal within the 60-day deadline, his lawyer needed Hegazy's written power of attorney.

But from the day of the trial onward, Egyptian prison officials proceeded to block Ghobrial's efforts to meet his client in person.

When the Dec. 28 appeal hearing concluded, court guards refused to allow Ghobrial to speak with his client, insisting that he must first get written approval from the presiding judge. When the attorney asked where Hegazy was being held, he was told he had been sent to a prison in Minya.

"I went there, but they told me he was not there, and [had been] sent to a prison in Cairo," Ghobrial told Mideast Christian News (MCN). So he submitted a request on Dec. 29 to get a permit from the Supreme State Security Prosecution to visit him.

But after he got the permit on Dec. 31, when he went to visit Hegazy in Cairo on Jan. 3, the prison told the lawyer it was an official holiday. He returned the following day, showing his permit and waiting his turn, only to be told by a prison employee that Hegazy had been sent to a Minya prison on Dec. 26 and had not since returned. When the frustrated lawyer asked for a written notice confirming that his client was still detained in Minya, the employee refused.

Complaint

Ghobrial then had to file a complaint to the Prosecutor General, demanding that Hegazy's place of detention be confirmed to him, so he could obtain his client's written authorization and file the necessary last appeal before the Court of Cassation.

Later, once again Ghobrial made the four-hour train trip from Cairo back to Minya. But when he arrived on Jan. 20, the prison management told him that Hegazy had just been transferred back to Cairo two days earlier.

"All they are doing with this, the delays and misinforming me about Hegazy's location, just lying to me, is their way to annoy me on purpose and delay the legal process," Ghobrial told World Watch Monitor.

Finally on Jan. 26, Ghobrial was admitted to visit Hegazy at Tora Prison, where the convert signed the urgently needed power of attorney.

Ghobrial continues to push for Hegazy's full acquittal on what he considers a "contrived" case, declaring that the prosecution failed to provide evidence that he was guilty of any of the three charges filed against him.

Second 'blasphemy' case revived

Hegazy still faces separate charges for "insulting Islam" on an old case revived against him last July by the Supreme State Security Prosecution in a district of Cairo.

Due to longstanding prohibitions against apostasy, a Muslim who abandons his faith is considered to have committed the ultimate blasphemy against Islam. According to a 2013 Pew Research poll, 88 percent of Egyptian Muslims favor the death penalty for anyone leaving Islam.

In early December, the Episcopal Bishop of Egypt and the Middle East Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis declared publicly that Egyptian Muslims who become Christians should be issued new personal identity cards and other official documents, just as the state routinely grants to citizens from other religions who convert to Islam.

The Anglican leader noted that although the Egyptian Constitution guarantees freedom of belief, "not all provisions are enforced on the ground."

Calling for specific legislation which would activate the constitutional provisions, the bishop told MCN "There is a need to consider removing the 'religion' field from identity cards to eliminate discrimination."

Now 32, Hegazy has not been allowed to register his legal identity under his baptismal name, Bishoy Armia Boulos. After converting to Christianity as a teenager, he had filed in 2007 to change his official identity to Christian. He and his wife, also a convert from Islam, have two children.

Egyptian court sentences man to 3 years in prison following declaration of atheism

Daily News (11.01.2015) - An Egyptian court handed out a three year prison sentence to a man accused of contempt of Islam and insulting the divine, on Saturday.

Karim Ashraf Mohammed Al-Banna was tried by a court in the industrial town of Idku, in the Delta governorate of Beheira.

The Idku District Misdemeanor Court allowed Al-Banna a bail of EGP 1,000 to suspend the prison time.

He is accused of using his Facebook account to publish articles that "belittle the divine", according to the rights group Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE).

Ishaq Ibrahim, a researcher on freedom of religion and belief at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), told Daily News Egypt that Al-Banna declared his atheism on Facebook and subsequently was harassed in public. Upon seeking to file a report of the assault at a police department in Idku, Al-Banna was arrested.

He has been held in custody since the date of his arrest in November.

Ishaq Ibrahim also reported that the case against Al-Banna was supported by his father, who identified "suspect" books in possession of his son to support the case.

Despite not being explicitly illegal by law, the Egyptian government and judicial system has recently been confronting the role of theism in the country by using charges of contempt of religion.

In August, the ministries of Religious Endowment and Culture signed a joint protocol to confront the two "extremisms"; both religious extremism and atheism, and to "spread true Islam".

In the light of recent cases against atheists and alleged homosexuals, many have commented that the environment in some regards is more Islamist now than under president Morsi, as the government tries to lay claim to religious authority.

Article 2 of the current Egyptian constitution, passed after the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohammed Morsi, states: "Islam is the religion of the State... the principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation."

Dar al-Ifta, the branch of the government that issues religious edicts (fatwas), claimed in December that there are precisely 866 atheists in Egypt, or around 0.001 percent of the population; a statement that was internationally ridiculed.

President Sisi sets a historic milestone

WWM (08.01.2015) - Hours before Egypt's Coptic Christian communities gathered for their traditional Christmas Eve services on Jan. 6, masked gunmen killed two policemen guarding a church in Upper Egypt's Minya city.

The attack came amid the government's tightened security precautions, initiated to protect all Christian churches during the Coptic Christmas holidays, celebrated according to the old Julian calendar on January 6 and 7.

Shot down in front of St. Mark's Catholic Coptic Church, near Al-Habashy square in central Minya, the policemen were identified as Eid Faheem Sadek, 59, a Coptic Christian; and Sergeant Mohamed Abu Zeid, 35.

Minya's local police force abandoned their guard duties after the early morning killings, to hold a protest at Minya University Hospital, where their colleagues' bodies were taken. But according to Anba Makarios, the Orthodox Archbishop of Minya quoted on the Coptic Watani newspaper website, the police returned to their protective duties that afternoon, to provide security for the large crowds attending the Christmas Eve celebrations in the city.

In a joint statement issued by Minya's Orthodox, Catholic and evangelical churches, local Christians announced that their Christmas celebrations would be restricted to religious services only, in respect to the families of both the two policemen and 20 Coptic Christians recently kidnapped in Libya.

President attends Cathedral mass

Significantly, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi chose the evening of the Minya attack to become the first Egyptian President to attend a Christmas Eve mass in the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of St. Mark in Cairo. During his surprise visit, he extended holiday greetings to Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II and all of Egypt's Coptic citizens.

"It was necessary to attend and wish you well," he said in a short speech, greeted by rousing applause from the worshippers. "We are Egyptians, and we have to be only Egyptians. We will build our country together. We will truly accept and love each other."

Televised on state television, President al-Sisi's symbolic visit, standing alongside the spiritual leader of Egypt's 10 million or more Coptic citizens, contrasted with the reluctance of previous presidents to associate publicly with their Christian minorities.

Many of Egypt's outspoken Muslim clerics have for decades fostered sectarian mistrust, urging their followers to avoid extending Christmas or Easter greetings to their Christian neighbors and forbidding them to enter a church.

Despite President Sisi's supportive stance toward the Coptic minority, his government has yet to address the judicial prejudices and restrictions that make them second-class citizens among Egypt's 90 percent Muslim population. Christians continue to be subjected to criminal prosecution for alleged blasphemy against Islam, and legal procedures to build churches remain convoluted and often blocked by Muslim street protests.

Sectarian tensions require constant protection

"All our churches in Egypt are under heavy police protection," Fr. Rafic Greiche, spokesman for Egypt's Coptic Catholic Church, told World Watch Monitor from Cairo the day after the Minya attack.

According to Al-Ahram newspaper, Interior Ministry spokesman Hany Abdel Latif declared that the Minya attacks were not religiously motivated. "It has nothing to do with any of the holidays of our Coptic brothers," Latif said. "It is instead aimed at the security forces, to try to undermine their resolve."

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, although Minya police official Hisham Nasr blamed the killings on the Muslim Brotherhood, designated a "terrorist organization" by the Egyptian government in late 2013. "Initial investigations showed that members of the terrorist Brotherhood group are involved," Nasr told the Anadolu Agency.

Over the past 18 months, jihadist groups in Egypt have launched frequent, deadly attacks against Egyptian security forces, killing hundreds of police and soldiers in retaliation for the overthrow of former President Mohammed Morsi. Coptic Christians and their churches have also faced multiple attacks, and the Christians have been blamed by Islamists for their mass support of the anti-Morsi movement.

A majority of the heavy reprisal attacks against Coptic Christians in August 2013, torching and destroying dozens of churches and Coptic properties, took place in Minya province, where sectarian violence has been endemic for several decades.
