Egypt

Egyptian mosque towers above a nearby church

The Church in Egypt is one of the oldest in the world. Egypt's former capital Alexandria was one of the great Christian centres until 640 AD, when the country was invaded by Muslim Arabs. Today there are an estimated eight million Christians; around 90% of the population are Muslims.

Egyptian Christians have suffered centuries of discrimination, and most of the wealthier Christians have left the country in the last few decades. Those who remain largely live in extreme poverty. They struggle with crippling restrictions and injustice, as well as violence related to the construction and repair of church buildings. Converts from Islam are acutely vulnerable.

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 has left the country's Christians in a state of grievous distress. The toppling of former President Mubarak seemed to offer some prospect of greater freedoms, but subsequent events have largely dashed these hopes.

Islamists have rapidly tightened their grip on the Egyptian state following the election as president of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in June 2012. The army and judiciary have been sidelined, hostile media outlets silenced, and opponents and protestors attacked. Morsi has given himself sweeping new powers, and many key offices are now held by Islamists. A new constitution that threatens basic rights and freedoms and lays the foundations for an Islamic state was passed in a referendum in December 2012.

In this hostile context the long-standing problems of Egyptian Christians have only intensified. They have been subject to an alarming surge in violent attacks; in just one example, two members of a Christian family were shot dead in October 2012 as a notorious Muslim gang leader tried to kidnap their female relative. A new report indicates that the kidnapping, forced conversion to Islam and forced marriage of Christian women has also escalated.

Nor can Christians rely on justice in the courts. In April 2012 an investigation into the massacre of 27 Christians during a protest in Cairo was closed, supposedly for lack of evidence; no-one was convicted. Several Christians, including two children, have been accused of blasphemy, and at least two have been jailed for allegedly insulting Muhammad.

In the summer of 2012 leaflets from militant Muslim organisations were distributed in Egypt calling on "all brothers and sisters" to "kill or physically attack the enemies of the religion of Allah – the Christians in all Egypt's provinces, the slaves of the Cross". They promised money for whoever helps to "achieve Allah's rights against his enemies". Their grim words vividly illustrate the acute insecurity of Egypt's Christians at a time of menacing political change.

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