



Strengthening National Unity: Religious Freedom and Diversity In Egypt

Since taking office in 2014, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi has made promoting greater religious tolerance and strengthening unity amongst Egyptians a cornerstone of his agenda.

In 2015, the President made history when he became the first Egyptian head of state to attend Christmas mass at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. In 2016, while attending Christmas mass again at the same location, President El Sisi vowed to rebuild and restore all churches that had been damaged by acts of terrorism on Churches and other Christian properties by the operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2013. In addition to legislative action and national directives, the last eight years have yielded significant gains for the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance by both government and religious communities.

Teaching Religious Freedom and Tolerance

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

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

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



President El-Sisi at a Coptic Christmas service

2014

President Abdel Fattah El Sisi takes office.

2015

President makes history when he became the first Egyptian head of state to attend Christmas mass at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo.

2016

President vowed to rebuild and restore all churches that had been damaged by acts of terrorism.



National Legislation and Initiatives Enhancing Religious Freedom and Tolerance

- ▶ **The three major Christian Churches in Egypt were represented in the drafting of the 2014 Egyptian constitution** through the Committee of Fifty.
- ▶ **The constitution includes principles ensuring peaceful coexistence and guaranteeing freedom of religion**, including citizenship (Art. 53), rule of law (Art. 94) and freedom of religion and the construction of places of worship (Art. 64). Furthermore, the constitution affirmed that the religious principles of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of legislations regulating their personal status affairs, religious affairs, as well as the selection of their spiritual leaders (Article 3).
- ▶ **Article (244) of the constitution recognized and acknowledged positive discrimination for certain groups, including Copts.** There are 38 Christian deputies in Egypt's House of Representatives, of whom 31 were elected and 7 were appointed by the President. Additionally, the newly established Senate includes 24 Christian representatives, of whom 17 were elected and 7 were appointed by the President.
- ▶ **A Presidential Decree was issued on December 27, 2021**, to reconstitute the "National Council for Human Rights". The current composition of the council includes 25 members, six of them are Christians.
- ▶ **A 2017 presidential decree established the National Council for Combating Terrorism and Extremism.** This body is headed by the President with members including the Prime Minister, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, the Pope of the Orthodox Coptic Church, the Minister of Defense, Members of Parliament, and other prominent figures.
- ▶ **A 2016 law on church construction was adopted** to facilitate the timely construction and licensing of churches.
- ▶ **The Egyptian government continues to implement projects to restore and maintain archaeological sites and various religious shrines** related to the itinerary of the

Holy Family's journey, which extends 3,500 km from Sinai to Assiut. In 2017, Pope Francis recognized the journey as an official Christian pilgrimage.

- ▶ **Work is currently underway to implement the "Great Transfiguration Over the Land of Peace" project** in the vicinity of the mountains of Moses and Saint Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula. The aim is to transfer this holy spot which God has honored with transfiguration, into a land that brings together the followers of the monotheistic religions.
- ▶ **A Supreme National Committee to promote religious tolerance was formed** by presidential decree in 2018 to combat sectarian conflict by developing awareness campaigns and other strategies.
- ▶ **In 2020, a law was passed establishing endowment authorities** for Catholic and Evangelical churches.
- ▶ **Meritocracy in the civil service leads Christians to senior government positions**, which includes Ministers and Deputy Ministers, Governors, Judges, and top diplomats and Ambassadors. In February 2022, President Abdel Fattah el Sisi, in a historical decision, has sworn in Judge Boulos Fahmy as the first-ever Coptic Christian to head the Supreme Constitutional Court.
- ▶ **Denigration of religions is a criminal act.** These acts have been criminalized to ensure public safety as well as preserve national harmony. This stipulation applies not only for Islam, but for Christianity and Judaism as well.
- ▶ **Administrative courts offer flexibility for Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses.** The Egyptian constitution guarantees the right to adopt a religion of one's choosing and stipulates that the State shall construct places of worship for the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, the Council of State, Egypt's administrative court system, issued a 2009 verdict permitting Baha'is to refrain from proclaiming any specific faith in identification documents.





The Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria

National Legislation and Initiatives Enhancing Religious Freedom and Tolerance (cont.)

► **Restoration and renovation of places of worship and religious archeological sites have been prioritized.**

Egypt has undertaken significant efforts to restore and license Christian Churches as well as strengthen Jewish community infrastructure.

► **In August 2016, Egypt’s House of Representatives, supported by the leaders of Egypt’s Coptic, Catholic and Evangelical Churches, passed a law facilitating the timely construction and licensing of churches.**

The legislation delegates the power of issuing permits to Governors and sets up an administrative committee to license religious services facilities. The law also eliminated many of the bureaucratic and legislative obstacles that previously delayed progress. The administrative committee has licensed over 2162 Churches and ancillary buildings till January 2022.

► **Fulfilling his promise in 2016, President Abdel Fattah El Sisi oversaw the restoration and rebuilding of 72 Churches and Christian religious facilities** that were damaged and vandalized by acts of terrorism in the summer of 2013.

► **A \$70 million plan was implemented to restore some Egyptian antiquities, including Synagogues in Cairo**

and Alexandria, the most recent was the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria, one of the oldest and most cherished Synagogues in the Middle East, which was reopened in January 2020. The renovation was made in partnership with Tipat Halav, a Jewish welfare and historical organization, and U.S. Jewish organizations. The government has also worked to restore Jewish cemeteries in Egypt, including the Fustat cemetery.

► **Religious communities have launched initiatives aimed at combating extremism and promoting religious tolerance.** The Al-Azhar Observatory for Takfiri Fatwas was established in 2015. Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church have also launched the “Egyptian Family Home” initiative, a cultural communications campaign aiming to raise awareness, and promote religious tolerance, respect, co-existence, and acceptance of others.

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