



## Egypt's Copts persecution should not go unpunished

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The Middle East has turned hostile to Christians and other religious minorities. Among those at risk are Egypt's Copts.

Under dictator Hosni Mubarak the U.S. State Department called the status of religious liberty "poor" and noted that Christians and Baha'is faced "personal and collective discrimination." Attacks on Copts were common and perpetrators rarely were prosecuted.

Mubarak's overthrow led Copts to hope for a freer and safer Egypt. But under President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood violence against Copts increased.

Morsi was not the only culprit. In one infamous case the military, then headed by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, shot down more than a score of Coptic protesters.

Two years ago al-Sisi overthrew Morsi and eventually became president. Alas, the military used extreme brutality — killing hundreds of demonstrators on the streets of Cairo — to maintain control.

Coptic Pope Tawadros II publicly supported the coup. But the church remained as vulnerable as it was visible, and was targeted by angry Islamists. Dozens of churches were destroyed.

In January al-Sisi celebrated Christmas at a Coptic service and promised to rebuild churches that had been destroyed. So far, however, the government has delivered more promises than actions.

Mina Thabet of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms complained that al-Sisi was no liberal and "doesn't care about religious freedom." Certainly he evidenced no interest prior to the coup.

Nor is the only problem attacks on churches (which have diminished). The State Department's most recent religious freedom report noted that Egypt's government did not recognize conversion from Islam, prosecuted people for religious defamation and blasphemy, including many Copts, and failed to respond to attacks on Christians. The lack of accountability "fostered a climate of impunity."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom warned: "Discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief remain in place. Egyptian courts continue to prosecute, convict, and imprison Egyptian citizens

for blasphemy, and new government initiatives to counter atheism emerged during the year."

In February four teenage Copts were sentenced to five years in prison for a video directed against the Islamic State but treated as an attack on Islam. Al-Sisi may be consciously using ostentatious state piety to maintain power in a society hostile to religious minorities.

Even if Copts believe they remain safer under al-Sisi, they may have sold their liberty birthrate for what turns out to be a mess of security pottage. Copts live in the same unfree society as everyone else.

Coptic film critic Joseph Fahim wrote two years ago: "more than 40,000 arrests have been made since Morsi's overthrow, journalists have been prosecuted, artists have been censored, opposition voices have been violently silenced, dissented politicians have been witch-hunted, the Mubarak regime has successfully reassembled itself, institutional corruption has grown more rampant, the country has descended into further chaos and fear has become the prevailing sentiment of the day."

The State Department's 2015 human rights report on Egypt is a depressing read: "The most significant human rights problems were excessive use of force by security forces, deficiencies in due process, and the suppression of civil liberties. Excessive use of force included unlawful killings and torture. Due process problems included the excessive use of preventative custody and pretrial detention, the use of military courts to try civilians, and trials involving hundreds of defendants in which authorities did not present evidence on an individual basis. Civil liberties problems included societal and governmental restrictions on freedoms of expression and the press, as well as on the freedoms of assembly and association."

Many people simply disappear. The latest case to embarrass the government is 28-year-old Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni, who was investigating Egyptian labor unions. His mutilated body sustained the sort of torture typically inflicted by the security forces. The government initially blamed his death on a car accident.

Finally, Cairo currently is engaged in a systematic campaign to shut down organizations reporting on government abuses, including the anti-torture Nadeem Center. Two years ago I was a member of a delegation of lawyers who visited the Nadeem Center. Co-founder Aida Seif al-Dawla told us that torture was more pervasive then than at any point during the Mubarak era.

In short, Egypt is scary for anyone who dissents. Unfortunately, sustained repression has only encouraged radicalization and more terrorist attacks, leaving Coptic Christians even more vulnerable.

Coptic reliance on Egypt's al-Sisi increasingly looks like a bad deal. Now is the time to search for a new approach that doesn't sacrifice national liberty for sectarian security.

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