

## EGYPT

Religious freedom conditions in Egypt have deteriorated significantly in recent years, and under the current transitional government, systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue to occur. Since President Mubarak stepped down in February 2011, the state of emergency remains in place and discriminatory laws and policies continue to negatively impact freedom of religion. In 2011, USCIRF for the first time has recommended that Egypt be designated a “Country of Particular Concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998.

### BACKGROUND

On February 11, 2011, President Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power after 18 days of a popular uprising. Subsequently, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took control, and within days dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, formed a committee to recommend constitutional amendments, and called for presidential and parliamentary elections within six months. In late March, SCAF issued a decree incorporating new amendments into an interim constitution that immediately went into effect, and announced that it would lift the state of emergency before parliamentary elections currently scheduled to take place in three stages in the fall of 2011. However, given the volatility of the current situation, the status of these initiatives is uncertain.

The Emergency Law, in effect since 1981, restricts many human rights. Civil society and human rights groups are critical of the state security courts and limits on the rule of law and due process. Since February 11, the transitional government has begun to dismantle the state security apparatus which has operated under the Emergency Law. Despite these initiatives, the state of emergency remains and discriminatory laws and policies continue to impact negatively on freedom of religion or belief. Activists are concerned that extremist groups are becoming more prominent in the country, with detrimental effects on the prospects for genuine democratic reform and improvements in freedom of religion or belief.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt. Violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians remained high during the past year, and the Egyptian government has failed to protect religious minorities from attacks, including during the transitional period when minority communities are increasingly vulnerable. This large number of attacks fosters a climate of impunity, making further violence more likely.

**Concern for Law and Order:** Since February 11, Islamist militant groups have increased their attacks on and harassment of Sufi Muslims. For example, in March in Alexandria, militants targeted at least 16 historic mosques belonging to Sufi orders and attempted to deface and destroy tombs of important Sufi Islamic scholars. Implementation of previous court rulings, including those that would grant official identity documents to Baha’is and change religious affiliation on identity documents for Christian converts, continues to lag. The court failed to convict two of the three alleged perpetrators in the 2010 murder in Naga Hammadi of six Christians and one Muslim outside a Coptic church on Coptic Christmas Eve. Since February 11, Egypt also has experienced an increase in crime and lawlessness due to a decrease in police and security presence. Consequently, some Islamist militant groups have used this vacuum to impose extra-judicial punishments.

**Blasphemy Laws:** Egyptian law forbids blasphemy through article 98(f) of its Penal Code which prohibits citizens from “ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.” This provision has been used to detain and prosecute members of religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs or whose activities are alleged to jeopardize “communal harmony” or insult the three “heavenly religions” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious groups negatively impacted in recent years include Ahmadis, Koranists, and Shi’a and Sufi Muslims.

**Ahmadis:** Beginning in March 2010, government security officials arrested without charge 11 members of the country’s small Ahmadi community. The Ahmadis subsequently were charged under Article 98(f) with “contempt for religion” and also on vague Emergency Law charges of undermining social cohesion, but were never prosecuted. Soon after USCIRF issued a public statement calling for their release, all were freed, with the final six released on June 7.

**Christian-Muslim Tension:** In the months leading up to the November 2010 elections, an increase in incitement to violence in both the Egyptian media and government-funded mosques exacerbated sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians. Christians also face official and societal discrimination. There continues to be a high incidence of violent attacks targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians, including an increased number of attacks after February 11 and reported incidents where military and security forces have used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and demonstrators. In response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities typically conduct “reconciliation” sessions between Muslims and Christians as a means of resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compel victims to abandon their claims to legal remedy. The failure to prosecute perpetrators fosters a climate of impunity.

**Baha’is:** All Baha’i institutions and community activities have been banned since 1960. Over the years, Baha’is have been arrested and imprisoned because of their religious beliefs. In March 2009, the Supreme Administrative Court required the issuance of national identification documents to Baha’is containing a dash or other mark in the space designated for religious affiliation of one of three officially approved faiths -- Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. However, since the revolution, there continue to be delays in granting identity cards.

**Jehovah Witnesses:** A 1960 presidential decree banned all Jehovah’s Witness activities. In recent years, Egyptian authorities have monitored the homes, phones, and private meeting places of members of this small community.

**Jews:** Material vilifying Jews appear regularly in the state-controlled and semi-official media. Egyptian officials claim that the anti-Semitic statements are a reaction to Israeli government policy toward Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism. Human rights groups cite persistent and virulent anti-Semitism in the education system.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In addition to designating Egypt a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- Ensure that a portion of the existing \$1.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing for the Egyptian government is designated to provide heightened security for religious minority communities and their places of worship;
- Urge the Egyptian government to repeal the Emergency Law, in existence since 1981;
- Press the transitional Egyptian government to undertake immediate reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including repealing decrees banning religious minority faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing a unified law for the construction and repair of places of worship;
- Press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence, including creating a special unit in the Office of the Public Prosecutor;
- Press the Egyptian government to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not placed under the jurisdiction of the new domestic security agency; and
- Provide and increase Economic Support Funding for democracy and governance organizations, for political party development, and other training for Egyptian groups and parties, and require the democracy and governance organizations to certify to the U.S. government that no funds shall be allocated to or disbursed to such groups and parties without first determining that each of them: does not advocate or use violence or discriminate against women, individuals or groups on the basis of religious affiliation or religious belief with respect to equality before the law and equal protection of the law; demonstrates full respect for the rule of law; publicly pledges to uphold the individual right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and freedom of expression, including the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of international boundaries.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Require the Departments of State and Defense to report every 90 days on the Egyptian transitional government’s progress on issues including: compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief, protection of religious minorities, and the prosecution of perpetrators of sectarian violence, as well as on the U.S. government’s progress in directly funding Egyptian NGOs without prior Egyptian government approval.

**Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Egypt.**