

Egypt's Coptic Christians must be protected from sectarian violence
Amnesty International
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A rise in tensions between religious communities in the town of Wasta, about one hundred kilometres south of Cairo, in recent weeks highlights the failure of the Egyptian authorities to protect Egypt's Coptic Christians, the largest religious minority in the country.

Tensions were sparked in February when a local Muslim young woman was reported "missing" and members of her family and local Salafis – Sunni Muslims who advocate a return to what they consider to be Islam's fundamental principles as practiced by the first Muslims – blamed the Mar-Girgis Church, claiming they had influenced the woman to convert to Christianity – an allegation the Church denies.

People in the town went out on the streets calling for the return of the woman or the departure of the Coptic Christian community from Wasta.

In some of the protests, shouts of "let the Christian die from fear", "today your sister, tomorrow your wife" and "she returns or they (Coptic Christians) leave" were heard.

Local residents told Amnesty International that leaflets are being distributed at the market, the public transport rank, and outside stores owned by Christians highlighting Muslims' religious duty to stand-up against the woman's alleged disappearance.

Discrimination and violence

According to local residents, violence escalated further between 19 and 25 March, when groups of men believed to be Salafis and their supporters forced all Christian stores and other businesses to close. They then patrolled the area to ensure they stayed shut and became violent with anyone who resisted.

A restaurant owner told Amnesty International that on 20 March, at around 6pm, some 15 men carrying sticks entered his restaurant whilst clients were inside, ordering its closure. Larger groups of men waited outside, while others entered other Christian businesses on the street also ordering they shut.

Local residents said security forces failed to intervene and that, in most cases, police stations refused to register complaints. One resident told Amnesty International that the head of the Security Directorate and the head of the General Security Investigations told him that filing complaints would only serve to ignite tensions further, advising him to pursue the reconciliation route.

As days progressed, the situation deteriorated.

On 25 March, after evening prayers, a large group of Muslim men walked to the Mar-Girgis Church and threw stones and Molotov cocktails inside the building. Some of the church employees who were there at the time managed to contain the fire.

Members of the security forces arrived at the scene shortly after and managed to halt the violence.

That night, the car of a local priest Father Shenouda Sabry was set on fire while parked outside his home. Other cars parked near-by were left untouched.

However, according to information available, no arrests have been made and no investigation established to find out who was responsible.

“Coptic Christians across Egypt face discrimination in law and practice and have been victims of regular sectarian attacks while authorities systematically look the other way,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

Later on 25 March, Coptic Christian and Muslim elders held a “reconciliation meeting”.

It was agreed that businesses run by Coptic Christians could reopen save Fridays.

However, Coptic Christians in Wasta were also warned that if the “missing” woman did not return by 24 April, they will face dire consequences.

A pattern of discrimination

Human rights organizations including Amnesty International have, over time, documented a pattern of discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt.

Under Hosni Mubarak, at least 15 major attacks on Copts were documented and the situation didn't improve under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) which ruled the country between the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and the election of President Mohamed Morsi.

In 2013, Coptic Christian activists reported at least four attacks on Churches or affiliated buildings in addition to Wasta, taking place in the Governorates of Aswan, Beni Suef, Cairo, and Fayoum.

The authorities' response to the violence has been poor, at best.

They have often favoured “reconciliation” over the prosecution of offenders as a way to address sectarian violence.

In addition, both Hosni Mubarak and the SCAF failed to end discriminatory practices preventing Copts from building or restoring houses of worship.

Churches have been closed or destroyed because the authorities alleged that the communities did not have the correct permissions to build or renovate. Presidential Decree 291/2005 makes repair or expansion of Christian churches subject to a permit from the regional governor. In some cases, this has reportedly been used by the local authorities to delay or impede the construction or repair of churches.

“It is high time for the authorities to take sectarian violence and threats seriously. The Egyptian authorities are responsible for ensuring the protection of people, their homes and livelihoods. Time and time again, President Morsi claimed to be President of all Egyptians. Now, he needs to take action to ensure that sectarian violence is prevented and when it occurs it is properly investigated, and those responsible face justice,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“By not prosecuting those responsible for sectarian violence, the Egyptian authorities are signalling Coptic Christians can be attacked with impunity”.

Egypt is a state party to a number of treaties which prohibit any forms of discrimination based on the grounds of religion including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

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