

Egypt Country Profile

7 December 2012

Egypt is one of the most populous countries in Africa with over 82 million people. It is dominated ethnically by people who identify themselves as “Egyptian Arab.” There is a ten percent Coptic Christian minority. A variety of ethnic minorities make up the remaining nine percent, including Turks, Greeks, and Berber peoples. Religiously the country is ninety percent Muslim, with a Sunni majority, ten percent Coptic Christian, and the rest Bahai, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox.

Egypt has one of the oldest civilizations on earth. Ruled for thousands of years by powerful Pharaohs, Egypt fell to the Persian Empire in 343 BC and the Roman Empire in 30 BC. It became part of the Byzantine Empire until 639 AD. In 451 AD the Egyptian Coptic Church was established. In the 639 AD Egypt was conquered by the Islamic Caliphate, introducing Sunni Islam to the country. In 1517 Egypt was invaded by the Ottoman Turks and became a province of the Ottoman Empire. A brief French invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte led to collapse of Ottoman power. In 1882 the British defeated the Egyptian Army and took control, but a revolt led to declaration of independence from Britain in 1922. British advisers to King Farouk were expelled in 1952 following the Egyptian revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

In 1953 Egypt was declared a Republic. In 1956, President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. This prompted an invasion by Israel, France and Britain, but the United States and Russia pressured them to withdraw. Israel and Egypt fought three wars that resulted in Israeli occupation of the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip, followed by Anwar Sadat’s rise to Presidency in 1970 and a peace treaty in 1979 in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. In 1981 Sadat was assassinated by a fundamentalist soldier and succeeded by Hosni Mubarak.

Mubarak used brutal force against democracy activists, but protected minority groups. Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood supported intolerance against Christians, Sufis, and Shi’a Muslims and were suppressed.

In January 2011, national discontent led to a widespread movement to remove President Mubarak from power. Civil resistance demonstrations in Tahrir Square led to his resignation in February, 2012. A constitutional referendum was held in March, 2012, followed by parliamentary elections, and the election of Prime Minister Mohamed Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, in June 2012.

Egypt’s ten percent Coptic Christian minority has faced discrimination and violence from Islamist extremists since the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Persecution has included beatings, killings, attacks on religious institutions, and the abduction of Coptic women. The Egyptian government has also made it difficult for Muslims to convert to Christianity. Religious intolerance has grown in the past twenty years, resulting in many Christians fleeing the country, especially to the United States.

In November 2012, Mohamed Morsi granted himself extra-constitutional powers, including immunity from judicial review. This has sparked public outrage and resulted in anti-Muslim Brotherhood protests, including the burning of many of the party’s offices. Protesters say the constitutional referendum on December 15 should be postponed because the proposed constitution lacks sufficient checks on executive power. Nightly demonstrations have returned to Tahrir Square. Morsi refuses to compromise.

There is a high risk of violent outbreaks between Egypt’s democracy movement and the government, as well as continuing risk of violence against Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority.

Genocide Watch Assessment: Stage 6