

Libya's Copts under attack?

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You'd think that Libyans wouldn't have much in the way of objections to Coptic Christians. There aren't really enough of them in the country to cause any problems: Only about 1 percent of the population consists of Copts, and more or less all of them are immigrants. Unfortunately, their low profile hasn't protected them from the forces of intolerance.

The new Coptic Church in Benghazi was ransacked and burnt on Thursday, March 14. Protesters broke into the church and set furniture on fire. This was ostensibly an act of retaliation against Egyptian Copts who recently attacked the Libyan embassy in Cairo, raising a cross over the entrance and burning the Libyan flag. In turn, the Egyptian protests came after an Egyptian Christian by the name of Ezzat Atallah died while in Libyan custody: He had been arrested on charges of proselytizing.

The series of tragic events began when security units arrested around 50 Egyptian Copts in Libya on suspicion of possible proselytizing activities. There are claims and counter-claims about what this meant, specifically. The group was captured with thousands of Arabic-language books and materials about Christianity. It still isn't clear, though, whether the material was being used to convert Libyans from Islam to Christianity, or was simply intended for personal use by the Christian community in Benghazi and Libya in general.

There is growing concern over religious freedom in Libya. The European Union Delegation in Tripoli expressed deep concern about the detention of Atallah and accompanying reports that he and other detainees accused of missionary activity were abused by security forces. The Libyan government has expressed its determination to ensure human rights in general and religious freedom in particular. But proselytizing is currently a punishable crime in Libya, a country whose population is more than 97 percent Sunni Muslim.

In post-revolutionary Libya, however, the space for freedom has opened wide, and not always for the better. Muslims and Christians co-existed peacefully in modern Libya for decades. Unfortunately, extremist elements have now become active after the revolution. Some Libyan mosques are controlled by these extremists, who use them to spread their values and ideas. Many young unemployed men in post-revolution Libya are finding refuge with extremist groups, where they can find a sense of belonging and a fixed worldview that offers an alternative to what the authorities have so far failed to provide. If Libyans want to solve this problem, we'll have to come up with ways of managing the immediate expectations of our young people along with producing long-term strategies for tackling unemployment and other youth-related problems.

Religious intolerance in Libya has also targeted Sufi Muslims. Islamist hardliners have attacked and demolished Sufi shrines around the country. These hardliners are members of a minority that by no means represents Libyan society; if these people are not confronted and stopped, however, they could cause serious damage. The only time they've been effectively confronted so far was on September 7, 2012, when clashes broke out between conservative Salafis and local residents in the small town of Rajma, not far from Benghazi. In that case, the residents managed to block the hardliners and saved the local shrine from desecration.

Despite the fact that proselytizing is a punishable crime according to Libyan law, the right to practice religion is guaranteed by the constitutional declaration (Libya's transitional roadmap). This makes the attack on the Coptic Church in Benghazi a punishable crime. The problem, though, is that the current situation in Libya makes it highly unlikely that any arrests or prosecutions will take place. As a result, unfortunately, Christian expats and practicing Christian communities in Libya need to be careful about any activities that could be mistaken for proselytizing or appear suspicious.

The Libyan foreign ministry condemned the attack on the church in the strongest terms, emphasizing that the actions of the individuals behind the attack represent only a very marginal minority. Indeed, the attacks on churches and Christian graves stand starkly at odds to the moderate and tolerant nature of the majority of the Libyan society. Many Libyans took to Twitter and Facebook to condemn the violence, and emphasized that such actions rather imply the total ignorance of the perpetrators of the values and virtues of the moderate Islam that most Libyans embrace.

The desecration of Christian sites in Libya underlines the importance of safeguarding the freedom of practicing one's faith. Soon enough Libya will embark on a constitution-writing process. These events will serve as a reminder of the importance of enshrining freedom of religion into the constitution, and providing it with safeguards against any violent and extreme views.

The Libyan authorities are still in the process of establishing something resembling the rule of law throughout the country. It is crucial that such sensitive issues as religious freedom are debated in a peaceful and healthy environment. In addition, civil society groups and international NGOs should raise awareness of religious freedom and encourage tolerance as Libyans continue to discuss the constitution.

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