



# Religious Minorities, Social Vulnerability, and Informal Religious Enforcement in Contemporary Egypt

Shaul M. Gabbay

1. Director, Global Research Institute, Posner Center for International Development, Denver, CO USA

---

**Abstract:** This paper examines the overlapping systems of legal marginalization, bureaucratic discrimination, and extrajudicial enforcement that render religious minorities structurally vulnerable in contemporary Egypt. Drawing on constitutional and statutory analysis, human rights documentation, and field-based scholarship, it argues that Egypt maintains a coherent, albeit largely informal, apparatus of religious social control that operates through four interlocking mechanisms: a legal framework that formally protects freedom of belief while encoding Sunni Islamic normativity; a bureaucratic order (including religious designation on identity cards, discriminatory educational curricula, and unequal application of church construction law) that converts legal ambiguity into everyday disadvantage; community-level enforcement through customary reconciliation sessions (*jalsaat 'urfiyya*) that immunize perpetrators of sectarian violence from criminal accountability; and a state-managed discourse of "national unity" that delegitimizes minority rights claims while outsourcing coercive enforcement to local and communal actors. The communities affected include Coptic Christians, Baha'is, Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, and atheists. Each group faces distinct vulnerabilities calibrated to their legal recognition and social position. The paper argues that vulnerability, internalized across these communities, functions as a mechanism of compliance, and that meaningful reform requires not symbolic gestures but structural change, including the repeal of the blasphemy statute, elimination of religious designation on identity documents, and genuine prosecutorial accountability for sectarian violence.

**Keywords:** Egypt, religious minorities, Islamic normativity, sectarian violence, bureaucratic discrimination

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2016, a mob descended on the home of a Coptic Christian woman in the village of Al-Karm in Minya Governorate, stripped her naked, and paraded her through the streets. The precipitating offense, in the community's eyes, was her son's alleged romantic relationship with a Muslim woman. [1] No perpetrator was ever criminally prosecuted. Instead, local police convened what is known as a *jalsa 'urfiyya*, a customary reconciliation session. The matter was, officially speaking, resolved. However, it was not resolved. It was buried.

This paper examines the intersection of legal marginalization, social precarity, and extrajudicial enforcement as experienced by religious minorities in contemporary Egypt. Egypt presents itself to the world as a guardian of moderate Islam and a protector of its Christian minority. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has attended Christmas mass at St. Mark's Cathedral and inaugurated the largest cathedral in the Middle East.[2] Yet beneath this theater of inclusion lies a system partly codified in law, partly enforced through community

pressure, and partly perpetuated by state inaction that renders religious minorities structurally vulnerable. The mechanisms analyzed here are not merely political abstractions. They shape the lives of real people, like the Baha'i couples denied the right to legally marry. [3] Or the atheist university student facing blasphemy charges for a Facebook post.[4] They impacted the Coptic grandmother who was pressured to accept a reconciliation settlement rather than see her family's attacker stand trial. [5]

Six dimensions of this system are examined in turn: the legal and constitutional framework; the composition and status of Egypt's religious minorities; the structural mechanisms of social vulnerability; the practice of informal religious enforcement; and the role of the state in legitimizing that enforcement.

### **LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK: INCLUSION ON PAPER, EXCLUSION IN PRACTICE**

Egypt's 2014 constitution contains language that would, read in isolation, suggest robust protections for religious freedom. Article 64 declares freedom of belief to be "absolute," while Article 235 commits the state to issuing a law regulating the construction and renovation of churches. [6] In practice, however, the constitutional framework is deeply ambiguous. The same document establishes Islamic sharia as the principal source of legislation (Article 2) and grants the state's preeminent Islamic institution, al-Azharan, in an advisory role in matters of Islamic law.

The statutory landscape is more openly restrictive. Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, Egypt's blasphemy provision, punishes anyone who "exploits religion to propagate extremist thoughts with intent to inflame civil strife, defame or show contempt for a revealed religion or its adherents, or harm national unity," with imprisonment of six months to five years. [7] Scholars have noted that the statute's original purpose of protecting religious rites has been distorted by courts into the protection of what is "necessarily known from religion," with al-Azhar regularly providing briefs that define those boundaries. Any religious expression that deviates from Sunni orthodoxy as interpreted by al-Azhar is thus structurally vulnerable to prosecution. [8]

Egypt officially recognizes three so called "revealed religions": Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and extends legal rights to worship only to their followers. [9] All other groups exist in a legal gray zone. A 2009 policy change allowed members of unrecognized communities to use a "dash" in lieu of a religion on identity documents, but this accommodation falls well short of meaningful protection: it does not enable legal marriage, inheritance, or the right to build a house of worship.

### **EGYPT'S RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: FACES BEHIND THE STATISTICS**

With an estimated population of about five to seven million, Coptic Christians form by far the largest religious minority in Egypt, comprising an estimated four to seven percent [10] They are not a monolith. They include urban professionals in Cairo, subsistence farmers in Upper Egypt, and a growing diaspora in the United States and Australia. [11] Their political influence has fluctuated dramatically across Egyptian history, declining sharply since the mid-twentieth century.

Beyond the Copts, a constellation of smaller communities lives in far greater legal precarity. Baha'is number between one and two thousand; Jehovah's Witnesses, up to fifteen hundred. [8] Egypt's once-vibrant Jewish community, which exceeded eighty thousand in the 1940s, has dwindled to near extinction – perhaps a few dozen elderly individuals in Cairo and Alexandria. Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, Quranists, and those who identify as atheist or nonreligious occupy an especially hazardous position. The Ahmadiyya, who believe in a prophet after Muhammad, are regarded by mainstream Islamic jurisprudence as apostates; a characterization that has justified mob violence and, as of early 2025, the arbitrary detention of at least fifteen members of a related group, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. [9]

Atheism occupies a growing space in Egyptian society. While no law explicitly criminalizes unbelief, self-identified atheists routinely face prosecution under the blasphemy statute and charges of "contempt of religions." In January 2026, Amnesty International called for the release of twenty-three individuals detained, in part, for expressing non-theistic views online. [12] Their stories illuminate a central paradox of the Egyptian system: the state formally permits freedom of belief but informally, and increasingly, formally, penalizes its exercise.

### **THE MACHINERY OF EXCLUSION: LAW, POLICY, AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

Egypt's minority population suffer not only from dramatic events like riots, arson, arrests and murders, but also from the grinding ordinariness of consistent and often relentless bureaucratic discrimination. The national identity card is perhaps the most intimate instrument of exclusion. Every Egyptian is required to carry one, and it lists the holder's religion. For Christians, Baha'is, and members of other non-Muslim communities, the card is a daily exposure: to a police officer at a checkpoint, a clerk at a government office, an agent at airport departures and arrivals, or a potential employer. In 2024, Coptic athletes were reportedly disqualified from professional opportunities because of the religion listed on their cards. [13]

The educational system compounds this vulnerability from childhood. Al-Azhar administers a state-sanctioned network of K-12 schools whose curricula, according to IMPACT-SE, remain openly hostile to religious minorities, characterizing Ismailis, Ahmadis, and Baha'is as heretical and teaching that all "unbelievers" face divine punishment. [14] Children absorb these frameworks as religious fact, and the social attitudes they produce persist into adulthood.

Geography compounds these structural disadvantages in ways that are rarely visible from Cairo. Minya Governorate in Upper Egypt, one of the country's poorest regions and home to one of its largest Coptic populations, illustrates the intersection of poverty and institutional neglect. Church construction offers a telling example. A 2016 law was intended to streamline approval for building and renovating Christian places of worship, but its application has been starkly uneven: in wealthier urban areas, approvals tend to proceed with relative ease; in rural communities and informal settlements, obstruction remains the norm. The cumulative effect is a geography of exclusion: the Coptic communities least able to absorb bureaucratic obstruction such as those without lawyers, connections, or disposable income, are precisely those for whom the state's formal commitments remain most hollow.

### **INFORMAL RELIGIOUS ENFORCEMENT: RECONCILIATION AS COERCION**

The most distinctive mechanism in Egypt's system of minority suppression is one that operates outside formal law entirely: the customary reconciliation session, or *jalsa 'urfiyya*. These gatherings, convened by local security officials, tribal elders, and religious leaders in the aftermath of sectarian incidents, are presented by the state as a culturally authentic and efficient means of restoring community harmony. In practice, they function as a parallel justice system that systematically disadvantages minority victims.

The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), in a landmark 2015 study, documented forty-five sectarian attacks resolved through customary reconciliation between 2011 and 2014 alone. [15] The study found that Public Prosecution offices routinely accepted these sessions' terms and closed criminal investigations, effectively immunizing perpetrators from accountability. The sessions' outcomes were frequently punitive for victims: families were fined, required to sell their homes and leave their villages, or ordered not to discuss the incident publicly. [15]

The coercive mechanics of participation are rarely reported but are well understood by those involved. Multiple Coptic priests have disclosed that when sectarian violence erupts, police often arrest perpetrators and victims. The Coptic Church leadership is then placed under pressure to participate in reconciliation committees in exchange for the release of detained community members. [16] The church, in other words, is given a choice between justice and freedom, and it is expected to choose freedom. The choice is then celebrated as communal reconciliation.

Where reconciliation sessions suppress collective grievance, the blasphemy law suppresses individual expression. Estimates suggest that up to ninety percent of Article 98(f) prosecutions in Egypt are brought against Christians, despite the law's formally neutral language. [17] Charges frequently arise not from formal complaints but from community pressure: a neighbor who disapproves, a colleague who takes offense, a social media post that is reported. The National Security Agency has conducted abusive interrogations of individuals accused of expressing heterodox beliefs online, and those interrogations are themselves a form of enforcement, regardless of whether formal charges follow. [18]

### **THE STATE'S AMBIGUOUS ROLE: BYSTANDER AND ACCOMPLICE**

The Egyptian state's relationship to informal religious enforcement is not one of ignorance or neglect, but rather one of active management. The government has developed a sophisticated narrative that simultaneously acknowledges sectarian tension, absorbs responsibility for addressing it, and provides or allows accountability for perpetrators. The key discursive tool is "national unity" (*al-wahda al-wataniyya*); a concept invoked so frequently in the aftermath of sectarian violence that it has become a mechanism for suppressing rather than examining that violence. When mobs attack Coptic homes and businesses, state media and official communiqués routinely reframe the events as "family disputes" or "neighborly misunderstandings," erasing their religious character. [15] Those who insist on identifying the sectarian nature of attacks are warned against "exploiting the incident to undermine the spirit of brotherhood." The accusation is normally made against those involved, Coptic activists, or international human rights organizations. The community is, in essence, required to perform unity as the price of protection.

The Sisi government has made a series of symbolic gestures toward minority communities that deserve to be understood as political stagecraft rather than structural change. The inauguration of the Cathedral of the Nativity in the new administrative capital, which happens to be the largest cathedral in the Middle East, was accompanied by considerable fanfare. [19] The Supreme Committee to Combat Sectarian Violence was established with similar visibility. Yet low-level sectarian violence has continued throughout the Sisi years, and those responsible rarely face criminal prosecution. [19]

This ambiguity is not incidental to the system, but rather, essential to it. The state benefits from a model in which it can claim credit for restraining radical Islamist violence against minorities while delegating everyday enforcement of religious social norms to communities, local officials, and extrajudicial reconciliation processes. The result is a form of outsourced coercion: deniable, flexible, and effective. It preserves the appearance of a modern, pluralist state while maintaining the social hierarchy that informal enforcement enforces.

The impact on minority religious individuals is persistent with an endless parade of difficulties and tragedies. It means that a Coptic woman in Minya who has been assaulted may have to choose between accepting a reconciliation settlement and watching her family's home be confiscated. It means that a young Baha'i woman cannot legally marry the person she loves. It means that an atheist in Alexandria deletes his Facebook posts and does not apply for certain jobs. The system's genius, if it can be called that, is that much of its enforcement requires no state intervention at all. The threat is enough. The knowledge of what has happened to others is enough. Vulnerability, internalized, becomes compliance.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary Egypt presents a case study in how formal commitments to religious freedom can coexist with an elaborate and effective system of minority suppression. That system operates through law (the blasphemy statute, the identity card regime, the uneven application of church construction approvals), through bureaucratic discrimination (in education and employment), through community-level informal enforcement (customary reconciliation sessions, social pressure, mob violence), and through the state's strategic use of a national unity discourse that forecloses accountability.

What connects these mechanisms is vulnerability: the structural condition of those who have less legal protection, less political power, less economic security, and less social belonging than the majority community. Addressing that vulnerability requires not symbolic gestures but substantive reform: repeal of the blasphemy statute, abolition of religious designation on identity documents, equal application of church construction law, and the prosecution of those who perpetrate sectarian violence. Until such reforms materialize, informal religious enforcement will continue to do the work that the law, officially, is not supposed to do.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. CSW: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "Egypt: Elderly lady assaulted and homes destroyed," 27 May 2016. [Online]. Available:

- <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/05/27/press/3124/article.htm>. [Accessed 28 February 2026].
- [2]. BBC, "Egypt Open's Middle East's Biggest Cathedral near Cairo," 6 January 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46775842>. [Accessed 28 February 2026].
- [3]. J. Mohamed, "Baha'is in Egypt: Citizens Without Rights," 8 September 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://arij.net/investigations/bahayeen-egypt-en/>. [Accessed 08 February 2026].
- [4]. Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: 3-Year Sentence for Atheist Convicted Under Blasphemy Laws," 13 January 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/13/egypt-3-year-sentence-atheist>. [Accessed 13 January 2026].
- [5]. H. Saleh, "Egypt's Copts keep the faith in the fight against Isis," 11 July 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.ft.com/content/11d92d14-5761-11e7-9fed-c19e2700005f>. [Accessed 28 February 2026].
- [6]. Egyptian Government, "The Constituion of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 1971 (amended 2007)," 2007. [Online]. Available: <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Egypt%20Constitution.pdf>. [Accessed 1 March 2026].
- [7]. M. Mandour, "Views: Egypt's Criminalisation of Minority Free Speech through Blasphemy Cases," 24 06 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://cihrs-rowaq.org/views-egypts-criminalisation-of-minority-free-speech-through-blasphemy-cases/?lang=en>. [Accessed 1 March 2026].
- [8]. US Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt," 3 March 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt#:~:text=Human%20rights%20groups%20called%20the,%2C%20citing%20OVID%2D19%20concerns..> [Accessed 1 March 2026].
- [9]. US Dept of State, "USCIRF Releases Report on Religious Freedom in Egypt," 19 February 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.uscirf.gov>. [Accessed 1 March 2026].
- [10]. Minority Rights Group, "Copts in Egypt," 30 January 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://minorityrights.org/communities/copts/>. [Accessed 1 March 2026].
- [11]. E. Saenz-Diez, *An Atlas of Contemporary Egypt: The Copts-Part of Egypt's Identity*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2017.
- [12]. Amnesty International, "Egypt: Authorities must end crackdown on individuals discussing religious beliefs online," 29 January 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/egypt-end-crackdown-on-individuals-discussing-religious-beliefs-online/>. [Accessed 2 March 2026].
- [13]. US State Department, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt," 15 March 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>. [Accessed 3 March 2026].

- [14]. IMPACT-se, "<https://www.impact-se.org/reports-2-2/egypt/>," December 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Review-of-Changes-and-Remaining-Problematic-Content-in-EgyptianTextbooks.pdf>. [Accessed 2 March 2026].
- [15]. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights logo Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, "'Whose Customs? The Role of Customary Reconciliation in Sectarian Disputes and State Responsibility' Four years, four presidents, and 45 unjust customary reconciliations that violate the rights of Coptic," 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://eipr.org/en/press/2015/06/'whose-customs-role-customary-reconciliation-sectarian-disputes-and-state>. [Accessed 2 March 2026].
- [16]. M. Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt*", Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013.
- [17]. Minority Rights Group International, "The Price of Faith: Religious Minorities and the Law in Egypt," 2021. [Online]. Available: [https://minorityrights.org/resources/?content\\_type%5B0%5D=reports-and-briefings](https://minorityrights.org/resources/?content_type%5B0%5D=reports-and-briefings). [Accessed 2 February 2026].
- [18]. Amnesty International, "Egypt: Authorities must end crackdown on individuals discussing religious beliefs online," 29 January 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/egypt-end-crackdown-on-individuals-discussing-religious-beliefs-online/#:~:text=The%20Egyptian%20authorities%20have%20intensified,freedom%20of%20religion%20and%20belief>. [Accessed 2 March 2026].
- [19]. Freedom House, "Egypt: Freedom in the World 2024," 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-world/2025>. [Accessed 2 March 2026].