Profile

The group has a well-established history in the country, with the first Bahá’í arriving in Egypt during the nineteenth century. Despite their formal organization as a distinct religious community, however, in 1960 their legal status as a recognized group was annulled under the Nasser government. This has contributed to the uncertainty about the exact number of Bahá’í in Egypt today, though estimates range from 1,500-2,000 to over 7,000. Though nominally guaranteed equal rights and religious freedoms under the 1971 Constitution, Bahá’í in practice have retained a secondary legal status due to ongoing religious discrimination. While personal status issues in Egypt are informed by religious rather than civil law, this recognition only extends to Islam, Christianity and Judaism, not the Bahá’í faith. This means that many aspects of the lives of Bahá’í adherents, such as marriage, divorce and family relationships, are not recognized by the state. This exclusion was reinforced by the fatwa issued against them in 2003 by Al-Azhar, the prominent religious institution, supporting their continued ban as apostates. These stereotypes have played an important role in the ongoing challenges that Bahá’í have faced in their country.

Bahá’í have long faced barriers in securing identification cards. This is in part a legacy of Nasser’s punitive 1960 Presidential Decree outlawing Bahá’í organizations and public activities: this established the basis for much of the subsequent marginalization that the community have experienced. It was further reinforced by the computerization of records in the 1990s, tightening the restrictions on registration and reducing the scope for cards to be issued to persons who do not practise any of the three recognized religions, and the 2004 Circular 49/2004 issued by the Ministry of the Interior. This specifically instructed officials to refrain from providing cards to anyone other than Muslims, Christians and Jews. In particular, it effectively forced practicing Bahá’í into a limbo when registering for personal documents. As Egyptian citizens are required to include their religious affiliation and the Bahá’í faith is not officially recognized, unlike Islam, Christianity and Judaism, practicing Bahá’í were not able to secure official status.

The effect of this institutionalized invisibility was to exclude them from Egyptian society. Without identification, Bahá’í found themselves barred from education, health services, employment and even the ability to secure death certificates or legally inherit. The effects were devastating for Bahá’í members and effectively forced them into illegality, as not having an identification card is a criminal offence in Egypt. Following a court case launched with the support of activists, in April 2006 the Egyptian Administrative Court upheld the right of Bahá’í to be registered on legal documents.
However, the victory was short-lived: resistance from Al-Azhar and the government led to an appeal of the verdict in May. In December, after suspending the ruling, the Supreme Administrative Court revoked it altogether.

After a protracted legal case, however, in 2009 Bahá’í finally secured the right to an identification card. However, as their faith remains unrecognized by the state, Bahá’í are obliged to put a dash in the space instead of their religious affiliation. Marriage and Bahá’í personal law are still not acknowledged by the state: married Bahá’í who have refused to be issued documentation that lists them incorrectly as ‘single’ still reportedly face difficulties in setting up a bank account and other basic freedoms. At present, the current legislation still refuses to recognize the validity of the Bahá’í faith and maintains their secondary status within Egypt. Their official ‘invisibility’ has also had a profound impact on their ability to participate in civil and political life. Bahá’í were also the target of hostility towards the end of Mubarak’s regime and in the wake of his resignation, including the torching of several Bahá’í homes: the perpetrators remain unpunished.

Current situation

Following the January 25 Revolution and the events of July 2013, when the army returned to power, the situation of Egypt’s Bahá’í community is still uncertain. The prescriptions of the 1960 Presidential Decree, despite the revolution, have yet to be annulled. This means that despite the 2009 lifting of the restrictions on identification documents Bahá’í have still not received actual recognition as a religion from the state. Indeed, Bahá’í still face difficulties when seeking government-issued identification cards and are frequently subjected to public vilification. In December 2014, a public workshop was held by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to warn of the dangers of the spread of the Bahá’í faith in Egypt.

Their security also remains an issue. In February 2011, Bahá’í homes in Shouraneya were again set on fire, with some reports alleging the involvement of state security officers in the attack. Salafi leaders have also continued to agitate against Bahá’í as a threat to national stability. Furthermore, this discrimination has been replicated in subsequent legislation. The Constitutional Declaration of 2011, the 2012 Constitution drafted by the previous Morsi government and the subsequent 2014 Constitution of the Sisi government, while guaranteeing the ‘inviolable’ right of freedom of religion, extended this only to Islam, Christianity and Judaism – meaning that Bahá’í are still prohibited from many basic freedoms, such as practicing their religious laws and constructing places of worship. Though Bahá’í representatives lobbied during the constitutional drafting processes to expand religious freedoms to their community, this did not occur.

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