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Egypt

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and the principles of Sharia (Islamic law) are the primary sources of legislation.

The government's respect for religious freedom remained poor during the reporting period. Non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the government generally worship without harassment; however, Christians and members of the Bahai Faith, which the government does not recognize, face personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and the ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government also sometimes arrested, detained, and harassed Muslims such as Shia, Ahmadiya, and Quranist, converts from Islam to Christianity, and members of other religious groups whose beliefs and/or practices it deemed as deviating from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities it alleged jeopardized communal harmony. Government authorities often refused to provide converts with new identity documents indicating their chosen faith. The government failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Coptic Christians in a number of cases. The government continued to favor informal reconciliation sessions following sectarian attacks, which sometimes prevented the criminal prosecution for crimes against Copts and contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults. The government again failed to redress laws relating to church construction and renovation, as well as practices, especially in government hiring, that discriminate against Christians. This allowed their discriminatory effects on society to become further entrenched. In positive steps, the government continued prosecution of four alleged perpetrators of a sectarian attack against Copts in Naga Hammadi and spoke out at the highest levels against sectarian violence.

Sectarian tensions increased during the period covered by this report. On January 1, 2011, just after the end of the reporting period, a bomb attack at the Coptic Orthodox "Church of the Two Saints" in Alexandria killed at least 22 and injured 96. On November 24 a riot that began over church-building in the Giza neighborhood of Omraniya led to the death

of two Copts, reportedly by security forces. Approximately 68 others, including 18 police, were injured. Inflammatory religious rhetoric increased during the reporting period, both in the media and during street demonstrations.

The ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of Congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the public. Specifically, embassy officers and other U.S. Department of State officials raised concerns with the government about sectarian violence, ongoing discrimination that Christians face in building and maintaining church properties, the government's use of informal reconciliation instead of criminal prosecutions, and its treatment of Muslim citizens who hold heterodox beliefs or convert to other religions. The Department continues to sponsor programs in Egypt to promote religious tolerance and freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles and a population of 86 million, almost 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims constitute significantly less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians range from 8 to 12 percent (6 to 10 million), the majority belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The country's Jewish community numbers approximately 125 persons, mostly senior citizens.

Other Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches that range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. A Protestant community, established in the mid-19th century, includes 16 Protestant denominations: Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status in the 1960s. There are 1,000 to 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses and small numbers of Mormons, but the government does not recognize either group. The number of Bahais is estimated at 2,000 persons.

Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There are many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, who have had a presence in the country for more than a century. These groups engage in education, social, and development work.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

Article 46 of the constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although, in practice, the government places restrictions on these rights. Islam is the official state religion, and Islamic law is the principal source of legislation. A January 2008 lower court ruling interpreted the constitution's guarantee of religious freedom as inapplicable to Muslim citizens who wish to convert to another religion. This ruling, which is not binding in other courts, remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period, although on April 27, 2010, an appellate court announced that it would not decide the appeal until the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled on a series of cases related to article 46. Courts ruled in previous years that the constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion does not apply to Bahais.

In its January 2008 decision in the case of Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy v. the Minister of Interior et al., the Cairo Administrative Court noted that the country ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) with a

reservation that the covenant shall be ratified to the extent that it does not conflict with Islamic law, including the covenant's article 18 which provides for freedom of religion.

Although there are no statutory prohibitions on conversion, the government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity or other religions. This and resistance to such conversions by local officials -- through refusal to recognize conversions legally -- constitutes a prohibition in practice. The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity. Moreover, in January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court, a court of first impression, ruled that freedom to convert does not extend to Muslim citizens. The court stated that the freedom to practice religious rites is subject to limits, especially those entailed by the maintenance of public order, public morals, and conformity to the provisions and principles of Islam, which forbid Muslims to convert. The court stated that "public order" is defined as the official religion being Islam, that most of the population professes Islam, and that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation. The ruling remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period. The Cairo Administrative Court ruled in June 2009 to deny Maher al-Gohary, a Muslim-born convert to Christianity, an identity document indicating his chosen faith.

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While there is no legal ban on proselytizing Muslims, the government restricts such efforts. Neither the constitution nor the civil and penal codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have detained or otherwise harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting the three "heavenly religions" -- Islam, Christianity, or Judaism -- or inciting sectarian strife. The government generally tolerates foreign religious workers on condition that they do not proselytize Muslims. For more than 15 years the government has refused reentry, denied residency renewal requests, or expelled expatriates they suspected of engaging in unapproved religious activities.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the government recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Islamic law, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Islamic law. The government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Islamic law as practiced in the country, Muslim women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslim men. A non-Muslim male must therefore convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Also, a non-Muslim woman who converts to Islam must divorce if her husband is not Muslim. In some cases, upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities reportedly have asked the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to convert, divorce proceedings may begin immediately, and custody of children is awarded to the mother.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the government's interpretation of Islamic law. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights, but may be provided for in testamentary documents. Converts from Islam to Christianity lose all rights of inheritance. Because the government offers no legal means for such converts to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, the converts' loss of inheritance rights may not be indicated on civil documents.

In the absence of legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resort to soliciting illicit identity papers. Authorities periodically detain and charge converts and those assisting them with violating laws that prohibit the falsification of documents. The minor children of such converts, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, may automatically become classified as Muslims by the government irrespective of the religion of the other parent. This practice is in accordance with the government's interpretation of Islamic law, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

Civil statutes and religious laws, both Islamic and Coptic, prevent Coptic men and Muslim women from marrying. When a male Christian and a female Muslim marry outside the country, their marriage is not legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the government's interpretation of Islamic law.

The law provides for "khul'" divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. Many women have complained that after being granted khul', the required child support is not paid.

In July 2010 the Supreme Constitutional Court suspended the implementation of a May 2010 Supreme Administrative Court ruling that the Coptic Orthodox Church must permit divorced adherents to remarry. The Coptic Orthodox Church characterized the May decision as an infringement on its authority. Execution of the ruling remained suspended at the end of the reporting period pending further review. According to government policy and previous practice, the application of family law, including marriage and divorce, is based on an individual's religion, whereby Orthodox Copts are subject to Coptic Orthodox Church law. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in cases of adultery or the conversion of one spouse to another religion, or to another Christian denomination.

The Ministry of Education bans wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) in primary schools and allows it only in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

In September 2010 professors filed suit against Hossam Kemal, President of Cairo University, for failing to carry out a court order overturning his earlier decision to ban university staff from working or giving lectures on campus while wearing the niqab (Islamic full face veil).

In September 2010 Ain Shams University and Fayoum University announced that female professors wearing the niqab would not be allowed into the classroom.

Constitutional amendments approved by referendum in 2007 have unclear implications for religious freedom. The amended article 1 of the constitution states that the country's political system is based on the principle of citizenship. The amended article 5 prohibits the formation of political parties or the conduct of political activities on a religious basis. Government supporters argued that these changes would separate religion from politics. Some critics, including the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, argued that the amendments are incompatible with the constitution's article 2, which states that the principles of Islamic law are the primary source for legislation.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) of Al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and, since 2004, to confiscate any publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (Hadith). A 2003 Ministry of Justice decree authorizes Al-Azhar to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no reports of the exercise of this authority during the reporting period.

In 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled that the government must issue new identity cards and birth certificates to 13 Christian-born converts to Islam who converted back to Christianity; the documents must indicate that the holder is Christian and "previously embraced Islam." The court held the "recording of a conversion" from Islam to Christianity in the personal identity card does not "establish" the apostasy of the card holder. However, the court held that failure to convey the holder's apostasy would conflict with public order. Some human rights observers said that by identifying persons as apostates, the court ruling would serve as a warning mechanism to the society at large. The nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights warned the government that any such public reference could subject converts to social stigma and discrimination. The government has taken no action to implement the order. In 2009 the government stated that it was awaiting a Supreme Constitutional Court decision on more than 100 cases filed by other "reconverts," and by several nongovernmental entities that oppose the ruling, contending that article 2 of the constitution, which states that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation, denies Muslims the right to convert from Islam.

On March 30, 2010, the Alexandria Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit filed on behalf of two boys born as Coptic Christians seeking recognition of their self-identification as Christian, despite their father's conversion to Islam in 2005. As a result, when the plaintiffs turned 16 in June 2010, they were only eligible to receive national identification cards designating that they are "Muslim." The court's dismissal of the lawsuit supported the discriminatory policy of forcibly changing the religious affiliation of children recorded on official documents when their father converts to Islam, even when the Christian mother retains custody. The court also dismissed a lawsuit filed to compel the government to identify the boys as "Christian" on official identity documents, ruling that Coptic Church-issued documents certifying that the boys were Christian had no legal standing.

All mosques must be licensed by the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf). The government appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The Ministry of Islamic Endowments reported that there were 104,506 mosques and small dedicated prayer areas called "zawayas" nationwide as of April 2010. A 2004 decree by the minister of Islamic endowments removed from governors the authority to issue permits to build mosques and placed private mosques under the ministry's administrative control; however, up to 20,000 mosques and zawayas may remain unsupervised by the ministry.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni Decree, still partially in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, Ministry of Interior (MOI) regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi Decree, specify a set of 10 conditions that the government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from a mosque and that approval of the neighboring Muslim community must be obtained before a permit to build a new church may be issued.

In 2005 the president issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's 26 governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to local authorities. Decree 291 noted that governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified documents, within 30 days of submission. According to the decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches. The lack of implementation meant that the difficulties faced by Christians largely remained.)

Some communities, faced with refusal of their requests for permits, use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits. Local authorities sometimes close down such unlicensed places of worship.

To obtain official recognition, a religious group must submit a request to the MOI's Religious Affairs Department, which determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The department also consults leading religious figures, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who, if he concurs, issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are potentially

subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under article 98(F) of the penal code, which forbids the "denigration of religions." There were, however, no reports of the government prosecuting unregistered religious groups under these provisions. The government last recognized a new religious group in 1990.

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Bahai institutions and community activities and strips Bahais of legal recognition. Despite the ban, Bahais are able to engage in community activities such as Naw-Ruz, the Bahai new year's celebration. During the Nasser era, the government confiscated all Bahai community properties, including Bahai centers, libraries, and cemeteries.

Government practices restrict the provision of national identity papers to some Bahais and members of other religious groups that are not officially recognized. The government requires all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews on national identity cards. Consequently, Bahais and other religious groups not associated with any of the three recognized religions have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or to live without valid identity documents. However, some unmarried Bahais have secured identity cards with a "dash" in place of a stated religion. In 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled in three cases brought by Bahais that the government must issue official identification documents containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. However, the court noted that one purpose of filling the religion field with a dash or other distinctive mark was to protect members of the "revealed religions" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) from Bahai infiltration and to avoid potential dangers from such persons' conduct and relations with them. The ruling stated that anyone who adopts the Bahai Faith is an apostate and that the religion cannot be recorded in any civil status or other official document because it would conflict with public order. In April 2009 the MOI issued Decree 520 providing procedures for members of unrecognized religious groups to obtain national identity cards with dashes in the religious identification field. According to Bahai community members, throughout 2010 the government implemented the order and continued to issue national ID cards with a dash, as well as birth certificates for the children of married Bahais. However, the government refused to issue identification documents to married, divorced, and widowed Bahais, unless they would agree to specify their marital status as "unmarried," because the government does not recognize Bahai marriage, and there is no civil mechanism for marriage.

Those without valid identity cards also encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Police occasionally conduct random inspections of identity papers, and those found without identity cards can be detained until they produce the document.

The government has not granted legal recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than 30 years. The government has raised no objection.

The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1960. Since then the government has, to varying degrees, subjected members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to harassment and surveillance. The Jehovah's Witnesses were legally registered in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956, and their presence in the country dates to the 1930s. In January 2010 the Cairo Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit filed by the Jehovah's Witnesses to compel the government to recognize it as a Christian denomination. The government attributes its refusal to grant the registration to the Jehovah's Witnesses to the opposition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which during the reporting period condemned the group as heretical, as well as to its lingering Nasser-era suspicion of links between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the State of Israel.

In 1954 the government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party that operates missionary, charitable, and political activities, on the grounds that the Constitution prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. The Muslim Brotherhood was also viewed as a threat to National Democratic Party (NDP) rule. However, the government has tolerated Muslim Brotherhood operations with varying levels of interference. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly

about their views and identify themselves as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary detention and pressure from the government.

The government at times prosecutes and otherwise harasses, including through detentions and the imposition of travel bans, members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony.

The government has advised journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitism. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with strengthening protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements. Five of its 25 appointed members are Christians.

Local media, including state television and radio, regularly include Islamic programming. Christian television programs are shown weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV.

The government observes the following as national holidays: Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, Mawlid al-Nabi (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), and Coptic Christmas (January 7).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Church and human rights leaders reported that six years after the promulgation of Decree 291/2005 many local officials continued to intentionally delay the process for obtaining permits to repair, rebuild, or expand existing churches. They charged that some local authorities refused to process applications without "supporting documents" that are virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that had been established during the country's monarchical era). They also complained that some local authorities categorized routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects that require formal permits rather than simple notification and maintained that some security forces blocked their churches from using permits that have been issued and denied them permits for repairs to church buildings. Such practices depended primarily on the attitudes of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church, and on their personal relationships with church representatives. As a result congregations experienced lengthy delays, years in many cases, while waiting for new building permits.

The government continued to detain, harass, and deny civil documents, including national identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to citizens who convert from Islam to Christianity.

During the reporting period, the government refused the Jehovah's Witnesses' continued efforts to obtain legal registration.

While the government complied with court rulings by issuing identity documents with a "dash" for religion to Bahais, it continued to refuse to issue marriage certificates. This made it impossible for married members of the Bahai community to obtain identity documents recognizing their marital status. The government cited its nonrecognition of the Bahai Faith and the country's lack of a civil marriage mechanism as reasons for the denial.

During the reporting period, the approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays, often measured in years. Although government officials maintained that the president approved all requests for permits

presented to him, independent critics charged that delays by the MOI and/or local authorities caused many requests to reach the president slowly or not at all. Some churches complained that local security officials blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit had been issued. Others suggested unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects. Many churches faced difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials.

According to statistics published in the Official Gazette, the president issued seven decrees during the six-month reporting period authorizing construction of four Protestant churches and three Coptic Orthodox churches. These churches include five in the Upper Egypt Governorate of Assiut, one in Bani Sweif, and one in the Delta city of Zagazig. No statistics were available on the number of permit requests made during the reporting period.

Local government officials have refused to issue a building permit for a new church in the Arbaeen District of Assiut for 13 years, despite a 1997 order from the president and approval from the MOI to issue the permit.

Local government officials in Assiut Governorate revoked a license to reconstruct the church belonging to the Church of the Brethren shortly after the license was granted in 2001, and construction has been halted for the past nine years. Church representatives reportedly began the application process in 1997, intending to replace their church building, the dilapidated condition of which they said posed safety hazards. Local police reportedly halted construction after the old building was razed in preparation for constructing the new one.

Since 2001 the MOI has prevented renovation of St. John the Baptist Church at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut. At the end of the reporting period, the congregation continued to meet for worship in a tent erected in the small courtyard of the church. The governor of Assiut issued a decree for a permit to undertake renovations in 1999 that was renegotiated with State Security in 2001 to allow for enlargement. Church representatives initiated their request for a renovation permit in 1999.

Governmental authorities delayed or blocked renovation of other churches as well, including the Church of Mar Mina near Beni Suef and the Archangel Mikhail Coptic Church in Ezbet al-Nakhl.

In recent years, two converts from Islam to Christianity, Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy and Maher Al-Gohary, have sought to have their conversion officially recognized in national identity documents by seeking recourse through the courts. In April 2010 an Administrative Court transferred a case filed by Higazy for change of religious affiliation to the Supreme Constitutional Court. The Administrative Court stopped proceedings until the Supreme Constitutional Court issues a decision on a separate appeal filed by Higazy regarding the constitutionality of article 47 of the Civil Status Law. Other converts have also filed claims regarding article 47. In January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled that the administrative agency of the Civil Status Department was not bound to examine Higazy's request to have his new religious affiliation, Christianity, recorded on his national identity card. In its ruling the court wrote that principles of Islamic law forbid Muslims from converting from Islam and such conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and an enticement for other Muslims to convert. The court asserted its duty to "protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam and to protect public morals, especially if the apostate petitions the administration to condone his misdeed and his corrupt caprice." The ruling maintained a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status.

Maher Al-Gohary continued to appeal a June 13, 2009, decision by the Seventh Circuit Court of Administrative Justice. The court ruled against Al-Gohary, a Muslim convert to Christianity, who sought government recognition of his conversion, including by changing the required religion space on his national identity card to indicate "Christian." The court stated that al-Gohary had demonstrated behavior that contradicted his claim to be a Christian, thereby "toying with religion." The court stated that, while the constitution's guarantee of freedom of belief is an internal matter and not subject to restrictions, the guarantee of freedom to practice religious rites, including freedom to embrace a different religion, may be limited through

regulations that emphasize higher interests, especially those related to safeguarding public order and moral values. The court also stated that Egypt approved the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with its religious freedom guarantees, "taking into consideration the provisions of Islamic law and the absence of contradiction between these provisions and the covenant." The ruling indicated that in the event of a contradiction, Islamic law takes precedence. The court also stated that there is no law authorizing the Coptic Church to certify a citizen's change of religion from Islam to Christianity. Accordingly, the court recommended that Parliament rectify legislative shortcomings that constitute a failure to achieve effective protection for freedom of religion and prevent manipulation of religion for personal gain.

On December 28, 2010, the State Security Administrative Court overturned a Ministry of Interior travel ban on Maher al-Gohary. The Court reportedly found that the MOI's "security concerns," namely that Al-Gohary's case would be used by human rights organizations abroad to defame the country's reputation, unconvincing. MOI is expected to appeal, and at the end of the reporting period al-Gohary was still unable to obtain a passport.

In recent years there have been reports that the government harassed Christian clergy and other Christian leaders at the international airport in Cairo, confiscating address books, written materials, and various forms of recordable media while they passed through customs to board flights.

Government officials detained a U.S. citizen at Cairo International Airport as he was traveling to a youth event at a Christian center outside Cairo. The traveler had a valid Egyptian visa. Officials held the man for 24 hours before returning him to the United States. Also during the reporting period, an American religious worker who had lived for more than a decade in Egypt was refused entry when returning to the country.

An Egyptian citizen convert to Christianity and his UK citizen spouse were detained at Cairo International Airport upon arrival in November. The spouse was deported and the Egyptian detained for approximately three weeks before being released and allowed to depart the country.

Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years.

Press articles and editorials in print and electronic media, which often criticize Israel and Israeli policy, occasionally also expressed anti-Semitic sentiment. Prior to the current reporting period, there were anti-Semitic editorial cartoons depicting demonic images of Israeli leaders, stereotypical images of Jews and Jewish symbols that generally referenced Israel or Zionism, and comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis. A number of privately owned, but government licensed, satellite television stations broadcast virulent anti-Semitic programming, which glorified or denied the Holocaust, over government-owned NileSat. Beginning in October the government warned stations to eliminate "sectarian content" (content that reinforces sectarian hatred or could spark sectarian violence) and took a number of these channels off NileSat. Following a court decision in November, five of these stations returned to NileSat while others remained off the air.

The constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed; however, the government discriminates against non-Muslims.

As of December 31, 2010, there were 10 Christians (seven appointed, three elected) in the 518-seat People's Assembly; six Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; two Christians in the 32-member cabinet; and one Christian among Egypt's 28 governors. Christians, who represent between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold fewer than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Public funds compensate Muslim imams but not Christian clergy.

Political parties nominate relatively few Christians to run in elections as candidates. Out of 839 candidates for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in the 2010 People's Assembly election, 10 were Copts. Approximately 24 Christians ran as opposition candidates and number of others ran as independents. Out of 92 candidates put forward by the NDP to run in the June 1 Shura Council election, 3 were Copts.

There were no Christians serving as presidents or deans of the country's 17 public universities. Of nearly 700 president, dean, or vice dean positions in the country's public university system, only one or two positions were filled by Christians.

The government discriminates against Christians and other religious minorities in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities and bars them from studying at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. In general the government bars non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Qur'an. Media and activists claim that Christians make up a disproportionately small proportion of the police and security forces.

The 2009-2010 National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) annual report, issued in February 2010, highlighted increased sectarian tension and restrictions on Shias, while at the same time noting a "relative breakthrough" in issuing identity documents to Bahais. Following communal violence up to and including the January 2010 Naga Hammadi attack, NCHR noted that authorities used a "combination of customary procedure, reconciliation and mitigation, along with the legal procedures of detention, referral to the public prosecution. . . ." An NCHR Mission investigating one case of communal violence recommended "penalizing the aggressor in the incident [because] reconciliation meetings were futile if they provide impunity for the aggressor." However, unlike in previous years, the 2009-2010 annual report did not provide recommendations on religious freedom or any other area to the government.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The government harassed Muslims who held views it deemed unorthodox including Quranist, Shia, and Ahmadiya Muslims. The Quranists are a small group of Muslims that the state considers unorthodox because they view the Qur'an to be the sole authority for Islam and reject some other traditional sources of Islamic law, including the Hadith.

In 2008 security officials in the governorate of Sharqiya arrested Quranist blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman. Police raided Abdel-Rahman's home and confiscated his personal computer, books, CDs, and cassette tapes before taking him to an unknown location. Despite multiple court rulings ordering his release, Abdel-Rahman was held until January 22, 2009. Security officials reportedly subjected him to physical and mental abuse in detention. As of the end of the reporting period, there had been no government response to investigate and potentially prosecute the officials.

In 2008 the public prosecutor ordered the release without charges of 25 members of the Islamic Al-Ahbash sect, including three Lebanese and a Kazakh, who had been arrested in 2007 on charges of membership in an illegal organization and contempt for religion. The expatriates were reportedly deported.

Between April and July 2009, government security forces arrested 200-300 Shias including prominent Shia cleric Hassan Shehata on charges of forming an organization for the purpose of propagating Shiite ideas that disparage Islam and Sunni confessions. Most of those arrested were released by fall 2009, and Shehata was released in March 2010. However, as of the end of the reporting period, seven Shias from this group were still being detained. The MOI has repeatedly renewed the detention orders, despite release orders from the Supreme State Security Court.

In 2009 security officials at Cairo International Airport detained Quranist Abdel Latif Said. The government released him, without charges, on November 25, 2009. On April 14, 2010, a Cairo Administrative Court ordered the government to lift

any travel ban it had imposed on Said. Security officials at Cairo International Airport had also prevented Said from traveling earlier, on April 24, 2009, to the United States to attend a conference.

Beginning on March 15, 2010, government security officials arrested, over several days, 11 members of the country's Ahmadiya Muslim community; all were subsequently released, with the final six being freed on June 7. The Ahmadiyas were charged with the penal code offence of showing "contempt for religion" and vague emergency law charges of undermining social cohesion. They were never prosecuted. Authorities also detained a number of Ahmadiyas for questioning over periods up to three days in December.

In September and October 2010, the government detained approximately 100 Shia Muslims. Media and NGOs reported that the Supreme State Security Prosecutor accused 12 Shia from this group in mid-October of "contempt of religion," forming an underground organization to overthrow the ruling regime, and receiving foreign funds.

On December 13, Minister of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) Hamdy Zakzouk called on security officials and imams, the vast majority of whom are paid by the government, to not permit celebrations of the Shia religious holiday of Ashura.

An estimated several thousand persons remained imprisoned during the reporting period because of alleged support for or membership in Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the government. The government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the ongoing state of emergency allows them to renew periods of "administrative detention" indefinitely.

Although there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity.

For approximately two years the MOI failed to comply with repeated court orders to release Emad Adib Atiya Suleiman, a Christian married to a convert to Christianity, from "administrative detention." The courts, including a 2008 ruling by the Supreme State Security Emergency Court, issued 15 orders to revoke a 2007 detention order for Suleiman that was based on reports of an alleged "romantic relationship between the aforementioned and a Muslim woman living in the same area." Suleiman was released on July 26, 2010.

In 2008 airport security officials arrested a convert from Islam to Christianity, along with her husband and their two sons, ages two and four, while they were trying to board a flight to Russia. Officials charged her with carrying a false identification document. The convert subsequently told U.S. officials that state security officials raped her multiple times and subjected her to other physical and mental abuse during her detention in January 2009 to pressure her to revert to Islam. Although her husband and sons were released after four days in custody, she was held until January 22, 2009, when a judge granted bail and ordered her release. Before granting bail, a judge reportedly told her he would have killed her if the law permitted. Upon her release she was reportedly thrown from a moving vehicle and subsequently went into hiding. Two employees of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria were arrested on suspicion of providing her forged identity documents.

In 2008 a male convert from Islam to Christianity claimed that agents of state security had detained him on multiple occasions over several years, including during the reporting period. The convert stated that authorities had subjected him to severe physical and mental abuse; he said the officers called him a "murtadd" (apostate), told him he was suffering as a result of his conversion, and pressured him to revert to Islam. The convert stated that during the reporting period state security officers beat his wife on the abdomen while she was pregnant, causing her to hemorrhage. He also showed officials scars purportedly inflicted by governmental interrogators in previous years, including long scars on his back and

sides and numerous deep, circular scars on his shoulder, reportedly caused by state security officers holding burning cigarettes against his flesh for long periods of time.

The government took no action to implement a 2008 ruling of the Supreme Court of Administrative Justice that ordered the government to issue national identity documents to 13 converts to Christianity who were originally Christian but had converted to Islam. There were hundreds of pending cases that other such converts have brought with the same request. The ruling, which is not subject to appeal, overturned a 2007 ruling by a lower court that held that the MOI was not obligated to recognize the reconversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam (see Legal/Policy Framework).

The government took no action during the reporting period to provide Fathy Labib Youssef, another such "reconvert," an identity document indicating that he is Christian. In December 2008 the Alexandria Administrative Court ruled that refusal to issue the identity document was illegal.

As mentioned above, the government refuses to issue converts from Islam to Christianity identity documents indicating their chosen faith. Some converts who procured counterfeit or falsified identification documents denoting their chosen religion, or helped others to do so, have been arrested, tried, and convicted for these crimes. For example on April 13, 2009, police arrested convert to Christianity Raheal Hemen Mussa, reportedly for possession of a false identification document. She was held for four days and then released into the custody of her parents.

In October 2009 a criminal court convicted Einas Refaat Mohamed Hassan, a convert from Islam to Christianity, of forgery for possessing a forged national identity card indicating her religion was Christianity. Hassan was released after serving a one-year prison sentence.

In June 2009 the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) referenced a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch which asserted that in 2007 there were 89 cases of Egyptian citizens whose religious affiliation had been changed in official documents to Islam against their will, after their fathers converted to Islam. The 2007 report also asserted that in violation of the law, the MOI refused to change their religious affiliation to Christianity when they reached the age of 15.

The government failed to investigate allegations of police misconduct and excessive use of force during the November 24 riot in the Giza neighborhood of Omraniya. Clashes between police and mostly Coptic rioters began over a church-building dispute and led to the deaths of two Copts. As many as 68 others, including 18 police, were reportedly injured. Human rights advocates have demanded an investigation into excessive use of force by security forces, including use of rubber bullets that witnesses claim caused the two deaths, and misconduct by police who threw rocks alongside civilians. Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III announced that the Coptic Church would file lawsuits against the government for actions that led to the two deaths. There were unconfirmed reports of police abuse against some of the 154 persons detained in connection with the riots.

Security forces on September 7 reportedly clashed with monks at the Coptic Orthodox monastery of St. Macarius of Alexandria in Wadi Rayan, Fayoum Governorate. Witnesses claim that police used tear gas, batons, and stones, and three monks were injured. Authorities confiscated limestone bricks that were to be used for building monks' cells, claiming the Coptic Church had not obtained authorization to build additions. The Monastery is located in a protected wilderness area and was periodically deserted prior to 1996.

The government continued in most cases to sponsor "reconciliation sessions" following communal violence and sectarian attacks instead of prosecuting perpetrators of crimes. Such "reconciliation sessions" generally precluded recourse to the judicial system for restitution. Following an attack on a Coptic Church facility in the Mediterranean coastal city of Marsa Matruh on March 13, 2010, 30 attackers were arrested, but no criminal charges were filed as the government had organized a reconciliation session. According to credible reports, the attack resulted in injuries to 19 Christians, four

Muslims, and eight policemen who attempted to intervene. The Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies investigated and reported that the attack resulted in the destruction of only Coptic-owned properties including nine homes, three workshops, a warehouse, and 11 automobiles. The Institute's assessment and press reports indicated that the incident was settled through cash payments to some victims who suffered property damage, and the Coptic Church agreed to demolish the wall that blocked an access route to the neighboring mosque. Some reports indicated that the wall was built on recently acquired Copt property. The attack was reportedly encouraged by the imam of that mosque who, like most imams in the country, receives a salary from the Ministry of Islamic Endowments. The imam reportedly incited a crowd estimated in the low hundreds. According to the institute report, the attack lasted three hours; fire trucks and ambulances arrived four hours after the attack began, and security forces, although located nearby, responded after two hours. The institute report credited security forces with extinguishing the fires and preventing carnage. Victims alleged that homes were looted before being set on fire.

During the reporting period, the government did not investigate or prosecute the perpetrators of a March 2009 attack on the homes of seven Bahai families in the village of al-Shuraniya in Sohag Governorate. Muslim villagers, some of them related to the Bahai villagers, attacked Bahai houses with bricks and rocks until police dispersed them. On March 31, 2009, the attacks escalated when attackers returned and set fire to the homes, forcing the Bahais to flee.

Prior to this reporting period, some prominent government officials denied that sectarian tensions were among the root causes of violence that occurred between Christians and Muslims, pointing instead to criminal, family, tribal, or other disputes. This contributed to a failure to effectively address religious tensions and violence.

In June 2009 state security and police forces reportedly instigated a sectarian clash in Boshra, near Beni Suef, when they prevented Christians from praying in an unlicensed church.

By the end of the reporting period, the government had not prosecuted any of the Bedouin villagers who assaulted the Abu Fana monastery in 2008, nor those who concurrently kidnapped, physically abused, and reportedly attempted forcefully to convert several monks. The armed assault also resulted in the death of one Muslim man, as well as multiple injuries including gunshot wounds to monks and the destruction of the chapel, artifacts, and some of the monks' cells. Three monks abducted from the monastery were reportedly rescued by security services. Police were reportedly slow to respond to the attack, but have maintained a presence on the road leading to the monastery. The NCHR investigated the attack, which according to independent human rights groups originated in a land dispute. On August 20, 2009, the government released, without charges, two Copts arrested in connection with the death of a Muslim villager. Two Muslims detained in connection with the attack were also released on August 20. Reports claimed the two Coptic brothers were being detained to pressure Coptic authorities not to press for official prosecution of the perpetrators. Human rights advocates reported that this incident exemplified an increasingly prevalent pattern of governmental authorities detaining Copts following sectarian attacks and either holding them without charges or threatening false charges and a police record. They said the detentions serve as a tool to blackmail Coptic authorities to desist from demanding criminal prosecution of the perpetrators and to dissuade the victims and/or their families from seeking recourse in the judicial system for restitution of damages.

Jehovah's Witnesses leadership reported the continuation of government harassment and interrogation of their members during the reporting period, including confiscation of religious documents and a ban on importing Bibles and other religious material. State security authorities also reportedly monitored the homes, telephones, and meeting places of Jehovah's Witnesses. Their mail was also reportedly sometimes confiscated and intended recipients summoned for interrogation by security officials that reportedly included threats of increased harassment of coreligionists, abusive language, and psychological pressure. Security agents also reportedly sought to incite animosity against them, characterizing Jehovah's Witnesses to neighbors as security threats and Zionists. Authorities also reportedly followed visiting foreign members of Jehovah's Witnesses. While Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be allowed to meet in groups of up to 30 in private buildings,

they remain prevented from building dedicated places of worship. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported varying degrees of government harassment and surveillance since 1960. Witnesses reported that government harassment they experienced in 2010 declined substantially from 2006-2008.

In 2008 a Giza criminal court sentenced Coptic priest Mita'us Wahba to five years in prison with "forced labor" for officiating at a wedding between a Copt and a Muslim convert to Christianity. The court found Father Wahba criminally liable for accepting an allegedly false identification document the convert presented. Wahba appealed but remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

On November 5 authorities released blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman Amer, incarcerated since 2006 and convicted in 2007 of "denigrating Islam" and insulting the president, and immediately detained him again. He was released on November 16. According to Karim Amer's public statement November 24, prison officials beat him on three occasions during his detention. A state security officer also reportedly warned him not to blog upon his release. The government has not responded to calls for an investigation into abuse by security forces.

On July 22 the government released blogger Hany Nazir, who had been held without charge under the Emergency Law since 2008 following his blogging about allegedly sensitive religious issues.

In April 2009 government security forces demolished a building the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Marsa Matrouh had recently bought to serve as a parish social services center. According to media reports, security forces claimed a brick fence on the roof of the one-story building exceeded the height approved by local government. At the end of the reporting period, there were no reports of governmental intention to investigate the conduct of the security forces who carried out the demolition.

In March 2009 a local council in Maghagha, Minya governorate, demolished part of a 10-acre Coptic cemetery, destroying graves.

In 2008 local authorities demolished a Coptic social services building owned by the Coptic Church in Alexandria, alleging it had been built without a permit.

On March 30, 2010, an administrative court in Alexandria dismissed a lawsuit filed on behalf of twin boys born as Coptic Christians seeking recognition of their self-identification as Christians, despite their father's conversion to Islam in 2005. As a result, when the plaintiffs, Andrew and Mario Medhat Ramses, turned 16 in June 2010, they could only receive national identification cards designating them as "Muslim." The court's dismissal of the lawsuit supported the discriminatory policy of forcibly changing the religious affiliation of Christian children recorded on official documents when their father converts to Islam. In its opinion, the court stated that Coptic Church-issued documents certifying that the boys were Christian had no legal standing. In June 2009 the Court of Cassation ruled to grant the twins' mother, Kamilia Lotfy, a Coptic Christian, custody of her two sons, overturning a 2008 ruling by the Alexandria Appeals Court that had awarded custody to their father based upon his conversion to Islam. At the end of the reporting period the boys remained in their mother's custody.

On July 27, 2009, a Cairo family court awarded legal custody of Aser Usama Sabri, whose parents are Bahais, to the child's Muslim aunt. The ruling, which came in a lawsuit filed by the boy's grandfather, had no immediate practical effect as the boy and his parents live abroad.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government continued prosecution of three Muslim men implicated in the January 2010 Naga Hammadi attack. They were charged with premeditated murder. As of the end of the reporting period, the court had ruled on motions, heard

testimony from numerous witnesses, reviewed crime scene data, and was scheduled to resume in January 2011 to issue verdicts.

Senior government officials issued strong statements condemning sectarianism and religious violence during the reporting period. Following the October 31 attack on the Saydat al-Najat Church in Baghdad and Al Qaeda threats against Copts, President Mubarak condemned sectarian violence and announced increased security measures for churches. Numerous ministers and religious leaders echoed these statements. On October 6 Mubarak publicly denounced sectarianism and called national unity "a red line I will allow no one to cross." The same day Sheikh Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayeb, and head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, issued a joint statement calling for peaceful coexistence. On October 9 Minister of Awqaf Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq warned imams working for the Ministry not to attack Copts in their sermons.

In October the government removed 12 privately-owned satellite television stations from government-owned NileSat for spreading "sectarian incitement" and other charges. A number of these stations were well-known for virulent anti-Semitic and other extremist programming. In late November a court order allowed five stations to resume broadcasting.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

Violent sectarian attacks, primarily directed at Copts, continued during the reporting period, although Christians and Muslims share a common culture and live as neighbors throughout the country. Communal tensions and sectarian incitement increased during the reporting period.

On January 1, 2011, a bomb attack at the Coptic Orthodox "Church of the Two Saints" in Alexandria killed at least 22 and injured 96.

On November 24 a demonstration in the Giza neighborhood of Omraniya led to clashes between police and mostly Coptic rioters. Two Copts were killed and up to 68 others, including 18 police, were reportedly injured. Eyewitnesses claim that rioters threw "Molotov cocktails" and stones, while police primarily used tear gas and rubber bullets. Videos of the riot show groups of police, joined by civilians, and rioters throwing rocks at each other. Rioters briefly blocked traffic on Cairo's ring road and also attacked the Giza Governorate headquarters building. Authorities detained approximately 154 persons in connection with the riot. The riot began when demonstrators, who had been at the site a number of days, attempted to prevent Giza officials and police from entering the construction site of a new community/social center. Giza officials claimed that Copts were building a church instead of a "services building" for which they had a permit. Before the riot Copts added domes and a small cross.

On November 15-16, in the village of Al-Nawahid, Qena Governorate, 12 houses and a store belonging to Coptic families were set on fire. The arson started after locals saw a Coptic teenage boy and Muslim teenage girl together. Police arrested 14 persons, including Muslims and Christians, who were released in the days following the violence. As of the end of the reporting period the government had reported no progress in investigating these crimes and had not arrested any suspects.

In late October one store and four houses belonging to Coptic families were set on fire in the village of Awlad Kalaf in Sohag Governorate. Security forces intervened to prevent further violence. As of the end of the reporting period the government had reported no progress in investigating these crimes and had not arrested any suspects.

Salafist-led demonstrations took place many Fridays from September to December in Alexandria, with crowds of up to 2,000 chanting violent anti-Coptic slogans and displaying signs with violent rhetoric. Demonstrators expressed anger at recent statements by Coptic Church leaders. Salafists also called for the release of women allegedly held in Coptic monasteries against their will. Smaller Salafist-led demonstrations took place in Cairo on a number of Fridays.

Demonstrators echoed a call by the Al Azhar Scholars' Front (not directly affiliated with Al Azhar) in September for a boycott on Christian businesses.

Bishop Bishoy, the second highest official in the Coptic Orthodox Church, angered many Muslims in September when he stated that Muslims are "guests" in Egypt and that parts of the Qu'ran may have been added by followers of the Prophet Muhammad after his death. Earlier in September prominent Islamist and former secretary general of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, Selim Al-Awwa, suggested that the Coptic Church was buying weapons and storing them in churches, as well as kidnapping Muslim women. These statements heightened sectarian tensions.

Throughout the reporting period, communal tensions in the media and during street demonstrations focused on the July 2010 disappearance in Minya Governate of Camilia Shehata Zakhir, the spouse of a Coptic priest. Egyptian lawyers filed suit accusing Al Azhar and the MOI of forcibly preventing Shehata from converting to Islam, though Al Azhar officials claim that Shehata never approached them. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights publicly criticized police for handing Shehata to the Coptic Church against her will. Some incendiary preachers and editorialists called for "storming" monasteries to find the woman.

The trial of four suspects continued during the period for their alleged role in the January 6, 2010, Christmas Eve shooting in Naga Hammadi, Qena Governorate that left seven persons dead (six Christians and one off-duty Muslim police officer) and 11 others wounded (nine Copts, two Muslims). The suspects remained in detention throughout the reporting period and were being tried before an emergency state security court on charges of premeditated murder. At the end of the reporting period, the court was scheduled to resume in January 2011 to issue verdicts.

The trial of a 20-year-old Coptic man who allegedly raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl in November 2009 in Farshout, Qena Governorate, continued during the reporting period. The court was scheduled to issue a verdict in February 2011.

As in previous years, there were occasional claims of Muslim men forcing Coptic women and girls to convert to Islam. Reports of such cases were disputed and often included inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. In November 2009 an international Christian advocacy group published a report regarding alleged cases of forced conversion; however, well-respected local human rights groups were unable to verify such cases and found it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involved a female Copt who converted to Islam when she married a male Muslim. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. government, including the ambassador, members of Congress, the Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and other Department of State and embassy officials. The embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The embassy also regularly discusses religious freedom matters with other government officials, including governors and members of parliament. The ambassador has made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically the embassy and other Department of State officials raised concerns with the government about the ongoing discrimination that Christians face in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005; official discrimination against Bahais; arrests and harassment of Muslim citizens whose religious views deviate from the majority; and the government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert. During the UN Human Rights Council periodic review of the government's human rights record in February 2010, the U.S. delegation made a number of interventions regarding religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials maintain an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahai religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. U.S. embassy officials investigate complaints of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. They also discuss religious freedom matters with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors in chief and journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services that work with Coptic and Muslim community groups, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for occurrences of sectarian bias.

The U.S. government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a civic culture that promotes religious tolerance, and supporting projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between different religious communities as a means to promote religious freedom.

The embassy supports development of educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curricula. The embassy also supported programs that promoted tolerance among young religious leaders, interfaith understanding in communities that have recently suffered from religious strife, and civic and political participation by marginalized youth.

Embassy officials also worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

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