

Egypt Overview

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Environment

Egypt occupies the north-eastern corner of Africa, the Sinai Peninsula and several islands in the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea. It is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea, [Sudan](#), the Red Sea, [Israel](#), Gaza and [Libya](#). For millennia the Nile River has nourished human populations along its banks. Egypt is the second-most populous country in Africa and its population of 82 million remains concentrated in cities and towns along the great river. The Saharan portion of the country, which is further in distance from the Nile river, remains sparsely populated.

Peoples

Main languages: Arabic (official)

Main religions: Islam, Coptic Christianity

Minority groups include [Copts](#) est. 4.7-7.1 million (6-9%), (Source: ICG lower estimate/CIA Yearbook higher) [Nubians](#) 200,000 (0.25%) (source: Ethnologue 1996); Baha'i 500-2,000 (source: US State Department 2006, International Religious Freedom Report) and Jews, fewer than 200. (source: US State Department 2006, International Religious Freedom Report)

Total population: 82 Million (CIA World Factbook, 2011 July Est.)

Many Egyptians are descended from the successive Arab settlers who followed the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, but many others are not. While many Egyptians refer to the majority ethnic identity as 'Arab' (and indeed Egypt's leader at independence preached pan-Arabism), others use the term 'Egyptian' as an ethnic as well as national moniker and point to their shared civilization in the Nile Valley for centuries before the Arab arrival. Those who use the ethnic term 'Egyptian' are sometimes accused of nationalism in the Arab world. Nubians living south of Aswan have been Islamized and Arabized in religion and culture although they still speak the Nubian language, Nobiin. Nomads who live in the semi-desert comprise an Arab-Berber mixture.

The Copts are indigenous Egyptian Christians, the vast majority belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. They live throughout Egypt but are concentrated in Alexandria, Cairo and the urban areas of

Upper Egypt (southern Egypt). They represent between around 6-9 per cent of the total population, but their proportion reaches an estimated 18-19 per cent in the south. Most Copts are working class peasants and labourers, although there is a Coptic business upper class and a middle class of urban professionals and small landowners. Copts are present in most institutions of the state, and there are Coptic members of all registered political parties.

Whereas Sharia law recognises Coptic Christians as 'people of the book', no such tolerance exists for the tiny Baha'i community of 500-2,000. Baha'i is a religion with roots in Shia Islam that emanated from Persia in the 19th century. Because the Baha'i believe that God's word is passed to humans through an ongoing series of revelations, it clashes with Islam's view that the Prophet Mohammed received the final revelations. Its followers face severe discrimination in Egypt.

By the twelfth century there were up to 20,000 Jews in Egypt. Under Ottoman rule they faced institutional discrimination, but during the nineteenth century their status improved, and they achieved prominence in commerce and industry. By the 1940s, 65,000-70,000 Jews lived in Cairo, Alexandria and other urban communities. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war saw hundreds of Jews arrested, their property and businesses confiscated; bombings in Jewish areas killed and maimed hundreds. Some 25,000 Jews left Egypt between 1948 and 1950, many going to Israel. In 1952 anti-British sentiment led to attacks on Jewish establishments, and after the 1956 war, 3,000 Jews were interned and thousands of others were given a few days to leave the country, while their property was confiscated by the state. By 1957 only 8,000 Jews were left. Hundreds of Jews were arrested and tortured after the 1967 war, and those still in public employment were dismissed. As a result of further emigration, by 1970 there were only 1,000 Jews in Egypt, and today there are fewer than 200, most of them elderly.

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History

Egypt was unified in the fourth millennium BC. Conquered by the Arabs in the seventh century, Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1517 to 1914 and held by the British from 1882 to 1922. In 1928, in the city of Ismailia, Hassan Al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood - a Sunni Islamist organisation - which grew to be one of the most powerful and influential Islamist organisations in the Arab world. In 1956 Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser became President, and in the early 1960s began shaping Egypt into a socialist republic. From 1970 President Anwar Sadat followed opposing policies to those of Nasser by promoting peace with Israel, economic liberalization and Egyptian nationalism.

In 1981 Muslim fundamentalists assassinated Sadat. He had favoured accommodation with the Muslim Brotherhood while cracking down on more radical armed Islamic groups. His successor, Hosni Mubarak, maintained the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, and occasionally linked them to the militant 'terrorist organization' al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. Gama'a's low-level guerrilla war underwent a resurgence from August 1994, with attacks on Egyptian Copts, prominent secularists and tourists. The government used incommunicado detention, torture and severe force to contain Islamic militants, and several hundred people were killed, mainly police and militants. Gamaa's political manifesto remains vague, but grievances include government corruption and incompetence, especially in the neglected south of the country. There were low turn-outs in the 1990 and 1995 multi-party elections, and the government has been accused of using the crackdown on militants to stifle wider opposition.

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Governance

In February 2011 Hosni Mubarak resigned as president of Egypt, after weeks of anti-government protests. The collapse of the Mubarak regime was finalized by a handover of power to the armed forces, thereby ending 30 years of authoritarian rule characterized by suppressing dissent, protests and jailing political opponents. In March 2011, Egypt effectively came under military rule with the army promising elections within 6 months.

Egypt's emergency laws, introduced after the 1981 assassination of Sadat, still remain in force. The authorities can arrest and question people without charge indefinitely. Significant numbers of Islamic militants were reportedly summarily executed through a shoot-to-kill policy. In November 1995 a military court convicted fifty-four senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a move widely seen as the climax of a campaign to ensure another overwhelming majority for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in the country's elections. Most Egyptian political parties, including secular ones, denounced the trial. The Brotherhood rejects violence and insists on its belief in parliamentary democracy. The government's approach has tended to reinforce extremist positions by closing all political avenues and dialogue, thus making violence an alternative avenue for those concerned about corruption, mismanagement and poverty.

Although a military crackdown by the Mubarak regime reduced the frequency of terrorist attacks allegedly conducted by Gamaa, such as the 1997 killings of 58 tourists near Luxor, it also served to further consolidate the government's authoritarian grip on power, as well as to justify the continuation of the emergency laws, without fear of significant criticism from the West. Western support, especially the enormous development and military aid received from the United States, has put the government further out of touch with the political sentiment of the Egyptian population. This was particularly the case following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The divide between Mubarak and the Egyptian population has played into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist opponents, and, in turn, the spectre of their political ascent serves to reinforce the support of western countries for Mubarak's authoritarian government.

Nevertheless, there has been some international pressure for reform. Political repression in Egypt received more attention following the arrest in 2000 of human rights activist and government critic, Saad Eddin Ibrahim. Such pressure led Mubarak to announce some reforms at the end of 2004, and promise multi-candidate elections for 2005. His willingness to reform has had its limits, however, as evidenced by the January 2005 arrest of the liberal secular politician Ayman Nour, who was widely viewed as Mubarak's most serious challenger. Mubarak has also been criticized for moving allies of his son Gamal Mubarak into key positions, which many observers believe may be intended to pave the way for a later hereditary transition of power.

Amid low voter turnout, Mubarak won a fifth term in office in September 2005 elections with 88.6 per cent of the vote. Although the elections were once again democratically deficient, the suppressed multi-party campaign saw first-time open protests against Mubarak's continued rule and greater willingness of the media to criticize the regime. More than 500 activists of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested prior to November 2005 parliamentary elections, but independent candidates endorsed by the organization increased their proportion in the still NDP-dominated body.

One year later, in November 2006, Mubarak continued to walk a line between making concessions to reform, but only insofar as it does not challenge his hold on power. In the same month he pledged constitutional reform in an address to parliament, arrests of members of the Muslim Brotherhood were on the rise again.

In December 2010, Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) won 83 per cent of the seats in parliamentary elections. The two main opposition parties, the Muslim Brotherhood and Wafd, boycotted

the second round vote after alleging widespread fraud in the first ballot. The poll was criticized by the United States and the EU. As many as eight people died in election related violence.

The culmination of political repression, social exclusion, rising prices, corruption and insufficient reforms found expression in the popular protests of February 2011, which were inspired by events in Tunisia. The popular uprising forced Mubarak to concede his position as a Western backed autocratic leader, paving the way for an opportunity to implement real political and social change in one of the previously most stable, but repressive, regimes in the Middle East.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

In 2007, the minority Baha'i community, numbering approximately 2,000 at most, received a further setback in their attempts to be officially recognised, when the Supreme Administrative Court reversed a lower court's decision earlier in the year to allow them to be officially registered for identity purposes. The result of this ruling was that Baha'is must continue to be registered as either, Muslims, Jews, or Christians. Refusal to do so entails the inability to obtain documentation ranging from birth certificates to other identification necessary to open bank accounts and send children to school. A government report in October 2006 argued that Baha'is must be 'identified, confronted and singled out so that they can be watched carefully, isolated and monitored in order to protect the rest of the population as well as Islam from their danger, influence and their teachings.'

In 2009, the Egyptian Interior Ministry issued a decree (no. 520/2009) that allows 'non recognized' religions not to have to identify as one of the three 'recognized' faiths. Instead officials are instructed to place a dash (-) before the line demarcating religion on all official identification documents. This means Baha'i and members of other faiths do not have to list their religion on their identification papers. HRW cites two cases in 2009 where discrimination was successfully contested by members of the faith. The first involved a lawsuit by a father of twin children who sought to obtain proper birth certificates for them. The second concerned a college student who couldn't obtain a national identity card to re-enroll in university unless he falsified his religious identity. In both cases the court provided a compromise in which members of the Baha'i religion were allowed to omit religious affiliation in their identity application documents.

Issues of religious freedom also arise in cases where individuals wish to convert to Christianity from Islam. Apostasy is prohibited under some interpretations of Islam. Those who convert often do so quietly because of the harassment and intimidation from both the authorities, including the police, and religious groups.

However, this approach was challenged in 2007, by the case of Mohammed Hegazy. According to reports, he undertook a court action to try to get his ID card changed to reflect his new Christian religion. His story was reported in national media, after which Mr Hegazy faced death threats and went into hiding. Mr Hegazy's case came amid a debate about apostasy, and its legitimate punishment. According to Associated Press reports, one of Egypt's most senior clerics, the Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, issued guidance against the killing of apostates - a view which was rejected by other religious scholars in Egypt.

The minority Coptic Christians, estimated at 5-10% of the overall population but concentrated more heavily in Cairo, Alexandria and the south, remained vulnerable to attacks in 2007 from Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups. In October, two Copts were murdered by persons unknown at

el-Kasheh, south of Cairo. Earlier in the year there were allegations of security force personnel destroying Coptic graves. The situation became progressively worse for the Coptic community when an attack on Abu Fana monastery in January 2008 was followed by another incident in May on Monks who were kidnapped, whipped and beaten the New York Times reported.

Sectarian violence directed at the Coptic community reached a climax in 2010-2011. On 6 January 2010, six Copts were killed in a drive by shooting in Naga Hamady after they left a late night mass to celebrate the eve of the Coptic orthodox Christmas. Later that year in November, clashes erupted between Copts and police over the construction of a church. One protestor was killed in large scale protests which are rare in the Coptic community. The Coptic community believed they had permission to build but were prevented from doing so by the authorities. Sectarian tensions were further exacerbated when 21 people were killed and 70 hurt in a bomb blast outside a church in Alexandria. About 1,000 worshippers were attending a New Year's service when the suspected suicide attack took place. Several hundred Christians clashed with Muslims and police following the attack.

In the wake of popular protests that overthrew President Mubarak, 13 people were killed in March 2011 when a Muslim mob attacked Christians who were protesting against the destruction of a church. This most recent attack raised concerns about continuing sectarian tensions and prompted calls for religious and legal reforms to end discrimination in post-Mubarak Egypt.

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