

Egypt and religious freedoms

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I am very pleased to be here to participate in this important Conference, which takes place concurrent with revolutions in some Arab countries. It is important for us during this Conference to address religious freedoms as it is one of the important issues, especially since the freedoms are still being violated in some countries even though we live in the 21st century.

God created man and honored him with special dignity. Therefore, every human has the right to believe what he wants. The freedom of thought and the freedom of belief is the right of everyone to believe or not believe, to believe in a thing or idea or thought or not; to adopt a different doctrine of prevailing belief or against it. Freedom of belief is absolute freedom. No one person nor governments have authority over the conscience nor power in forcing people to stick to religion believed to be false or abandonment of religion believed to be true.

Religious Freedom is in the heart of any just and free society. It is embedded firmly as a constituent value as a global principle. The right in freedom of religion constitutes the cornerstone to democracy. It is the dynamic scale in the formation and maintenance of a political stable System. In contrast, falling short of protecting religious freedom and other basic human rights promotes extremism and leads to instability and violence. Therefore assessing religious freedom conditions is considered an important indicator in diagnosing the general health and stability of any country. Freedom of conscience or belief is considered one of the rights enshrined in the international laws of human rights.

Freedom of belonging to a religion is the personal conviction of that religion stemming from studying and understanding that faith, and so that the individual is a believer and messenger at the same time. The principle of freedom to belong to any religion which appeared in the first paragraph of article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and political rights appeared to resolve before all countries, sovereignties and communities that this freedom is essential to man for he is free to profess whichever religion he chooses, leave it or change his religion altogether.

Although Egypt signed the international laws and treatise, religious freedoms, however, are still incomplete in the Egyptian society.

Egyptian society consists of approximately 85 million people, mostly belong to Sunni Islam, and the number of Egyptian Christians about 15 million people, mostly belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church, but there are Catholic and Evangelical.

Religious freedom in Egypt is not absolute, and there are restrictions and limitations that do not permit interfaith movement, because most of the Egyptians think that changing religion threatens the security, social safety and tranquility of society and all residents who live in peace, love and unity!!

These limitations can be summarized as follows:

1. The boundaries of recognition of religious freedom do not extend to include non-Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam-and therefore, any one who belongs to other faiths like Buddhism or Baha'i, for example, is inevitably doomed and heretic worthy of hell fire.
2. There are those who belong to Abrahamic religions, but at the same time accuse their fellow professing brethren of differing Abrahamic religions that they are dissolute, deviants and that their holy books were distorted and changed.
3. A person who adopts the religion of the majority does not have the right to change his religion and follow another religion of his choosing. If he does that he may be killed and his blood shed. Also, if a parent, whether a father or a mother switched from Christianity to Islam, then it becomes compulsory for their children to embrace Islam. Egypt passed some judicial laws forcing Christian children to follow Islam if a parent switched to Islam as Islam is considered the superior religion.
4. The boundaries of recognition of religious freedom for religious minorities in these communities are not absolute or abstract restrictions but there are restrictions and limitations imposed on the freedom of those of differing religions and their freedom of worship in those countries. There are still problems in building churches in Egypt. In my assessment, there are three main reasons hampering the church building process:

First: outdated legal reasons

II: Retarded educational reasons

III: fanatical religious reasons.

As for the outdated legal reasons, we have what Al Ezaby Pasha legacy PAL. In February 1934, then Interior Undersecretary (Al Ezaby Pasha), issued a judgment in the form of ten questions that must be answered before allowing the possibility of building a church. Unfortunately, administrative authorities are still using these unjust conditions up to now.

These are the 10 conditions and requirements:-

1. Is the building site proposed for the Church vacant space or agricultural? And is it owned by the applicant or not? A thorough ownership search must be conducted and the proper documents attached although ownership has been satisfactorily established.
2. How far is the proposed church building site from nearby mosques and shrines in the area?
3. Is this vacant land space surrounded by Muslims or Christians?
4. If among the Muslim homes, is there an objection to construction?
5. Is there another Church of the same denomination in the town of the new proposed building?

6. If there are no other churches, then what is the distance between the town of the proposed building site and the nearest same denomination Church to the neighboring town?

7. How many members of the denomination in question in this town?

8. A permission and approval must be obtained from proper authorities if the proposed building site of the Church is close to Nile bridges, irrigation canals, utility lines, railway lines etc...

9. A formal report of this investigation indicating neighboring shops and public places and their exact distance to the church-building site and sent to the Ministry.

10. The applicant must submit with his request a scientifically measured one-over-one thousand drawing signed by the Chairman of the religious denomination and an engineer familiar with the proposed church-building site. The assigned investigation unit is to verify its validity, sign off on it accordingly and present it with the investigation report.

II. Regarding the outdated educational curricula, students are taught that building churches leads to sin. Perhaps the article published by the great enlightened writer Professor Ahmed Abdel Muti Hijazi in an essay (tragedy not without comic scenes) by Al-Ahram on Wednesday 14 July 1999 confirms this. In it he mentions: (one of the required textbooks for law students at the University of Cairo, is a book by Dr. Ahmed Taha 'Atiya Abu El Haj. According to the book in chapter II of the third topic in implementing the law, a person is prohibited from 'willing' from his estate any portion that could be used for what would lead to sin such as building a church or a nightclub, a casino or to promote wine-making, raising pigs, cats or dogs. Isn't this destructive?)

This is what students learn within the walls of the greatest of our Egyptian universities. That building churches leads to transgression. And they equal the Church to nightclubs and casinos!! Thus, every year our prestigious universities provide us with fanatical students who reject others who follow different religions and world view.

III:-in terms of fanatical religious opinions, and perhaps most famously the Advisory opinion of the Muslim Brotherhood, published in Al-Da'wah magazine, issue II no. 56 of December 1980 Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah Al-Khatib, the Mufti of the community and currently a member of the Office of guidance, answer regarding the church-building law in the land of Islam. He said (the law regarding building those things — to use his expression — in the land of Islam is tri-dimensional: First: it is prohibited to build a church in towns Muslims founded and built such as El Maadi, 10th of Ramadan and Helwan, etc... Second, it is prohibited to build —those things- in towns Muslims opened by force such as Alexandria. The Sheikh confirms that some educated called for the demolition of these churches because they are owned by Muslims. III what has been amicably agreed upon between Muslims and the community is to keep the churches as they are but preventing any reconstruction or rehabilitation should any of them require it.)

What's to be understood from this opinion without a doubt is that towns found and built by Muslims don't accommodate non-Muslims. A question arises: where will the Egyptian Christian residing in Alexandria go when his church there is demolished according to this opinion?!!! The logical answer is that he will go to the places which the Muslim brotherhood allows churches to

be built. The only exception the Muslim brothers make is to keep existing churches. However, they make this concession a mirage when they prevent the rebuilding of any destroyed torn down churches. They may achieve their purpose with time. The inevitable result from the Advisory opinion of the Muslim brotherhood is the absence of churches in the land of Islam. The logical conclusion is that there is no place for non-Muslims in Egypt. The Sheikh finishes his opinion by forcefully stressing that no one shall cause a church in the land of Islam.

In addition, there are many government positions where Christians can not work. Therefore, many of the educational curriculums ignore Coptic history.

The right of citizenship needs to be effected in Egypt, regardless of sex, religion, color or race. For that is the only way to put an end to any religious strife. As we also need a law that criminalizes discrimination based on sex and religion. Furthermore, freedom of belief must be absolute.

The confiscation of religious freedoms is despotism beyond tyranny because the principal issue is the individual's complete and indivisible freedom in choosing his religion, whichever it may be. Conversely speaking, he may choose to have no religious at all. Some people may disagree with those who –according to their viewpoint- have perverted beliefs, they may think of them as atheists or polytheist, but this does not give anyone the right to violate the human right to freedom of belief. It's a matter of fate and future.

If Arab countries do not respect human rights as developed countries do, then our societies are in real crisis!

Thank you for your attention.