

Sectarian Violence in Egypt

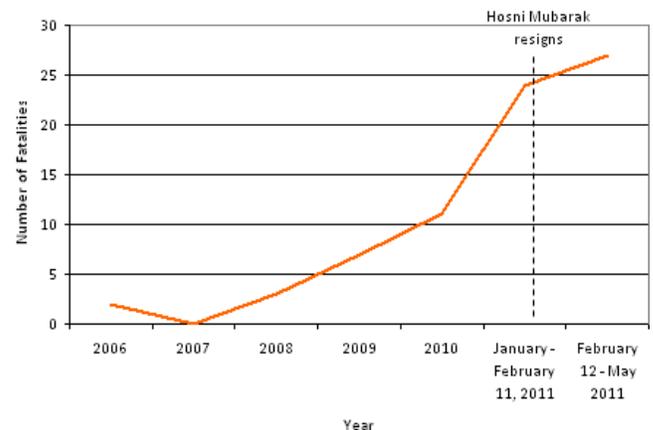
There is mounting concern about sectarian violence in Egypt since the overthrow of President Mubarak in February. Human Rights First shares these concerns that heightened tensions between the minority Coptic Christian community and the majority Muslim community present a major challenge to Egypt's progress towards peaceful democratic change and has urged Egypt's interim rulers to take urgent steps to end the violence and address its underlying causes.

Some news reports and analysis have suggested that sectarian violence only emerged as a problem after the end of Mubarak's authoritarian rule, with the implication that Egypt's Christian minority was somehow protected by the old repressive order. This version of events does not reflect Egypt's recent history. **Incidents of sectarian violence and attacks on Christians in particular were on the rise in Egypt in the latter years of Mubarak's rule. Since the uprising there has been a continuation of this worrying trend.**

Incidents of sectarian violence in Egypt are the product of long-standing failures by the Egyptian government:

- to address inequality and discrimination against Egypt's Christian minority;
- to hold accountable those who engage in violence or incitement to violence against religious minorities;
- to take a clear stance against religious extremism and the exploitation of religious bigotry for political ends;
- to protect the lives and property of citizens;
- to uphold and strengthen the rule of law;
- to promote and protect religious freedom;
- to foster a climate of religious tolerance and co-existence in Egyptian society.

Total Number of Fatalities in Incidents of Sectarian Violence, 2006-2011



The answer to these ingrained problems do not lie in a return to authoritarian rule; rather the emerging democratic order in Egypt must implement effective measures to safeguard the rights of religious minorities and combat violent extremism.

Facts

- From January 2008 to January 2010, 53 incidents of sectarian violence or tension occurred in 17 of Egypt's 29 governorates, averaging about two incidents a month. (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2010, 5)

- In 2011, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended Egypt as a Country of Particular Concern due to Egypt's "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." According to USCIRF, "The Egyptian government engaged in and tolerated religious freedom violations before and after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011." (USCIRF 2011, 49) Egypt was listed as a Watch List country from 2002 to 2010. The U.S. Department of State has not yet acted on the Commission's recommendation.
- The U.S. Department of State, USCIRF, and Freedom House have noted an increase of sectarian violence in past years. (U.S. Department of State 2009; USCIRF since 2002; Freedom House 2010).

Chronology of Examples of Sectarian Violence Prior to Mubarak's Ouster

January 1, 2011: Alexandria—Bombing of Two Saints Church as Coptic Christians exited New Years Eve service. The attack killed 23 people and triggered Christian protests in the street as well as violence between some Muslims and Christians.

November 24, 2010: Giza—Police halted construction on a church-owned building, instigating a clash between police, Muslim bystanders, and Coptic Christians. Two Christians were killed, dozens injured, and more than 150 people detained.

November 2010: Qena governorate—More than a dozen Coptic Christian homes and businesses were burned and looted. Rumors about a romantic interreligious relationship triggered these attacks. Security officials imposed a curfew and arrested several Muslims, but no one has been charged.

September 2010: Cairo—Egyptian police reportedly utilized excessive force on Christian demonstrators protesting the government's refusal of a license to build a church extension. Two people were killed and dozens were wounded.

March 13, 2010: Marsa Matrouh—An imam incited an estimated 250 to 300 Muslims to attack a Coptic Orthodox Church. Its wall allegedly encroached on the pathway to the mosque. About two dozen Christians were injured, the Church was damaged, and three Christian homes were burned.

January 6, 2010: Naga Hammadi—A drive-by shooting on Coptic Orthodox Christians leaving Christmas Eve mass killed six Christians and a Muslim police officer as well as wounding several others. In the following days, fighting between Christians and Muslims ensued in Naga Hammadi and surrounding villages; Christians suffered much of the damage.

January 9, 2010: Baghoura—A Christian woman was killed in the wake of the Naga Hammadi drive-by shooting and its subsequent fighting.

November 2009: Qena governorate—Rumors that 20-year-old Coptic man raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl triggered rioting and sectarian fighting for five days, resulting in widespread damage to Christian owned-businesses.

October 19, 2009: Deyrout—Farouk Atallah, a 61-year-old Christian, was killed because the Muslim assailants believed Atallah's son engaged in a sexual relationship with their Muslim relative. Their arrests triggered anti-Christian rioting and extensive damage to Christian property in Deyrout. The four assailants were acquitted in February 2010.

June 21, 2009: Ezbet Boshra-East—Reports of Christians from Cairo visiting a pastor in Ezbet Boshra-East caused Muslims in the village to attack a building used for Christian services. Christian homes were looted, crops on Christian farms were uprooted, and Muslims and Christians were injured.

May 10, 2009: Cairo—A homemade bomb exploded near a Coptic Orthodox church, but no one was hurt. The police detonated a second bomb located in the same area.

March 4, 2009: Mied Ghamer governorate—A Muslim man doused a Christian man with gasoline and set him on fire due to a rumor that the victim had a relationship with a Muslim woman. The rumor initiated other clashes in the village, also resulting in the death of the Christian man's father.

January and May 2008: Minya governorate—A large group of Muslim Bedouins attacked the Abu Fana monastery. One Muslim died, three to seven Christians were wounded, and several monks were abducted and abused in the May attack.

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