

Egypt

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
800 North Capitol Street, NW Suite 790
Washington, DC 20002

*Serious problems
of discrimination,
intolerance, and other
human rights violations
against members of
religious minorities,
including nonconforming
Muslims, remain
widespread in Egypt.*

— 2005 USCIRF Annual Report

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom remains concerned about ongoing violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Egypt, including widespread problems of discrimination and intolerance against members of minority Muslim, Christian, and other religious communities. In the last two years, the Egyptian government has adopted several measures to acknowledge the religious pluralism of Egypt's society, including the formation of a National Council for Human Rights, increased efforts in promoting interfaith activity, and the addition of materials in the public school curriculum on Coptic Christian contributions to Egypt's history and the issuance of a Presidential decree designating Christmas as an official national holiday. Yet the government has not taken adequate steps to halt repression based on religion or belief, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom. Nor has the government taken steps to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the media.

A Commission delegation traveled to Egypt in the summer of 2004 to discuss with Egyptians the nation's efforts to advance the right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights in accordance with the international human rights instruments to which Egypt is a party. During the visit, the delegation met with senior Egyptian government officials and religious leaders, human rights groups, women's rights advocates, scholars, educators, legal specialists, and others active in civil society. The information gathered from this visit and through additional research and documentation has brought to light serious concerns that have caused the Commission to include Egypt on its Watch List again this year. Despite some welcome steps, as cited above, the situation has deteriorated in other areas detailed below.

The United States has a close relationship with Egypt, including cooperation on regional stability and the war against terrorism. With nearly \$2 billion in economic and security assistance, Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world. Begin-

ning in 2003, and reaffirmed in the State of the Union Address in 2005, President Bush specifically has called on Egypt to "show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." The Commission views the strength of the bilateral relationship and repeated calls for reform by the United States as an opportunity for the two countries to increase cooperation significantly to advance protection for the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights as an important aspect of U.S. policy to promote freedom and democracy in the greater Middle East.

Background

Egypt has a population of approximately 70 million, 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. There are also minority Muslim communities, including Shia, Sufi, and other Muslim groups, which constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Approximately 8 to 10 percent of the population is Christian, the largest non-Muslim religious minority community in the Arab world, the vast majority of which belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.¹ Other Christian communities numbering from the thousands to hundreds of thousands include Catholic, Protestant, Syrian and Greek Orthodox, and other Evangelical Christian communities. There is also a small Baha'i community estimated at several hundred and a Jewish community of less than 200.

Egypt is a self-proclaimed democratic republic with a branch of Sunni Islam as the state religion. Citizens do not have the freedom to change their government. In 1999, President Hosni Mubarak was reelected unopposed to a fourth 6-year term in a national referendum. The President appoints the Cabinet and the country's 26 governors and may dismiss them at his discretion. The judiciary is not fully independent, in part because a 1981 State of Emergency Law (the Emergency Law) continues to be in force. Under this legislation, several categories of cases fall within the jurisdiction of the state security or military courts. The National Democratic Party (NDP), which has governed since 1978, has used its entrenched position to dominate national politics and has maintained an overriding majority in

USCIRF

COMMISSIONERS

2

PREETA D. BANSAL, CHAIR

Of Counsel, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

FELICE D. GAER, VICE CHAIR

Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, The American Jewish Committee

NINA SHEA, VICE CHAIR

Director of the Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House

KHALED ABU EL FADL, COMMISSIONER

Professor of Law, UCLA

ARCHBISHOP CHARLES J. CHAPUT, COMMISSIONER

Archbishop of Denver

MICHAEL CROMARTIE, COMMISSIONER

Vice President, Ethics and Public Policy Center

ELIZABETH H. PRODROMOU, COMMISSIONER

Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs and Assistant Professor of International Relations, Boston University

BISHOP RICARDO RAMIREZ, COMMISSIONER

Bishop of the Diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico

MICHAEL K. YOUNG, COMMISSIONER

President, The University Of Utah

JOHN V. HANFORD III, EX-OFFICIO, NON-VOTING COMMISSIONER

Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State

JOSEPH R. CRAPA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

visit our web site at
www.uscirf.gov

the People's Assembly (lower house) and the Shura Council (upper house). In February 2005, in a positive response to both domestic pressure and President Bush's explicit calls for democratic elections in Egypt, President Mubarak called for an amendment to the Constitution to allow opposition candidates to run. However, candidates reportedly must be registered with officially-recognized political parties and be approved by the People's Assembly. As of this writing, crucial details regarding the next elections remain unclear.

The Role of the State Security Services

The state security services are the lead government entities responsible for dealing with religious affairs in Egypt. The Commission is concerned that the policies and actions of this agency interfere with various aspects of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by restricting activities of Muslims, Christians, and others.

According to members of religious minorities, interference, harassment, and surveillance by the state security services are significant problems. A high-ranking Egyptian government official told the Commission delegation that either Al-Azhar University officials, the Chief Mufti of the Republic, or the Coptic Patriarch are consulted, as appropriate, to assess the potential security risks of any religious activity that might, from the government's point of view, threaten public order. This includes the activities of minority Muslim groups considered to hold "unorthodox" religious beliefs, as well as Baha'is, Evangelical Protestants, Mormons, and others. Over the past several years, dozens of individuals associated with some of these groups have been detained and tried in state security courts for violations of Article 98(f) of the Penal Code which prohibits "insulting heavenly religions" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

While acknowledging that the potential for violence is a valid matter of state security, several interlocutors suggested to the Commission during the delegation's visit that removing the religion "portfolio"



USCIRF delegation meets with Egyptian Foreign Minister Abul Gheit.

from the state security services and placing responsibility for religious affairs in a more transparent and politically accountable section of the government, such as the Office of the President, would be appropriate under current conditions. Egyptian government officials asserted that historically, terrorism in Egypt began in the mosques and therefore, tight surveillance of all mosques is now necessary to monitor potential extremist activity. Nevertheless, in the Commission's view, some shift of responsibility could result in a more appropriate balance between preventative security measures and protecting human rights, in accordance with international standards, for members of religious groups to conduct their day-to-day affairs without undue interference by the state security services.

The State of Emergency

Although the role of the state security services in religious affairs predates the 1981 Emergency Law, the implementation of that law, renewed for another three years in February 2003, has undermined the protection of human rights in Egypt, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

The security forces continue to mistreat and torture prisoners, arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, hold detainees in prolonged pretrial detention, and occasionally engage in mass arrests.³ Thousands of persons have been detained without charge on suspicion of illegal terrorist or political activity; others are serving sentences after being convicted on similar charges. Others

If reform efforts in Egypt are to make meaningful progress, the U.S. government must increase its pressure on President Mubarak and senior members of his government to uphold Egypt's international human rights commitments to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief and to ensure protections for human rights and the rule of law in criminal proceedings.

In the State of the Union Address in early 2005, President Bush reaffirmed his commitment of promoting democracy and freedom in the Middle East as an essential U.S. foreign policy goal, declaring that "the great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East, can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." The Commission feels strongly that, with an increased public emphasis by President Bush on U.S. policy to promote democracy in Egypt, the time is ripe for the U.S. government to demand a timetable for swifter implementation of political and human rights reforms by the Egyptian government, including significant reforms and improvements in the right to freedom of religion or belief.

To that end, the Commission makes the following recommendations.

I. Taking Most Responsibility for Religious Affairs Out of the Hands of the Egyptian Security Services

Specifically, the U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to:

- shift *de facto* responsibility for religious affairs from the state security services, with the exception of cases involving violence, and establish an entity or position (e.g., an ombudsman) in the office of the President to oversee religious affairs in Egypt;
- repeal the State of Emergency, in existence since 1981, in order to allow for the full consolidation of the rule of law in Egypt;
- repeal the 19th century, Ottoman-era Hamayouni Decree – which requires non-Muslims to obtain a Presidential decree to build a new place of worship – and ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient criteria and procedures for construction and maintenance; and
- allow full access to the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating Section 98 (f) of the Penal Code – which "prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife" – instead of having those cases heard by the state security courts.

II. Implementing Additional Reforms in order to Comply with International Human Rights Standards

Specifically, the U.S. government should urge the Egyptian government to:

- exclude from all textbooks any language or images that promote enmity, intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on faith, gender, ethnicity, or nationality; and include in school curricula, in school textbooks, and in teacher training the concepts of tolerance and respect for human rights, including religious freedom. Textbooks should be reviewed in light of the standards for education set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- cease messages of hatred and intolerance, particularly toward Jews and Baha'is, in the government-controlled media and take active measures to promote understanding and respect for members of these and other minority religious communities;
- take all appropriate steps to prevent and punish acts of anti-Semitism, including condemnation of anti-Semitic acts, and, while vigorously protecting freedom of expression, counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities;
- ensure that every Egyptian is protected against discrimination in social, labor, and other rights by reforming the identity card, either by (a) removing religious affiliation from identity documents, or (b) making it optional for Egyptians to identify religious affiliation on identity documents; at present, individuals must identify themselves as adherents of one of the three recognized faiths – Islam, Christianity, or Judaism;

RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

- urge the Egyptian government more actively to investigate societal violence against any individuals or groups on the basis of their religion, particularly the targeting of Coptic Orthodox Christians, and bring those responsible to justice, and ensure compensation to those targeted;
 - *investigate claims of police negligence and inadequate prosecution of those involved in the Al-Kosheh case;*
- request the National Council for Human Rights to investigate allegations of discrimination against Coptic Orthodox Christians as a human rights issue and to publish their findings and recommendations;
- repeal a 1960 Presidential decree banning members of the Baha'i community from practicing their faith; and
- implement the 2002 recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture.

III. Ensuring that U.S. Government Aid Promotes Prompt and Genuine Political and Legal Reforms and is Offered Directly to Egyptian Civil Society Groups

Specifically, the U.S. government should:

- negotiate an agreement with the Egyptian government to establish a timetable and specific steps to be taken to make progress on political and legal reforms, including the steps described above in Parts I and II. If deadlines are met in a timely manner, then the U.S. government should consider, within the boundaries of its overall aid to Egypt, providing economic assistance to areas where significant progress has been made. If deadlines are not met, the U.S. government should reconsider the dimensions and direction of its economic assistance;
- offer direct support for human rights and other civil society non-governmental organizations (NGOs) without vetting by the Egyptian government;
- urge the Egyptian government to ensure that NGOs engaged in human rights work can pursue their activities without undue government interference. The U.S. government should monitor and report if this is accomplished;
- expand support of initiatives to advance human rights, promote religious tolerance, and foster civic education among all Egyptians, including support for:
 - *civic education and public awareness programs which reflect the multi-confessional nature of Egyptian society and the diversity of Egypt's religious past;*
 - *efforts by Egyptian and other NGOs to review Egyptian educational curricula and textbooks for messages of hatred, intolerance, and the advocacy of violence, and to monitor equal access to education by girls and boys regardless of religion or belief;*
 - *preservation of Egyptian Jewish properties and antiquities in a publicly accessible site, such as in a museum, so that all Egyptians can better understand past and present Jewish contributions to their history and culture;*
- as mandated by section 104 of IRFA, train Foreign Service Officers at Embassy Cairo about universal human rights, especially the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief; the history, experiences, and contributions of different religions to Egyptian history; and how to identify and respond to discriminatory and other abridgements of the rights of persons belonging to these communities; and
- in the context of the annual Congressional appropriation of U.S. assistance for Egypt, Congress should require the State Department to report to it annually on the extent to which the government of Egypt has made progress on the issues described in Parts I and II, as well as the progress of the U.S. government on providing, as appropriate, funding directly to Egyptian NGOs without prior Egyptian government approval.

have been detained on charges of “unorthodox” Islamic religious beliefs, as detailed below. The U.S. government has taken the public position that if there is evidence against an individual, he or she should be tried in a court and not kept indefinitely in administrative detention.³

There are also widespread allegations by independent Egyptian human rights groups and others of improper use of state security emergency courts and military courts, including that the accused are not permitted to appeal to a higher judicial body, and that ensuing verdicts “can only be overturned or modified by the president.”⁴ Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have concluded that the primary purpose of the courts is to punish political activism and dissent, even when that dissent is peaceful.⁵ The use of these courts to try individuals deemed by the state to have “unorthodox” or “deviant” religious beliefs or practices is discussed below.

Egyptian government officials allege

. . . the time is ripe for the U.S. Government to demand a timetable for swifter implementation of political and human rights reforms by the Egyptian government

that the government does not apply the Emergency Law except in cases of terrorism. Other high-ranking government officials suggest that the Emergency Law could be abandoned if the existing criminal codes were improved to confront terror adequately. The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), formed by the Egyptian government in January 2004, officially called for an end to the State of Emergency in April 2005.

Islam and Non-Conforming Muslims

The Egyptian government regulates and exerts some control over Islamic religious institutions and activities, control that, according to the government, is necessary to combat religious extremism and terrorism. The state appoints and pays the salaries of all Sunni Muslim imams, and all mosques must be licensed by the government. Sermons are monitored by the state security services.

Under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which “prohibits citizens from ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife,” persons accused of “unorthodox” Islamic religious beliefs and

practices that insult the three “heavenly religions” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) continue to be prosecuted in the state security courts. While this law has not been used to prosecute acts of anti-Semitism or acts against Christianity, it has been used to punish those who openly disagree with the state-favored interpretation of Islam. These include “unorthodox” or non-conforming Muslims, such as the tiny community of Koranites, who are charged with practicing beliefs deemed to deviate from Islamic law.⁶ This provision also has been used to target religious practices that the government alleges conflict with sharia (Islamic law).

In May 2002, a group of 21 persons were tried in a state security court, accused of “insulting religion due to unorthodox Islamic beliefs and practices.”⁷ In 2004, state security courts reportedly sentenced six people to six months’ imprisonment for “contempt of religion” in connection with holding private religious gatherings and advocating modifications to basic Islamic

rules.⁸ In December 2004, 13 “unorthodox Muslims” were referred to trial by a state emergency court on “charges of insulting heavenly religions.”⁹ As of this writing, their status is unknown.

In late 2003 and early 2004, state security services arrested and imprisoned 20 Shia Muslims without charge and subsequently interrogated them about their religious beliefs. They reported suffering physical abuse. According to the State Department, 19 of the 20 Shia were released by August 2004.

There are several groups in Egypt that believe in or seek to establish an Islamic state based on their political interpretation of Islamic law. These groups, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood, are considered illegal organizations by the Egyptian government under a law prohibiting political parties based on religion. Despite these restrictions, the Muslim Brotherhood has become more visible in Egypt’s political landscape. At a meeting of the Commission delegation and members of the People’s Assembly Foreign Relations Committee,

a Muslim Brotherhood member of Parliament was introduced openly by the Chair of the Committee and invited to make a statement. The delegation was informed by the Committee that approximately 15-16 members of Parliament belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, although they were technically elected on behalf of permitted parties.

According to the Egyptian Human Rights Center for the Assistance of Prisoners, there are currently 12,000-15,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups in administrative detention who have not been brought to trial. The Muslim Brotherhood and some of these other groups have used violence in the past to achieve their aims, including the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 and attacks on foreign tourists. In addition, some factions of the Muslim Brotherhood have used the group’s ideological roots as a platform to engage in terrorist activity. Some Islamist groups persist on advocating violence. Security forces continue to arrest hundreds of Islamists every year and some are subjected to harassment, arrest, systematic torture and/or prolonged detention. Human rights groups who closely follow such cases stated to the Commission that the vast majority of these prisoners are in prison for extremist political beliefs or activities, not on the basis of religion. According to NGOs that monitor the situation of prisoners, the largest extremist organization operates inside the prison system.

Non-Muslim Religious Minorities

Notwithstanding the Egyptian government’s repeated claim to the Commission delegation that “we are all Egyptians,” many representatives of non-Muslim religious minorities told the Commission during its visit that there was discrimination against them in law, practice, and society. Christians are subject to special, restrictive rules on the building and repair of churches, and are not appointed to high government or ruling party posts. The government has failed to prosecute successfully perpetrators of the mass murder of 21 Christians in 2000 in the Upper Egypt village of Al-Kosheh. In the Commission’s view, violent attacks by militant Muslims are an ongoing concern, especially in rural Upper Egypt, and the government has not provided adequate protection for Christians. Persistent intolerance in the media toward Jews and Baha’is,

USCIRF

4

including by government-controlled media, is also a serious problem.

Representatives of non-Muslim religious minorities, particularly Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, report interference, harassment, and surveillance by the Egyptian state security services, amounting to discriminatory treatment. Although neither the Constitution nor the Penal Code prohibits proselytizing or conversion, the State Department has observed that the Egyptian government uses the Penal Code to discourage proselytizing by non-Muslims.¹⁰ Article 98(f) is used frequently to prosecute alleged acts of proselytism by non-Muslims. Furthermore, if a religious group chooses to bypass the registration process for obtaining official state recognition in Egypt, "participants could be subject to detention and could also face prosecution under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code."¹¹

CHRISTIANS

During the Commission visit, several Coptic Orthodox and other Christian leaders reported ongoing problems of societal intolerance and violence by Muslim extremists, and the failure of the government to prevent or respond adequately to those problems. Egyptian government officials confirmed in June 2004 that the Court of Cassation upheld the acquittal of 94 of 96 suspects who were charged with various offenses committed in the killing of 21 Christians and one Muslim in Al-Kosheh in early 2000. The perception of religious bias on the part of Egypt's justice system was reinforced by the fact that the two individuals convicted of killing the sole Muslim victim in these attacks received sentences of 15 and three-

and-a-half years, respectively. The decision has left public prosecutors and Christian advocates with no further legal options. At the same time, other Christian leaders reported fewer attacks by extremists in the last year against Christians, though with Islamic extremism still a factor in Egyptian society, the situation remains volatile.

Despite claims by Egyptian government officials that Egyptian law puts mosques and churches on equal footing with regard to obtaining permits to build and repair places of worship, Coptic Orthodox and other Christian representatives report ongoing problems in building and repairing churches, stemming primarily from interference by the state security services that must approve such requests. Moreover, even though mosque and church repairs are allegedly subject to the same laws, enforcement of the laws is much more stringent for churches than for mosques, due to a 19th century Ottoman decree still in force requiring non-Muslims to obtain a Presidential decree to build a new place of worship. Although President Mubarak reportedly approves applications for new construction and, under new regulations, provincial governors now have the authority to approve applications for church repair, hundreds of such applications are languishing in the system. Even some permits that have been approved cannot be acted upon because of interference by the state security services, at both the local and national levels. Egyptian government officials did not respond adequately to Commission inquiries about the question of why there were different requirements for construction and repair of churches and mosques.

Although Egyptian government officials claim that there is no law or policy that prevents Christians from holding senior positions, the Coptic Orthodox Christian community faces *de facto* discrimination in appointments to high-level government posts. There are no Coptic governors and none in chief executive positions in intelligence, the police, the diplomatic corps, the judiciary, and the military. Coptic Orthodox and other Christians have also been denied the right to stand for elected public office, since the ruling party refuses to nominate them as candidates.

JEWES AND ANTI-SEMITISM

The small Jewish community maintains and owns its property and performs required

maintenance through private donations without excessive interference from local authorities. However, state security services continue to regulate and approve those permitted to make repairs, which, in some cases, has created problems and delays. During the Commission visit to Egypt, interlocutors stated that there is continued surveillance of synagogues by state security services. There is also police protection for the few existing synagogues that have been preserved.

Numerous religious and human rights advocates have documented persistent, virulent anti-Semitism in the media. Material vilifying Jews – with historical and new anti-Semitic stereotypes – also appear regularly in the state-controlled and semi-official media. Such material has included: Holocaust denial, anti-Semitic cartoons, and television programming, such as the 24-part series based on the notorious anti-Semitic "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Although Egyptian government officials have said that there is no official policy condoning anti-Semitism or other forms of intolerance, acts of anti-Semitism are virtually unopposed by government leaders. Several senior Egyptian government officials claim that a distinction needed to be made between attitudes toward Jews and problems related to Israeli policy, and that many Egyptians are not educated well enough to appreciate that difference. According to the State Department's 2005 *Report on Global Anti-Semitism*, Egyptian government officials said that "anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, [the U.S. government concluded that] there are relatively few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment."¹² Indeed, in the past year, billboards have been displayed prominently outside a synagogue near Cairo labeling current and past leaders of the state of Israel as "killers."

BAHA'IS

All Baha'i institutions and community activities have been banned since 1960 by a Presidential decree. Thus, Baha'is are unable to meet and engage in communal religious activities. Almost all community members are known to the state security services, and many are regularly subject to surveillance and other forms of harassment. Baha'i representatives also cite increased intoler-



USCIRF delegation meets with leading human rights advocate Saad Eddin Ibrahim (center).

ance in the independent and government-controlled media. Furthermore, Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center has issued *fatwas* in recent years urging the continued ban on the Baha'i community and condemning Baha'is as apostates.

During the Commission's visit to Egypt, interlocutors cited an increased tendency by Muslim clerics to view Baha'is as a heretical sect of Islam rather than an independent religious movement. When asked why in practice the right to freedom of religion of the Baha'i community is not protected under the Egyptian Constitution, government officials said that Islam recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Nevertheless, Egyptian officials claimed that Baha'is are free to practice their religion in private. Various Egyptian religious leaders and government officials made spurious claims to the Commission, without any evidence, that Baha'is have engaged in political activity against the Egyptian government in the past and that the community practices immoral acts, such as "wife-swapping." The absence of facts to support such authoritative denunciations apparently made no difference to the officials who made the slanderous statements.

Mandatory Identity Cards

The Egyptian government requirement to include religious affiliation on the national identity card particularly affects members of the Baha'i community and Muslim converts to Christianity. The Egyptian government has now made it illegal to be in public without an identity card. The identity card is also necessary to engage in many basic transactions such as opening a bank account, buying a car, or obtaining a driver's license. Furthermore, identity cards are necessary to verify the religion of a student so that he or she may receive religious instruction in primary and secondary schools – as required by the Egyptian Constitution – according to his or her beliefs.

According to human rights activists in Egypt, there is a written policy, in the form of standing orders from the Ministry of the Interior, not to issue new identity cards to Baha'is. In the past, some local government offices would allow Baha'is to write in "other" on the identity card. Since the identity card system has been computerized, it has become impossible for Baha'is to acquire one because "Muslim, Jew, or Christian" are the

only allowable choices. Because the Baha'i faith is banned, members of the community also have difficulty obtaining or renewing passports, marriage licenses, birth certificates, or death certificates.

In January 2004, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief concluded that "the mention of religion on an identity card is a controversial issue and appears to be somewhat at variance with the freedom of religion or belief that is internationally recognized and protected. Moreover, even supposing that it was acceptable to mention religion on an identity card, it could only be claimed that the practice had any legitimacy whatsoever if it was non-discriminatory: to exclude any mention of religions other than Islam, Christianity or Judaism would appear to be a violation of international law."³ During its visit, the Commission was told by a high-ranking Egyptian government official that religious affiliation needs to be included on the identity card because there are different applications of the law for the different religious communities. By requiring religious affiliation on the card, the Egyptian government prevents manipulation by the various religious groups.

that the state could not prevent a woman from changing the religion on her identity card from Muslim to Christian. Implementing this decision could help end government interference with the freedom of every Egyptian to adopt the religion of his or her choice. According to the State Department, it is not clear, however, if this decision will set a precedent for future cases involving conversion of individuals from Islam to Christianity.

Increasing Intolerance in the Education System and Society

During the Commission visit, several interlocutors reported an ongoing deterioration in the quality of the state education system that is increasingly under control of fundamentalist religious or political figures. They also cited a decrease of government monitoring of activities inside public schools and content of the curriculum. Reportedly, school teachers do not accept girls unless they cover their heads starting at age 12, and the Koran and Islamic history are compulsory studies in all schools for all children. According to one interlocutor with whom the Commission met, all history textbooks present an Islamic perspective; even some Muslim intellectuals have begun criticizing

There is a growing sense among human rights groups that Islamic extremism is advancing in Egypt with detrimental effects on the prospects for democratic reform, religious tolerance, and the human rights of women and girls.

Known converts from Islam to Christianity generally receive attention from the state security services, and converts have been arrested for attempting to change their religious affiliation on identity documents. Most conversions are reportedly done quietly and privately. Egyptian government officials told the Commission delegation that no law prevents conversion, but some individuals have been arrested for falsifying documents. In some instances, converts, who fear government harassment if they officially register their change in religion from Islam to Christianity, have reportedly altered their own identification cards and other official documents to reflect their new religious affiliation. A court decision in 2004 affirmed

the situation and asking for change to include Coptic history.

There is a growing sense among human rights groups that Islamic extremism is advancing in Egypt with detrimental effects on the prospects for democratic reform, religious tolerance, and the human rights of women and girls. The government is not taking adequate measures to counteract this problem, especially in the area of public education and the media, where extremist influence is growing. One prominent interlocutor told the Commission delegation that anyone who opposes the government – and is not one of a small group of "liberals" – has sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood.

U.S. Policy

Over the last few years, as in prior Administrations, the U.S. government has focused its policy toward Egypt on maintaining regional stability, continuing military assistance, and since 9/11, enhancing cooperation in the war on terror and advocating economic and political reforms. Since 2003, U.S. assistance has centered on economic reform, education, civil society, and other programs supported by the Middle East Partnership Initiative. In FY 2004, the United States provided approximately \$570 million in economic aid and \$1.3 billion in military aid. The U.S. government will decrease, by approximately \$40 million each year, Economic Support Funds to about \$400 million in 2008 in keeping with a plan to reduce aid to Israel.¹⁴ Despite this, Egypt remains the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, even though democratic and human rights reforms by President Mubarak's government have been almost non-existent.

Moreover, despite publicly stating that restrictions on religious freedom are a

principal human rights problem in Egypt, the U.S. government has not adequately pressed the Egyptian government in numerous areas of concern to the Commission.¹⁵ The U.S. Embassy in Cairo appears to raise some of the less visible religious freedom concerns with Egyptian government officials, rather than address some of the deeply entrenched systematic problems, such as the interference of the state security services in the affairs of all religious communities.

The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Mission in Cairo focuses on six objectives, with its primary goal of accelerating economic growth.¹⁶ Two objectives emphasize the creation of private sector jobs: strengthening the trade and investment environment and increasing access to sustainable utility services. Four objectives target the enhancement of the human and natural resource base: improving basic education, strengthening governance and participation, providing health services, and upgrading natural resource management. According

to USAID Mission staff, the Egyptian government recently asked USAID to focus on curriculum development, primarily the "non-controversial set of issues," but not to interfere with the religious education curriculum, which the Commission found contributes to intolerant and extremist views. For FY 2005, the USAID Mission in Cairo has approximately \$61 million for education and democracy and governance programs, which include very few programs on promoting religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith activity.¹⁷

Almost all NGOs are controlled by the Egyptian government, despite the existence of USAID's NGO Service Center that helps Egyptian NGOs establish themselves. According to the Egyptian government, NGOs requesting assistance from USAID are vetted by the government of Egypt to ensure that no group has any "radical tendencies." The Commission found that this mechanism also is used by the Egyptian government to prevent pro-democracy Egyptian NGOs from receiving U.S. government assistance. ❧



USCIRF delegation meets with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Tantawi

TO CONTACT THE COMMISSION:
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
 800 North Capitol St., NW, Suite 790
 Washington, DC 20002
 Web site: www.uscirf.gov
 E-mail: communications@uscirf.gov
 Voice: 202-523-3240
 Fax: 202-523-5020

For further information on this issue, contact:

DWIGHT N. BASHIR, SENIOR POLICY ANALYST
 202-523-2340, ext. 22 • dbashir@uscirf.gov

¹ CIA World Fact Book; U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, "Egypt" September 2004 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35496.htm>, accessed March 2, 2005).

² U.S. Department of State, 2004 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, "Egypt" February 2005 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41720.htm>, accessed March 4, 2005).

³ U.S. Department of State, Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2003-2004, "Egypt" May 2004 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2003/31022.htm>, accessed March 4, 2005).

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Government Contempt for Basic Political Rights," August 28, 2003 (<http://hrw.org/press/2003/08/egypt082803.htm>, accessed March 15, 2005).

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Repeal Emergency Law, Abolish Emergency State Security Courts," August 28, 2003, (<http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/08/egypt082803-ltr2.htm>, accessed March 16, 2005).

⁶ Koranites do not accept hadith, oral traditions of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, or Sunna, the way the Prophet Muhammad lived his life. Their source of guidance comes only from the Koran.

⁷ Several of those charged were ultimately convicted and sentenced to jail terms. U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2003, (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24448.htm>).

⁸ Amnesty International, Annual Report 2004.

⁹ 2004 Country Reports, "Egypt" (Internet).

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, 2003 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, "Egypt" February 2004 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27926.htm>).

¹¹ Department of State, 2003 International Religious Freedom Report. For a religious denomination to be officially recognized by the state, a request must be submitted to the Religious Affairs Department at the Ministry of Interior, which assesses whether the proposed religion would pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The department also consults the leading religious figures recognized in the country, particularly the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the President, who issues a decree recognizing the new religion.

¹² U.S. Department of State, Report on Global Anti-Semitism, January 2005 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/40258.htm>, accessed March 14, 2005).

¹³ Para. 42, Report Submitted by Abdelfattah Amor to the Commission on Human Rights, 60th session, January 16, 2004, E/CN.4/2004/63.

¹⁴ See "CRS Issue Brief for Congress," Egypt-United States Relations. Congressional Research Service, January 11, 2005.

¹⁵ See Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2003-2004

¹⁶ USAID Budget: Egypt, (<http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2005/ane/leg.html>, accessed March 11, 2005).

¹⁷ Ibid.