



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Egypt

Egypt – EGY36285 – Coptic Christians –
Muslim Brotherhood – Islamists
5 March 2010

Question

- 1. Please provide expert advice on the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude towards and treatment of Coptic Christians, particularly those engaged in proselytisation, in Egypt.**

On 26 February 2010, several experts were contacted for advice on the above matter¹.

On 26 February 2010, the following response was received from Dr Paul Rowe:

...

Thank you for the question regarding the treatment of Copts by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists. I am happy to comment in regard to the questions. My response to the questions is interrelated, so I will address them both together in my answer.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a broad-based organization that takes an official line based upon the public application of Islamic principles. With regard to Christians, this usually implies the formal application of restrictions on the public role of Christians under the status of "protected people" (ahl al-dhimma) or "people of the book" (ahl al-kitab). Leaders of the Islamist movements are rhetorically committed to tolerance and acceptance of Christian minority groups in Muslim states. In practice, this means that Christians are accepted only as subordinate citizens in a Muslim society and discrimination (if not persecution) would likely be systematic under an Islamist government. While the leadership of the Brotherhood takes a relatively soft line on the treatment of Christians, supporters and self-appointed representatives of the Brotherhood often use Christians as a stalking horse for Western interests in an attempt to galvanize support for the movement.

In Egypt, independent Islamists and those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood have frequently fomented public hostility against Christians. Islamists regularly target Christians for defamation and public persecution in the independent press. This is usually done as a means of boosting the public profile of Islamist politicians prior to elections, though it happens between elections as well in an attempt to boost newspaper sales and to maintain public support for the movement. Perhaps the most egregious recent incident was the use of the press and popular sentiment to cause riots that targeted Christians in the city of Alexandria in October 2005. Three people were killed in violent riots staged at a church in Alexandria in response to the performance of a play that merely portrayed an individual from an Islamist group. This coming year's election may well provide new opportunities for Islamist radicals to target Christians again.

Islamists frequently engage in vigilante attacks against Christians, in particular those who seek to share their faith with Muslim neighbours. I object to the use of the term "proselytization"

¹ RRT Country Advice 2010, Email to P. Rowe: 'Treatment of Coptic Christians by Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists', 26 February – Attachment 1.

for this activity (which implies initiation into rites rather than intellectual conversation about beliefs), but this is indeed how it is characterized by the Islamist movement. In an interview I conducted in May 2007, one Christian leader described to me in detail an incident in which one of his co-workers was abducted by a small group of self-appointed activists who were upset with his active attempts to evangelize Muslims. It required the intervention of the head of the Coptic Evangelical (ingili) Church with the office of the President of the Republic for the police to act on what was apparently their full knowledge of this abduction. I do not believe that this was an isolated event. Police often avoid direct confrontation with Islamist vigilantes for fear of local repercussions. The attitude that religious beliefs are not open to change is reinforced by the practice of assigning a religion on an identity card, a categorization which a Muslim is not able to change. Security services will intervene in cases of religious intimidation, but sometimes will only respond when pressured.

In the past, Islamist radicals have occasionally targeted Christian shopkeepers and wealthy local Copts in extortion rackets justified by the traditional Islamic practice of demanding *jizya* (a poll tax) on non-Muslims, a practice that came to an official end in the mid-nineteenth century. This was reported widely in the 1990s in Upper Egypt (known as the *Said*), at a time when the local *gama'a al-islamiya* terrorist movement was targeting Copts for assassination and engaging in armed battles with the Egyptian authorities. I have not heard reliable reports of this practice over the last decade. However, intercommunal tensions persist, especially in Upper Egypt, and take the form of clan feuds, which may be justified in the rhetoric of the Islamist movement. The most recent and notable of these incidents was the Christmas massacre of 8 Copts as they left Christmas mass in Nag Hammadi in January 2010.

As I have indicated, the Muslim Brotherhood and the modern Islamist movement in general is a widely varying social movement that takes many forms. Many Islamists demonstrate high regard for their Christian neighbours, and indeed Christian leaders have occasionally taken up common political causes with the Islamist movement. Nevertheless, Islamist vigilantism and rhetorical attacks against Christians remain the greatest threats to the tranquility of Egyptian Copts. Reports of their harassment of individual Christians in local contexts should be taken seriously.²

Attachments

1. RRT Country Advice 2010, Email to P. Rowe: 'Treatment of Coptic Christians by Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists', 26 February.
2. Rowe, P. 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice: 'Re: Treatment of Coptic Christians by Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists', 26 February.

² Rowe, P. 2010, Email to RRT Country Advice: 'Re: Treatment of Coptic Christians by Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists', 26 February – Attachment 2.