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EGYPT | Parliament Passes Controversial Law

Egypt's Parliament approved a controversial new law governing the building and renovation of churches by a two-thirds majority on Aug. 30, following four hours of, at times, impassioned debate.

Although the new law fulfils a constitutional commitment to pass legislation regulating the sensitive issue of church construction and renovation, it has been criticized by a number of Coptic MPs, who claim it is "restrictive" and was "imposed on Christians."

Previously, permission for building a new church could only be granted through presidential decree, which occurred once every year or every other year. Under the new law, applications will be submitted to and decided by the relevant provincial governor.

During the debate on the new legislation, criticism was particularly levelled at vague provisions stipulating that the size of any new church must be in proportion with the number of Christians in the surrounding neighborhood and that population growth must also be taken into account. Another ambiguous stipulation requires provincial governors to consider "the preservation of security and public order" when deciding on an application.

While some Coptic MPs, such as Margaret Azer, welcomed the new legislation as a "progressive step, even though it still includes some negative points," others, such as Emad Gad, said it was "restrictive and will still make it hard for Christians to build churches easily." He also told the Al-Shorouk newspaper the government has not shown any will to eradicate sectarian tensions in the country.

Sectarian attacks continue to occur in Egypt whenever Christian communities are suspected of using homes or other buildings as places of worship. CSW recently reported on a spike in the

frequency of these attacks, largely in the Governorates of Upper Egypt, where false rumors of Christian properties being used as churches have resulted in damage or destruction.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While we welcome the efforts of Egyptian lawmakers to fulfil the constitutional commitment for a new law governing construction and renovation of churches as a step towards ensuring freedom of religion and equality for the Christian community, we share the concerns about the legislation in its current form. The ambiguous prerequisites for church construction are not seen in legislation pertaining to other places of worship. Not only do these expansive caveats provide ample grounds on which to refuse applications; but final permission for any construction or renovation also lies in the hands of governors who are potentially vulnerable to the demands of those opposed to any church presence in their area. The Egyptian Parliament must press for a stronger law governing the construction of all places of worship. This would ensure equality of citizenship for all Egyptians and send a strong signal to anyone seeking to divide the country along sectarian lines."