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EGYPT | New Report States Improvements for Some Religious Minorities

A new report on Egypt by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) found that while there have been improvements for some religious minorities during President Abdel Fattah el Sisi's term in office, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) continues to be suppressed, both in specific localities and as part of wider restrictions on human rights across the country.

The report details Egypt's improved constitutional commitments to FoRB for "the heavenly religions," namely, Sunni Islam, Christianity and Judaism, as well as President Sisi's personal support for equal treatment for the Coptic community.

These improvements contrast, however, with a lack of legal clarity regarding the status of other minority religious groups, an increase in blasphemy cases targeting members of non-majority faith communities; and continuing outbreaks of sectarian violence, particularly in Upper Egypt, with inadequate intervention on the part of the security services to prevent or bring it to an end.

Furthermore, CSW's report highlights the failure of judicial services to convict those responsible for sectarian attacks; the continuing use of reconciliation meetings following sectarian violence, which often deprive victims of justice and adequate compensation; an abiding societal hostility towards, and legal restrictions on the construction of houses of worship by non-majority faith communities, and an increase in the targeting of atheists.

The ongoing hindrances to the full enjoyment of FoRB by religious minorities are occurring alongside unprecedented restrictions on civil society, including a draconian new law governing the operations and funding of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Human rights defenders have been prevented from travelling abroad; their personal and/or professional assets have been frozen; several have been taken to court on suspicion of receiving foreign funding, and some have experienced lengthy detention.

This clampdown on civil society has been criticized by, amongst others, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, who pointed out that "NGOs who have played a valuable role in documenting violations and supporting victims will see their activities completely crippled" if it continued.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "This report shows that both state and non-state actors can be responsible for restricting the right of non-majority faith communities to freedom of religion or belief. While appreciating the tremendous challenges faced by the Egyptian government in addressing a transnational terrorist threat, we remain deeply concerned by the increasing restriction of space for independent civil society, which has also had a negative impact on the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief. Even as the presidency consistently champions the equal citizenship of the Coptic community, ongoing sectarian attacks and an increase in blasphemy charges are having a disproportionate effect on this community, while other faith communities continue to lack legal status. We urge the Government of Egypt to comprehensively address the hindrances to the fulfilment of the constitutional stipulation that 'freedom of belief is absolute.'"