



Coptic Solidarity Fact Check: Speech by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi at the launch of the National Human Rights Strategy

September 22, 2021

Introduction

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi hosted an event in the New Administrative Capital on September 11, 2021 concerning the launch of Egypt's new National Strategy for Human Rights (2021 – 2026). Mr. el Sisi touted this strategy as the first "integrated strategy that promotes the principles of the new republic and Egypt's development vision."

Certainly, any initiative to enhance the dire human rights situation in Egypt is most welcome. If the protection and promotion of human rights only depended on positive rhetoric, then Egypt's new human rights strategy would appear to be positive. Below, Coptic Solidarity has provided a review of [President el-Sisi's speech](#), expressing our critique of this plan and concluding thoughts.

(The translation of Mr. el-Sisi's speech is provided by Egypt's State Information Service.)

President el-Sisi

Ladies and gentlemen... honorable attendance,

At the outset of my speech today on the occasion of launching the first national strategy for human rights, I would like to welcome you all, whether being a contributor to the preparation of that strategy or Egyptians and foreign guests who share with us that luminous moment in the contemporary history of Egypt, which I consider a serious step towards the advancement of human rights in Egypt, taking into account the importance of this vital field in evaluating the advancement and progress of societies.

In this context, I would like to point out to the fact that Egypt has been one of the first countries that contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Its contribution in this field did not stop at this date, but continued until now with deep belief and national self-confidence of the importance of adopting a comprehensive and serious approach to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

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- Although Egypt was indeed an original signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it began to sign treaties with reservations (especially as of the 1970s). Egypt signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) conditional to the statement that provisions of the covenant would not conflict with the shari'a. In the same manner as the Egyptian constitution, this condition asserts the supremacy of the sharia over the ICCPR. Egypt's status is thus incompatible with the rights guaranteed in this important human rights instrument.

President el-Sisi

Today, as the Egyptian government launches its first national strategy for human rights, which is the result of unremitting efforts made by the Permanent Higher Committee for Human Rights over the course of more than a year, I would like to second the methodology by which this strategy was prepared,

which was based on a broad participatory and consultative manner that responds to the aspirations and hopes of the Egyptian people.

I would also like to thank the National Council for Human Rights, the representatives of the civil society from various governorates, and the members of the advisory body for their constructive contribution to the formulation of this strategy.

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- Given that the Egyptian government has closed many civil society organizations, sued them, imprisoned numerous staff members, and refused to provide these individuals with free and fair trials, it begs the question, with whom did the Egyptian government work to create this new human rights strategy? It clearly did not have the input of civil society apart from those under Egyptian government control.

President el-Sisi

The Egyptian vision of human rights is based on a number of basic principles, most notably: All rights and freedoms are interrelated and complementary. There is a close link between democracy and human rights, with the importance of achieving a balance between rights and duties, and between the right of the individual and society and the need to combat corruption to ensure rights and freedoms.

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Mr. el-Sisi's rhetoric describes a fictitious Egypt which is nothing like the Egypt the world knows today. More than 30 countries of the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a [joint statement](#) on 12 March 2021 expressing their deep alarm about "the trajectory of human rights in Egypt and share[d] the concerns expressed by the [UN] High Commissioner for Human Rights and [UN] Special Procedure mandate holders."

On Dec. 18, 2020, the European Parliament adopted a resolution by a majority of 434 vs 49 MEPs on Egypt. As [reported by CIHRS](#) there is deterioration of human rights in the country as Egyptian authorities systematically use enforced disappearance and "continue to brutally and systematically repress any form of dissent, thereby undermining core freedoms," amid an escalating crackdown targeting civil society, human rights defenders, journalists, academics, lawyers, and doctors.

- UN Special Rapporteurs and various bodies have [issued statements](#) that include the cases of individual prisoners of conscience in Egypt, such as this one concerning Ramy Kamel.

President el-Sisi

Moreover, the commitment to preserving and respecting the rights and freedoms should be achieved through the legislations and public policies on the one hand, and the implementation of those legislations and policies by various national institutions and mechanisms on the other hand. As regards the legislation and public policies, the efforts of the state are based on constitutional and legal principles and obligations. In this regard, the constitution has achieved a major qualitative leap as it established the principles of citizenship, justice and equality in rights and duties without any discrimination and made equal opportunities a basis for building society.

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- The Egyptian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and criminalizes discrimination based on religion. Yet, the second article of the constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the state...and the principles of Islamic shari'a are the main sources of legislation." These statements are antithetical since the shari'a repudiates religious freedom. The shari'a is founded on non-equality between a Believer (a Muslim) and a Non-believer in addition to

non-equality between men and women. The shari'a also proscribes discrimination and persecution of minority faiths. The Egyptian government appears to be introducing contradictory principles. All the constitutional articles are to be interpreted in light of and in submission to Article 2, making the shari'a take precedence and be the primary form of institutionalized discrimination by the Egyptian government. Unless this infamous Article-2 is deleted, or at least constrained, any discussion about equality and liberty will remain rhetorical, if not hypocritical.

- In recent years, several laws were passed, which use broad and/or vague definitions of crimes that make it easy for the “justice” system (police, prosecution, and courts), to arrest, detain, and prosecute anyone they deem a threat! The justice system often acts as a mere tool of the executive branch and various security agencies. In particular, the *en vogue* accusations of “joining a terrorist organization” or “spreading false news with the objective of disturbing the public” render discourse regarding legal principles a mere farce.
- The existence of certain notorious laws and their abusive effects remain an egregious tool to harass individuals and limit personal expression, often for a mere comment on social media. Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code, enacted in 1981, penalizes “derision or denigration of the heavenly religions,” (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity). However, such **provisions** in the law (referred to hereunder as blasphemy laws) are primarily used by the Egyptian authorities and al-Azhar to ensure conformity amongst Muslims in their views, to punish or neutralize members of minority faiths, and lastly, to prevent conversion away from Islam. The punishment for blasphemy carries prison sentences between six months to five years and fines. Considering such consequences, any discussion concerning religious freedom is ineffectual.
- The Egyptian government treats individuals differently, based on their faith. Living under systematic governmental discrimination equates to life as a second-class citizens for any religious minority in Egypt. The major religion is Sunni Islam, and individuals of that faith have a preferred status in all legal matters, education, employment, and in society. Christianity and Judaism (the handful remaining in Egypt) are officially recognized faiths, but all “non-Abrahamic” faiths, such as Bahai, are not officially recognized. They are consequently unable to obtain places of worship or hold events. Additionally, atheists (who must still be “assigned” a religion on their ID card), are targets of harassment and imprisonment if they exhibit their lack of faith.
- **Due to the 1996 Hisba law**, a third party is permitted to sue any citizen or entity if it is deemed to be in the public interest. This law is utilized by attorneys and extremists to target Christians and members of other minority faith groups. Collective punishment is exacted by mobs after mere accusations of blasphemy are made. Many Copts have been displaced from their villages due to incidents of violence, mob rule, and through the use of reconciliation sessions in which Copts give up the right to press charges against their Muslim attackers. This is usually done in order to secure release of Copts unfairly arrested during such incidents.
- **Al-Azhar institution** is enshrined in the constitution as “the main authority institution for theology and Islamic affairs.” The constitution requires that the Egyptian government provide sufficient funding to the institution to achieve its various educational and dawa purposes. Unfortunately, there is no similar provision of government funding for other faiths. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enroll in the al-Azhar institution unless they are able to memorize and recite the Quran. The research Center of al-Azhar has the authority to censor and confiscate any publications, speeches, recordings, or art deemed inconsistent with Azhar’s views on Islam and their interpretation of Islamic law.

Moreover, the constitution guarantees the independence of the judiciary as being the fundamental vehicle that ensures the effective enforcement of all rights. The Egyptian legislative structure is abundant of varieties of guarantees necessary to promote and respect human rights; "All persons are equal before the law."

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President el-Sisi supported constitutional amendments that [gave him more influence over the country's judiciary](#), including the power to appoint and discharge judicial officials. President el-Sisi has taken specific steps [to remove more independent minded judges](#) and replace them with individuals that consolidate his power. For example, [Counselor Hisham Heikal was fired](#) and continuously suffers retaliations from the government as a direct result of him filing a complaint regarding discrimination against a Coptic colleague. Heikal was dismissed from his position without the opportunity to provide a defense during his April 21 hearing at the Administrative Prosecution Disciplinary Board. He was not even given an option to resign. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi issued a presidential decree No. 228 of 2018, published in the Official Gazette on May 31, 2018, dismissing Counselor Heikal from his position as Deputy General Prosecutor of the Administrative Prosecution Authority, based on the board's ruling.

- The latest rounds of parliamentary elections were skewed, as security agencies pre-screened candidates and intervened to support favored candidates. The two-chamber parliament has become an expensive formality or token institution.
- The newly "elected" parliament has a total of 34 Christian deputies, when all the categories are combined. This is an improvement over the situation under Mubarak, but barely represents 5.6% of the total membership. This is [a serious under representation in comparison to their share of the population](#) (10-15%).

President el-Sisi

The Egyptian state also stresses its commitment to respect and protect the right to physical integrity, personal freedom, political practice, freedom of expression and formation of civil associations, as well as the right to litigation. Egypt always welcomes the plurality of views, even their differences, as long as they take into account the freedoms of others. They aim, through constructive and participatory criticism, to achieve the best for the benefit of Egypt and its people.

Egypt has constantly embraced freedom of thought, creativity and expression, resulting in a pioneering Egyptian contribution to its regional environment, in "art, literature and culture". Furthermore, this field has received direct support from the state leadership to encourage cadres working in it.

At the same time, we have a firm conviction of the importance of strengthening efforts to achieve prompt justice as well as guaranteeing fair trials. The state exerts unremitting and continuous efforts to emphasize the values of citizenship, tolerance and dialogue, and to combat incitement to violence and discrimination.

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- Mr. el-Sisi has highly influenced Egyptian media by forcing outlets to either report his message, shut down, or have their leaders imprisoned.
- Egypt's press freedom has [declined sharply](#) under el-Sisi's administration as a number of journalists have been detained on false charges, through the blocking of websites, and by the shuttering of news outlets. Egypt ranks **166th out of 180 countries according to RSF's 2021 World Press Freedom Index**.
- Numerous Copts, civil society activists, journalists, and other prisoners of conscience languish in jail on false charges by the Egyptian government. They are subjected to heinous torture and

abuse by the National Security Agency. They are unlikely to be freed or receive fair trials by the Egyptian judiciary. Ramy Kamel, Patrick Zaki, and Peter Ragheb are a few such examples of individuals who remain in prison, merely for having and expressing personal views regarding human rights in Egypt.

- Impunity for crimes against Copts, their homes, businesses, and churches has been a major factor in the continued attacks on Copts. Final rulings must be considered rather than preliminary ones because sentences are rarely carried through for perpetrators of those who attack Copts.

President el-Sisi

Similarly, Egypt has a rich national institutional structure that works to promote respect and protection of human rights, and it is subject to continuous development. The establishment of the Permanent Higher Committee for Human Rights came as an important addition that would support and strengthen coordinated national action in this field. Alongside, there are units and departments specialized in human rights in all ministries, governorates and related authorities. Additionally, the National Councils for women, childhood, motherhood, persons with special needs and people of determination, play leading roles in promoting the rights of these groups.

Moreover, the National Council for Human Rights, as being the independent national human rights institution, in accordance with its powers within the framework of the Constitution, plays a pivotal and active role in consolidating and raising awareness of the relevant principles, and submits its annual reports to the state.

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- The National Council for Human Rights seems to only exist on paper. When the council makes a statement, it is usually a method to try and defend Egypt's "reputation" abroad, not for actually censuring condemnable acts by state organs or defending the victims.
- The Egyptian authorities have [failed to intervene](#) and end the trafficking of Coptic women and minor girls. Coptic Solidarity submitted a report to various UN and US entities titled ['Jihad of the Womb': Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt](#)

President el-Sisi

Civil society comes as an important primary partner in the process of promoting and protecting human rights in all political, economic and social dimensions, spreading awareness of human rights in society, encouraging a culture of volunteer work, and contributing to efforts to combat extremism and trends against the values of our Egyptian society.

There is no doubt that the contributions and achievements of civil society are clear and its partnership with the state is indispensable.

Hence, I directed the government to reconsider the previous Civil Society Law, which resulted in the issuance of the new law regulating the practice of civil work, including the facilities and guarantees to enhance civil work. This follows a societal dialogue among one thousand and three hundred Egyptian and foreign NGOs. After the issuance of the regulations of this law, a new phase of government-civil society partnership, based on the foundations of cooperation and respect for the law, took place.

At the level of civil and political rights, we pay special attention to promoting the right to participate in political and public life as an important constituent to advance all domains of human rights and contribute to consolidate democracy and the rule of law. In order to promote these rights, a variety of national legislations have been adopted; and a number of independent entities and bodies have been established to organize the exercise and enjoyment of those rights.

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The provisions of the new civil associations law are just as draconian as the old law. [Human Rights Watch](#) recently published a report demonstrating that “ Law 149 and the implementing regulations—which were published earlier this year—are just as disastrous for independent groups, especially human rights organizations. The new law shows that the government remains determined to throttle any genuine manifestations of civil society.”

- The Egyptian authorities have used [case 173/2011](#) for years to dismantle the country’s human rights infrastructure, penalize civil society, end funding, and imprison civil society staff. Even though the case is partially closed it [is still being used on prominent civil society leaders](#).

President el-Sisi

Civil and political life in Egypt has recently witnessed an intense activity. That activity succeeded to accomplish all constitutional entitlements that ensured the people’s expression of its free will through presidential and parliamentary elections. People’s representatives assumed their responsibilities in the free expression of their visions to accomplish the national course, evaluate the executive authority’s performance through a parliamentary session that is full of political interactions and affiliations for the achievement of common good.

Furthermore, we have completed our legislative institutions by creating a Senate and holding elections for it to serve, alongside the House of Representatives. Moreover, the National Election Authority was established as an independent and permanent entity with sole authority to manage elections and referenda at all phases, ensuring their integrity and encouraging political participation.

Furthermore, various laws have been enacted to ensure that Egyptian citizens can exercise their political rights. These laws include the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights, the Law on Political Parties, the House of Representatives Act, the Senate Act, the Presidential Elections Act, the Electoral Constituencies Act, and the Law on the Regulation of Civil Work. These laws have been considered a significant and quantum leap forward in enshrining and ensuring the exercise of political rights and freedoms.

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- It is an incontestable fact that political freedoms and rights in Egypt are now simply non-existent. Mere “suspicion” of a critique about the acts or policies of Mr. el-Sisi and his close circle (especially the army or the various intelligence and security agencies) is met harshly and may lead to individual disappearances.
- The 2018 elections were not free and fair as Mr. el-Sisi [imprisoned and/or threatened](#) the opposing candidates. The [constitutional amendments](#) further concentrated the executive power and extended a presidential term by additional years.

President el-Sisi

On the basis of freedom of religion and belief, Egypt, the country that has a rich religious heritage, continues to exert tireless efforts to emphasize the values of citizenship, tolerance, dialogue and combating any incitement to violence and discrimination. The Egyptian State has made significant progress in this area, ensuring equity among its sons in both rights and duties. These principles are also evident in issuing of the Church Building and Restoration Law, which legalized the construction of approximately 1800 churches and buildings affiliated to them. Furthermore, the New Administrative Capital's "Al-Fattah Al-Aleem" Mosque and "Milad Al-Maseeh" Cathedral stand side by side as witnesses to those efforts and successes.

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- The [2016 church law](#) is inherently discriminatory and does not treat churches with the equal treatment of mosques. Only a total of 1,800 churches and subsidiary buildings (representing 32.5% of the outstanding applications of 5,540) which Mr. el-Sisi refers to as being “legalized”, have received preliminary/conditional approvals. Final approvals are not typically reported by the government, but based on unofficial contacts with a number of concerned churches, it seems that only a small percentage has been granted final approval.

Mr. el-Sisi boasts about the cathedral in the new administrative capital, yet it is mainly a “show church” as it does not represent the Egyptian reality of building a church. It continues to remain an arduous task to obtain a “license” to build a church in villages.

- The US Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) has placed [Egypt](#) on their Tier 2 list for the previous three years (2017-2019) meaning they engaged in or tolerated at least one of the three elements in the standard of “systematic,” “ongoing,” or “egregious” violations, and on the Special Watch List in 2020.
- Egypt continues to remain one of the few countries in the world where the mention of religious identification is obligatory in official documents and ID cards.

President el-Sisi

The integrated developmental vision "Egypt 2030" is founded on ideals of comprehensive, sustainable, and balanced development in terms of economic, social, and cultural rights. As a result, the benefits of development are fairly distributed, all groups achieve the highest levels of societal integration, and the rights of present and future generations to use resources are protected.

(The rest of this section on women and youth can be found at the SIS site)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to reiterate that this first national strategy stems from an Egyptian self-philosophy believing in the importance of achieving integration in the process of upgrading society. This philosophy would not be completed without a clear national strategy for human rights that deal with challenges as it takes into account the principles and values of the Egyptian society. So, it shows interest in human rights axes from an integrated perspective and a comprehensive concept of those rights, and in the belief that the lesson always lies in implementation. I direct the Permanent Higher Committee for Human Rights to continue implementing the mandates entrusted to it, and I also direct the government to take all steps that would enhance this, at the top of which are the following:

First:

Continuing efforts to integrate human rights goals and principles into the state’s public policies, and within the framework of implementing the “Sustainable Development Strategy, Egypt Vision 2030.”

Second:

Inviting political entities and civil society organizations to show interest in enriching the Egyptian political experience, and building trained cadres by expanding the circle of participation and expression of opinion in a climate of creative interaction and objective dialogue.

Third:

Ensuring the equitable distribution of the fruits of development and the right of every person to enjoy an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, in a way that provides them their basic needs.

Fourth:

Strengthening communication with various civil society institutions, and providing all facilities for the effective implementation of the law regulating the practice of civil work and its executive regulations, to provide them with an appropriate atmosphere to work as a key partner for achieving development and spreading a culture of human rights in society.

Fifth:

Seeking to implement the integrated vision of administrative reform, to build an efficient and effective administrative body that follows the mechanisms of good governance and is subject to accountability and the approval of citizens for the level of services provided to them and is characterized by efficiency, justice and non-discrimination.

Sixth:

Developing a system for receiving and following up on complaints in the field of human rights to respond quickly and effectively to any complaints and to communicate effectively with the competent authorities regarding them.

Seventh:

Intensifying the national efforts to build capabilities and training in human rights field. Before concluding my address, I would like to declare 2022 as the “Year of Civil Society”, which I call upon to continue to work hard and diligently side by side with the Egyptian state institutions so as to achieve the sustainable development in all fields, and to spread awareness concerning the culture of human rights; thus contributing to realizing the hopes and aspirations of the great people of Egypt.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Honorable Guests,

Egypt has reassured its respect to all commitments related to human rights and basic freedoms. Egypt’s sole aspiration is to allow the Egyptian society to enjoy its total rights that guarantee security and stability to our nation; the matter that necessitates more sincere effort and sustained work for the sake of maintaining the course of human rights. Egypt sons always deserve the best. Egypt governmental and civil institutions will continue their national efforts so as to realize such target. On the threshold of establishing a “new republic”, Egypt did not forget to start a new era in its future and extended history with a national strategy for human rights believing in its importance in the continuity and renewal of the national state as well as maintaining the sustained efforts so as to keep the dignity of the Egyptian citizen.

May the Peace, Mercy and Blessings of Allah be upon you

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- Mr. el-Sisi noted in his speech that the success of these efforts is based on implementation. Not only does this human rights strategy lack clear benchmarks, but the Egyptian administration has refused to implement its own laws in order to protect the human rights of citizens. Delivering yet another speech does nothing to improve implementation.
- Egypt’s prior permanent representative to the **UN, H.E. Mr. Alaa Youssef**, adamantly denied imprisonment of innocent citizens, closure of NGOs, and many other rights violations in 2020 during the follow-up session to Egypt’s Universal Periodic Review. He further claimed that some NGO’s have falsely reported about abuses taking place.

COPTIC SOLIDARITY CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Coptic Solidarity welcomes any initiative aimed at improving human rights conditions in Egypt, provided that it is genuine and is linked to specific and prompt actions, coupled with quantifiable benchmarks.

However, president el- Sisi’s speech and the propaganda-type event where it was delivered is – as demonstrated above – clearly aimed at “foreign consumption.” Given the heightened level of international criticism of Egypt’s harrowing human rights record, it appears that Mr. el - Sisi has been (ill-)advised by his aids and public relations companies to mount this show, use progressive buzzwords that appeal to a Western audience, and make vague promises for the future—all while keeping his brutal policies of repression intact.

As [CIHRS recently commented](#), “The country’s abysmal human rights situation is the consequence of brazen disregard for the rule of law, including a lack of political will on the part of the president to respect human rights. President el-Sisi has repeatedly expressed his contempt for universal human rights enshrined in international conventions ratified by Egypt, citing Egyptians’ supposed lack of human rights culture and awareness relative to Westerners”

When president el-Sisi refers to this “luminous” moment in Egyptian history, he is completely out of touch with the reality he has overseen. There has been near shuttering of civil society, the curtailment of free speech and imprisonment of numerous journalists and activists, impunity and increased attacks on the indigenous Copts and their properties, increased trafficking of minority Coptic women, and a revolving system of arrest and detention of many thousands of innocent civilians.

One other serious concern is that this strategy document covers a very wide range of domains making human rights, in the traditional sense, very diluted so that they appear marginal and, consequently, abuses—however serious—are considered secondary amidst other socio-economic issues.

We believe that Egypt must first implement the most basic of reforms in order to end state enforced human rights violations. **If there is a political will to change course and enact a new strategy of human rights, the least to do would be to take immediate credible goodwill steps**, such as:

1. **Immediately and unconditionally release anyone held for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly; and release others detained arbitrarily**, including those held in prolonged pre-trial detention without trial or the possibility to challenge the lawfulness of their detention; cease the practice of charging defendants in new cases based on the same set of facts, commonly called “rotation” (or “recycling”), and **protect those in custody from torture and other ill-treatment** and ensure their regular access to their families, lawyers of their choosing, and adequate medical care;
2. **Create a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders**, including by effectively protecting them from arbitrary arrest, detention and other forms of reprisal or harassment; instructing the public prosecution to close Case No. 173 of 2011; removing all arbitrary measures including travel bans and asset freezes against human rights defenders and their families; quashing verdicts against human rights defenders including those sentenced in their absence; and removing human rights defenders from the “terrorists list”;
3. **Amend Law No. 94 of 2015 on counterterrorism, Law No. 8 of 2015 on terrorist entities, Law No.175 of 2018 on cybercrime and Law No. 149 of 2019 on NGOs** to bring them in line with Egypt’s international obligations.
4. **Abolish** all “blasphemy” laws (such as **Article 98-f** of the Penal Code) and immediately end all outstanding court cases.
5. Set a clear goal of “legalizing” all **outstanding churches and related buildings** before the sixth anniversary of the 2016 Church Law.
6. Abolish the **mention of religion from all official documents**, including IDs.
7. Start clear steps to turn **Al-Azhar back into the religious institution** it was for 1000 years before 1961 and integrate its schooling and university branches into the national education system.
8. Establish the **Anti-Discrimination Commission** that was mandated by the 2014 Constitution (Article-53) but never put in place.
9. Abolish the **1996 “Hisba” Law**, which allows a third party to sue any citizen or entity if it is deemed to be in the public interest.