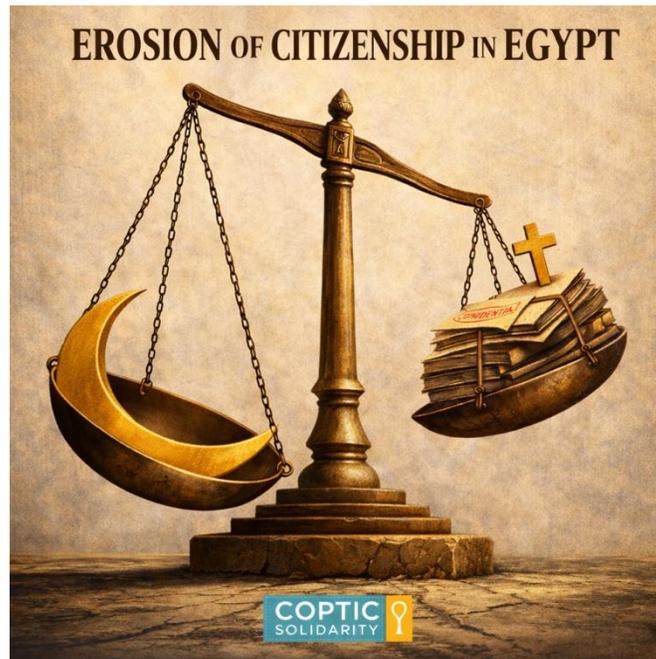




## EROSION OF CITIZENSHIP IN EGYPT

*State-Managed Religious Governance and Institutional Islamization  
under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi*



***Special Report***

by

**Coptic Solidarity**

(March 2026)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State institutions in Egypt are reshaping religious authority and citizenship through the consolidation of a system of state-managed religious governance.

Egypt's legal and political system has long embedded religious elements in its constitutional and administrative structures. However, rather than reforming these frameworks toward equal citizenship, the Egyptian state has reinforced and expanded them over the past decade.

Since President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi assumed power in 2013, Islamic institutions have assumed an increasingly prominent role within the machinery of governance. Bodies such as Al-Azhar, the Ministry of Awqaf, and Dar al-Ifta have expanded their influence across state institutions, education, and public administration.

Key developments include the continued enforcement and expansion of blasphemy provisions, administrative practices that restrict religious expression and effectively prevent individuals from changing their religious affiliation, and widening legal asymmetries governing religious identity and conversion. At the same time, the growing saturation of religious instruction within public education has reinforced a pervasive religious framing of identity and citizenship.

The analysis in this report covers several dimensions of this transformation. These include the legal framework that embeds religion within legislation; the institutional expansion of religious authorities within the state; regulatory constraints affecting Christian churches and historic institutions, including the challenge to the historic autonomy of Saint Catherine's Monastery; the growing influence of religious education through both the Azhar system and mosque-based schooling; the expansion of Islamic norms in public life; the administrative restrictions governing religious conversion; and the increasing use of state ceremonies and presidential rhetoric to frame national identity in explicitly religious terms.

Taken together, these developments reflect a broader transformation in the relationship between religion and governance. While citizenship in Egypt remains formally universal in constitutional language, the institutional framework increasingly reflects state-managed religious hierarchy that reshapes both the meaning and practice of citizenship.

Over the past decade, these phenomena emerged not merely as persistence of religious influence in politics, but the consolidation of a state-managed religious governance system in which state-dominated Islamic institutions and norms shape the structure and practice of citizenship.

### Key Statistics

Selected Indicators of Institutional Religious Expansion:

Indicator	Estimate
Mosques supervised by Ministry of Awqaf	151,000+
Mosques built or renovated since 2014	13,000+
Estimated prayer spaces (zawiyas)	1–1.5 million
Churches applying for legalization (all denominations)	5,500
Churches granted conditional legalization	3,453
Al-Azhar schools	9,000+
Students in Azhar schools	2+ million
Students at Al-Azhar University	400,000+
Maximum penalty under blasphemy law (Art. 98f)	5 years imprisonment

## Introduction

Discussions about religion and politics in Egypt often assume that authoritarian regimes invoke religion as a tool to legitimize political power. Developments of the past decade reveal a deeper structural transformation. Rather than simply using religion as a symbol for legitimacy, the Egyptian state has increasingly integrated Sunni Islamic institutions into the machinery of governance itself.

Egypt’s legal and political systems have long incorporated religious elements. However, the political transition of 2013 marks a turning point in how these structures are used. Instead of reforming religiously based legal frameworks or limiting the influence of religious institutions, the state has expanded its institutional and religious role across governance, education, and public administration.

This report examines how this transformation operates in practice. It analyzes the legal framework embedding religion in legislation, the institutional expansion of religious authorities, regulatory constraints affecting Christian institutions, the growing role of religious education, the normalization of Islamic norms in public life, and administrative restrictions governing religious identity and conversion.

### I. Constitutional and Legal Foundations of Religious Governance

The constitutional framework of Egypt establishes a structural relationship between religion and governance that privileges Islam within the legal system.

Article 2 of the Constitution declares: “Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic is its official language, and the principles of Islamic Shari‘a are the principal source of legislation.”

This provision has significant legal implications. Courts often interpret legislation in ways that ensure compatibility with Shari‘a principles. As a result, religious doctrine directly influences legislative interpretation and judicial decision-making.

Although the Constitution also guarantees equality before the law and freedom of belief, these guarantees coexist with—and are effectively subordinate to—a legal framework that embeds one religion within governance.

- **Personal-Status Law**

Egypt does not maintain a unified civil family law system. Instead, personal-status matters are governed through religious legal frameworks.

Muslim citizens are subject to Islamic jurisprudence in matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, or child custody.

Christian communities apply church-based personal-status regulations recognized by the state. Because each Christian denomination maintains its own legal framework, disputes involving interdenominational marriage or conversion can become legally complex. These Christian-specific laws are subordinate to the overall framework of Islamic laws, thus prohibiting, for example, child adoption. A unified personal status law for all Christian denominations has been languishing in governmental offices for years, with no indication as to what prevents it from being promulgated.

This system results in citizenship rights being ~~are~~ mediated through religious affiliation rather than a unified civil legal structure. However, a unified civil legal structure cannot function before a full separation between religion and state is in place.

- **Religion Identification in National Identity Documents**

Religion is also embedded within the administrative structure of the state.

Egyptian national identity cards require citizens to declare their religion on official documents, such as birth certificates and ID cards. The official categories available are limited to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (there are currently fewer than 15 Jews in Egypt).

This classification influences various aspects of daily life, from job application to sporting club membership, as well as the application of personal-status law in procedures related to marriage registration, divorce, and inheritance disputes.

- **Blasphemy Laws and Regulation of Religious Expression**

Religious authority is further reinforced through legislation regulating speech.

Article **98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code** criminalizes speech deemed contempt of religion or harmful to national unity. Convictions under this provision can carry penalties of up to **five years in prison**.

Human-rights organizations have documented numerous prosecutions under this law during the past decade. Individuals targeted have included bloggers, social-media users, teachers, and those (non-Muslims or Muslims) accused of criticizing Islamic doctrine or expressing dissenting views.

These legal mechanisms demonstrate how religion is embedded within the governance structure rather than treated solely as a private matter of belief.

- **Structural Limits on Minority Participation in State Authority**

Although the Constitution affirms equal citizenship, patterns of appointment across multiple sectors of the state apparatus strongly suggest the existence of an informal ceiling that limits the presence of non-Muslims in positions of authority.

This pattern appears repeatedly in judicial, administrative, military, and executive appointments. For example, presidential decrees published in the Official Gazette on January 26, reveal the presidential appointment of 739 new members to the State Administrative Court and the State Legal Defense Authority. Among these appointees, only eight were Coptic Christians, representing approximately 1.1 percent of the total. Similar patterns appear in local administration. A government list of newly appointed city managers in October 2025, included 164 officials across Egypt's governorates; none were Coptic Christians.

Such examples are not isolated incidents, but part of a long-recognized pattern often described as a "glass ceiling." Coptic representation in senior state positions tends to remain at symbolic levels, rarely exceeding a small percentage (below 2%, or none in security and intelligence institutions), regardless of their demographic presence, estimated to represent 10 – 15 percent of Egypt's population.

The underrepresentation is reinforced by the absence of institutional mechanisms designed to address systemic and root causes of discrimination. Article 53 of the Egyptian Constitution provides for the establishment of an independent anti-discrimination commission tasked with monitoring equality before the law. However, more than a decade after the adoption of the Constitution, this body has never been created. As a result, constitutional guarantees of equality remain largely declaratory, without institutional mechanisms capable of monitoring or correcting discriminatory practices—and providing substantive equality for Copts.

These patterns collectively suggest that the erosion of equal citizenship in Egypt does not operate only through legal asymmetries or religious governance structures. It also manifests through **restricted access to state authority**, where participation of non-Muslims remains symbolically acknowledged but structurally limited.

These legal and constitutional provisions provide the framework within which religious institutions operate and expand their influence within the structures of the Egyptian state.

---

## II. Expansion of Institutional Religious Authority

Since 2013, the Egyptian government has strengthened the institutional role of Sunni religious organizations within the state.

The most prominent institutions involved in this process include **Al-Azhar, the Ministry of Awqaf, and Dar al-Ifta.**

- **Expansion of Religious Authority Across State Institutions**

The **Ministry of Awqaf** exercises an extensive role in religious life in Egypt. Its responsibilities include licensing imams, building, renovating, and supervising mosques, regulating religious endowments; and overseeing religious education in mosques.

In recent months, the Ministry of Awqaf has also launched nationwide initiatives aimed at promoting Qur'anic recitation as a central feature of public religious life. One such initiative, officially titled "*Dawlat al-Tilawa*" ("The State of Recitation"), seeks to encourage widespread memorization and recitation of the Qur'an across Egyptian society. The program is an addition to existing state-sponsored activities such as Egypt's annual international Qur'an recitation competition, which awards significant financial prizes to participants from across the Muslim world. These initiatives illustrate how the ministry's role extends to the active promotion of religious practices on a national scale.

**Dar al-Ifta**, Egypt's official body responsible for issuing religious opinions (*fatwas*), also plays a significant role in shaping religious discourse.

The institution issues an estimated one million religious rulings annually on matters ranging from finance and social behavior to political participation and religious practice.

In recent years the government has promoted Dar al-Ifta as a central authority for religious interpretation, discouraging independent religious rulings issued outside official channels.

Over the past year or so, these religious institutions have **expanded their influence beyond traditional religious domains** through a series of cooperation agreements with a wide range of state institutions. These agreements—often referred to as "protocols of cooperation"—aim to promote religious guidance and Islamic values in sectors not traditionally associated with religious governance.

Such initiatives have included cooperation with Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, as well as partnerships with institutions such as the High Military Academy, the Egyptian Space Agency, and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. These arrangements typically involve joint programs, conferences, and advisory roles intended to introduce Islamic jurisprudence or religious guidance into areas ranging from education and diplomacy to scientific research and strategic studies.

The proliferation of these partnerships demonstrates how religious institutions are becoming more deeply **embedded and influential** across the administrative structure of the Egyptian state. Rather than remaining confined to mosques or religious instruction, these bodies now extend into sectors traditionally governed by secular administrative frameworks. This expansion reflects a broader pattern in which religious authority becomes integrated into diverse areas of public policy and state activity.

- **Islamic Infrastructure and Spatial Islamization**

The expansion of Islamic religious infrastructure represents one of the most visible manifestations of institutional Islamization.

According to official statistics from the Ministry of Awqaf, Egypt has **more than 151,000 officially registered mosques**. Analysts estimate **1–1.5 million smaller prayer spaces (zawiyas)**.

Since 2014, the government reports that **over 13,800 mosques have been constructed or renovated.**

Several high-profile, state-funded mosque construction projects have been completed during the past decade. Among the most notable is the **Al-Fattah Al-Aleem Mosque** in Egypt's New Administrative Capital. The mosque is one of the largest in Africa and serves as a symbol of the government's emphasis on Islamic infrastructure.

Mosques have been incorporated into major state development projects, including new cities and residential districts. These projects often feature prominent mosque construction alongside government buildings and public squares.

The scale and visibility of these religious structures reinforce the centrality of Sunni Islamic identity within public space.

---

### **III. Church Construction, Sectarian Violence, and Administrative Constraints**

Unlike mosques, churches—whose construction, maintenance, and functioning costs are entirely covered by the community, without any public subsidy—face a **drastically different situation.**

While the Egyptian state has expanded Islamic religious infrastructure dramatically over the past decade, Christian religious institutions continue to operate under restrictive regulatory conditions.

Historically, the construction or repair of Christian churches required direct presidential approval. This requirement dated back to Ottoman-era regulations and remained in practice for much of modern Egyptian history.

- **Legal Framework Governing Church Construction**

In **2016**, the Egyptian parliament adopted a new **Church Construction and Renovation Law**, presented by the government as a reform intended to simplify church construction procedures. **Having a law specific to churches rather than a unified law for houses of worship undermines any notion of citizenship equality.**

The law enshrined old constraints and introduced several new administrative mechanisms that continued to limit Christian communities' ability to build or repair places of worship.

One of the law's most controversial provisions required thousands of churches that had been constructed without formal permits to apply retroactively for legalization.

According to official government statements, by recent counts, **more than 5,500 church buildings and related service facilities** submitted legalization applications. Half of these belong to the Coptic Orthodox community, which represents about 85 percent of Christians in the country. A government committee, headed by the prime minister, and including representatives from the military, the intelligence community, state security, and Islamic affairs, oversees the process.

Over the past nine years, the committee has issued **conditional legalization for 3,453 churches and related service buildings**, subject to compliance with additional safety, zoning, and administrative requirements. Several hundred applications remain pending, often due to objections raised by local authorities or security agencies. Even when approval is granted, local authorities frequently delay implementation.

- **Local Opposition and Security-Controlled Settlements**

In many rural areas, church construction or legalization requests trigger **local “sectarian tensions,”** as radicalized local groups often oppose the construction of churches. This happens particularly in villages where Christian communities seek to regularize or expand church facilities to adequately accommodate the number of worshippers.

Rather than relying on an equitable judicial system to resolve disputes, authorities frequently convene **customary reconciliation sessions**, mediated by security officials and local Muslim community leaders. If intended to defuse sectarian tensions, **these sessions often placate the aggressors and produce outcomes that disadvantage Christian communities.** In many documented cases, Christian residents are pressured to accept compromises, including halting construction or relocating religious facilities.

Human-rights organizations have repeatedly criticized this system because it replaces the rule of law with negotiated settlements that prioritize communal stability over equal rights.

Church construction disputes have also produced numerous hostile incidents. On **February 3, 2026**, clashes erupted in the **Zohour–15 May district** following the unjustified demolition by the local authorities of structures associated with a church project. The incident triggered security intervention and arrests of several protesting Copts.

Similar incidents have occurred in multiple governorates in recent years. In **2017, violent attacks in the village of Kom al-Lufi in Minya governorate** led to the burning of homes belonging to Christian families following rumors that a church was being built without authorization. In **2018, tensions erupted in the village of Dimshaw Hashem**, also in Minya, after local Christians sought permission to open a church building. Security authorities again intervened through reconciliation sessions rather than judicial proceedings. In **2023, clashes in the village of Al-Fawakher in Minya** followed attempts by Christian residents to use a building for worship. These incidents illustrate how church construction and legalization disputes frequently trigger communal tensions that are resolved through informal security mediation rather than through the rule of law.

- **St. Catherine’s Monastery and State Challenges to Historic Ownership**

The pressures affecting Christian religious institutions in Egypt extend beyond disputes over church construction and licensing. A particularly significant example concerns the historic Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai. Founded in the sixth century and widely regarded as the world’s oldest continuously functioning Christian monastery, Saint Catherine’s has maintained **recognized ownership** and administrative control over its surrounding lands for more than **fifteen centuries**, surviving successive political regimes and regional conflicts.

In recent years, however, Egyptian authorities have initiated legal proceedings challenging these longstanding property rights. Through court actions and administrative initiatives linked to development projects, the government has sought to challenge the monastery's historic ownership rights and transfer legal authority over lands traditionally belonging to the monastery. Critics argue that these actions contradict assurances previously given by Egyptian authorities during the process of seeking **UNESCO World Heritage** recognition for the Saint Catherine site and rely on contested legal claims challenging the monastery's centuries-old ownership.

If implemented, such measures could effectively transfer control of the monastery's historic domain to the state. In this sense, the Saint Catherine's case reflects a broader pattern identified throughout this report: the growing tendency of the Egyptian state to subordinate historically autonomous religious institutions to centralized state authority within its evolving system of religious governance.

---

#### IV. Education and the Institutionalization of Religious Identity

While the regulatory mechanisms mentioned above affect the operation of Christian religious institutions, other state policies reinforce religious identity through broader social institutions—most notably the education system.

Education is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which religious identity is reproduced within Egyptian society.

- **The Al-Azhar Educational System**

The **Al-Azhar's** Muslims-only **educational system**, largely funded by the state and subsidized by no student fees, forms a vast parallel network that operates alongside Egypt's public school system. According to official statistics, this network has expanded significantly in recent years to include **over 9,000 schools and institutes**, with approximately **two million students** enrolled in primary and secondary education.

**Al-Azhar University** currently has **over 400,000 students**. Over the past decade Al-Azhar University has expanded significantly and now includes **more than 80 faculties and numerous regional branches across Egypt**, including campuses in Cairo, Alexandria, Assiut, Tanta, Zagazig, and other governorates. Al-Azhar University is now among the largest universities in the world.

Unlike traditional seminaries devoted exclusively to clerical training, the Azhar system combines secular subjects with religious instruction. Students study subjects such as mathematics, science, and history alongside courses in Qur'anic studies, Islamic jurisprudence, and Arabic religious scholarship.

Graduates of the Azhar system frequently enter careers not only in religious administration and education, but also in state institutions, including the education sector, judiciary, military, and police.

- **Religion in the Public Education System**

The influence of religion in education extends beyond Azhar institutions.

Within the general public education system, religious instruction is compulsory. Students attend religious education classes throughout their schooling.

These classes are divided according to the religion listed on a student's national identity documents.

Religious narratives also appear widely in other parts of the curriculum. In many textbooks, Egyptian national identity is framed through Islamic history and religious symbolism. Lessons in Arabic language, history, and civic education often incorporate references to Islamic heritage, and students are often required to study and memorize Qur'anic excerpts in these classes.

Religious influence is also visible in everyday school practices. In many schools, morning assemblies that traditionally included the recitation of the national anthem increasingly feature Qur'anic recitation or religious chants. **Dress codes** similarly reflect the growing normalization of religious symbolism: although not formally mandated nationwide, the wearing of the hijab is widely expected in many schools, particularly for adolescent girls. In practice, this expectation often operates as a quasi-obligatory norm rather than a voluntary expression of personal belief, and human rights organizations have repeatedly recorded incidents of harassment and assault against women who do not cover their hair, predominantly Coptic women.

The structure of religious education also creates practical difficulties for non-Muslim students. In many public schools the number of qualified Christian religion teachers is limited, particularly in certain rural areas where Christian students may represent a small minority. As a result, Christian pupils may receive irregular instruction or be placed in supervised study periods while Muslim religious classes proceed normally. At the same time, religious education grades contribute to overall academic evaluation in several stages of schooling, raising concerns that disparities in instruction may affect academic outcomes for non-Muslim students.

- **Revival of Mosque-Based Kuttab Education**

Recently, the government—with clear “presidential encouragement”—has also promoted the revival of traditional **Qur'anic learning** environments known as “*kuttab*.” These programs, starting at young age, encourage mosque-based instruction for younger children and reinforce the association between religious identity and education.

---

## V. Islamic Norms and the Reshaping of Public Life

Beyond legal frameworks and institutional arrangements, the growing influence of Islamic norms within everyday public life represents another dimension of the changing relationship between religion and citizenship in Egypt. Religious expression in the public sphere has become increasingly pervasive, supported both by state policy and by broader social pressures.

- **Religious Practices in Public Space**

The **auditory landscape** of Egyptian cities also reflects this saturation of religious practice. Mosques and neighborhood prayer halls (*zawiyas*) are typically equipped with powerful loudspeaker systems used to broadcast the call to prayer five times daily, often preceded by extended Qur'anic recitations or religious chants. Efforts by residents—including some Muslim citizens—to reduce sound levels, particularly for the dawn prayer, have been repeatedly rejected by the Ministry of Awqaf.

Together, these practices contribute to a public environment in which Islamic rituals and symbols hold a dominant place within civic space. While many of these practices are viewed by supporters as expressions of piety, their institutionalization within state structures reinforces a broader expectation that public life should conform to Islamic norms.

- **Religious Dress Norms and Social Pressure**

The growing normalization of Islamic symbols is also visible in **patterns of dress**. Over the past few decades, the wearing of the hijab has expanded dramatically across Egyptian society and is now estimated to be worn by a large majority of Muslim women, often beginning at a young age. A smaller but visible proportion of women wear the niqab. Although these practices are often framed as personal expressions of faith, many observers note that strong social pressure plays an increasing role in shaping these choices. In some public settings—particularly crowded urban transportation—women who do not wear the hijab may face verbal harassment or social stigma. Reports also indicate that some Christian women feel obliged to adopt the hijab when traveling in certain public environments in order to avoid unwanted attention.

Persons observed not fasting in Ramadan are often subjected to harsh public scolding, even if they are sick—or simply not Muslims. Aggressors are rarely held accountable.

- **Religious Symbolism in State Offices**

Religious symbolism is also widely present within government workplaces. In public offices ranging from ministerial departments to local administrative bureaus, framed Qur'anic verses are commonly displayed on walls, while copies of the Qur'an are frequently placed on officials' desks in visible positions. Work routines are often interrupted to accommodate midday and afternoon prayers, with employees gathering in corridors or shared spaces even when designated prayer rooms exist. These practices reinforce the expectation that Islamic observance forms a normal and visible part of everyday administrative life.

- **Religious Dominance in State Media**

State media and public broadcasting play a significant role in reinforcing this environment and contributes to the pervasive presence of religious religion in public life. Egypt operates a 24-hour radio station devoted exclusively to Qur'anic recitation, widely heard in public transportation, shops, some government offices, and homes across the country.

Egyptian national television channels routinely interrupt programming to broadcast the call to prayer. Daily programs dedicated to Qur'anic interpretation, religious instruction, and Islamic cultural themes are a routine phenomenon. Dedicated religious broadcasting further reinforces this presence. Religious programming occupies thousands of hours of airtime annually across state-owned networks. In contrast, Christian religious

programming remains extremely limited; the state television network typically broadcasts a single Coptic Christmas mass each year, a clear symbol of a tokenization policy to present a false image of religious equality.

---

## VI. Administrative Regulation of Religious Identity

Beyond shaping public space and social norms, religious identity in Egypt is also regulated through formal administrative mechanisms

Religious identity in Egypt is not merely a matter of personal belief. It is also a legally regulated administrative category.

Conversion policy reveals one of the most significant asymmetries in the Egyptian system.

Conversion **to Islam** is formally and promptly recognized by the state and recorded in civil registry documents. Individuals converting to Islam can obtain official documentation reflecting their new religious identity through administrative procedures involving religious authorities.

Conversion **away from Islam**, however, is treated very differently. The state administration refuses to issue official documentation reflecting their new religious identity. The state authorities frequently treat such cases as matters of national security, a practice that has intensified over the past decade.

Egyptian courts have historically refused to authorize changes to identity documents for individuals who convert from Islam to another religion. Even though the law does not formally prohibit such conversion, courts refer to Article 2 of the Constitution to emphasize the supremacy of Islamic principles, which prohibit “apostasy.”

As a result, individuals registered as Muslims typically remain legally classified as Muslim regardless of their personal beliefs.

This administrative structure effectively creates a **one-directional conversion system**. Once an individual is registered as Muslim, changing that classification becomes effectively impossible.

Human-rights organizations have repeatedly argued that this system violates international principles of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

- **Enforcement and Documented Cases**

The enforcement of religious governance in Egypt can be illustrated through several documented, recent, cases.

One widely cited example involves **Said Mansour Rezk Abdelrazek**, who converted from Islam to Christianity and attempted to change his religious classification in official identity documents.

Instead of recognizing his request as an exercise of religious freedom, authorities treated the case as a security issue. Abdelrazek was detained and faced legal proceedings related to his attempts to amend his official records.

Another prominent case involves **Dr. Augustinos Samaan**, a Christian apologist who posted peaceful online videos defending Christian beliefs.

Samaan was prosecuted under contempt-of-religion provisions and received a **five-year prison sentence** following a closed trial.

Prosecutions under Article 98(f) have expanded during the past decade and have targeted both religious minorities and Muslim reformist voices. Individuals accused of “contempt of religion” have included bloggers, teachers, social-media users, and activists who expressed heterodox interpretations of Islamic texts or criticized religious authorities. Several Muslim intellectuals and writers have faced investigations or charges after publicly questioning traditional interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. Human-rights organizations have documented dozens of such cases since 2013, illustrating the growing weaponization of blasphemy provisions to police religious discourse.

- **Disappearance of Coptic Women**

Advocacy groups have documented numerous cases involving the disappearance of Coptic Christian women and girls who later reappear after being declared converts to Islam. In most cases, families alleged coercion and obstruction of authorities when attempting to challenge the official conversion status. Families also report that security authorities discourage legal challenges and instead encourage accepting the situation as a fact in order to prevent communal tension.

A recent case is that of Silvana Atef, a 17-year-old girl with special needs, who disappeared in October 2025, was forcibly converted to Islam, and married to a man who later became known to her family and authorities. Instead of pursuing accountability, authorities have failed to arrest or prosecute those responsible and have not reunited Silvana with her family. This case raises serious concerns about the **protection of minors and individuals with disabilities, due process, and state complicity**. The National Councils for Human Rights, Women, and Childhood have yet to be heard from in this or any other case.

In several reported cases, individuals who disappeared were later declared to have converted to Islam and married Muslim men. Administrative authorities often rapidly recognized the new religious status, while mechanisms for reversing such changes remained limited.

These incidents illustrate how religious governance in Egypt operates not only through legal structures but also through administrative enforcement and security intervention.

---

## VII. Presidential Rhetoric and the Religious Framing of Citizenship

Presidential rhetoric has reinforced the religious framing of national identity.

In a widely discussed speech delivered during Egypt's **2026 Police Day celebrations**, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi referred to believers and non-believers using explicitly theological language.

During the address, he described unbelievers as individuals who “do not know God” and spoke of divine judgment separating **“the rescued” from “the perished.”**

The formulation implies that religious belief determines ultimate moral status.

In another public speech, during a Ramadan *iftar*, President el-Sisi referred to the distinction between the individual's Islam and the Islam of the state—thus explicitly referring to Egypt as a **“Muslim state.”**

Although such remarks are often accompanied by references to coexistence and tolerance, they reinforce the notion that Islamic identity forms the moral, superior center of Egyptian national identity.

Within this framework, **tolerance is framed as a generous** accommodation extended to minorities **rather than** as an **expression of equal civic citizenship.**

At the same time, Egyptian authorities frequently present the country **internationally as a model of religious moderation and coexistence.** Official diplomatic messaging highlights initiatives such as calls for “renewal of religious discourse,” interfaith dialogue, and the state's support for historic Christian institutions. However, these narratives hide domestic legal and administrative practices that sustain structural religious asymmetries. While public messaging emphasizes tolerance and coexistence, internal governance structures maintain restrictions on religious conversion, enforce blasphemy provisions, regulate religious infrastructure of non-Muslims through security and administrative mechanisms, and sharply limit the access of non-Muslims in state positions to a minimum symbolic level.

- **St Catherine's Narrative at a State Ramadan Religious Celebration**

President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi regularly participates in publicized religious observances, from dawn prayers to official Ramadan celebrations. Recent public ceremonies further illustrate the central place given to religious symbolism within the political sphere. During an official state celebration of Laylat al-Qadr in Ramadan (March 16, 2026), he attended alongside the country's senior political and military leadership. The program prominently featured the nationwide initiative “Dawlat al-Tilawa” (“State of Recitation”), including Qur'anic recitation competitions and religious chanting presented as a source of national pride.

In his address, the president praised the recitation initiative as a distinctive Egyptian achievement capable of inspiring similar initiatives in other fields. Such ceremonies illustrate how religious celebrations are increasingly elevated into **national political events** in which Islamic symbolism frames public identity.

Significantly, the ceremony also included a documentary presentation on the government's **“Grand Revelation” development project in Saint Catherine's**, highlighting the Sinai site in connection with the Qur'anic narrative of the divine manifestation to Moses. The inclusion of this project in a major national religious celebration—something unprecedented in previous state ceremonies—illustrates how the

government is increasingly **framing Saint Catherine's within a broader Islamic symbolic narrative**. Observers note that this framing helps contextualize ongoing state efforts to assert greater administrative **control over the monastery's** historic domain.

---

## CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates the consolidation of a system that can best be described as **state-managed religious governance**. Within this model, Sunni Islamic institutions occupy a privileged and structurally dominant position within governance, while non-Muslim religious communities remain formally recognized but institutionally subordinate. Religious leadership often serves as an intermediary between communities and the state, meaning that representation of non-Muslim citizens is frequently mediated through church authorities rather than through equal civic participation.

The Egyptian state presents this arrangement as a model of religious coexistence and social stability. However, the model demonstrably preserves **hierarchical relations between religious communities** rather than establishing full equality under the law.

The Islamization of Egypt under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi does not manifest as a formal theocracy or the rule of religious movements. Instead, it operates through a centralized administrative framework that embeds Islamic institutions deeply within the structures of the modern state.

Legal hierarchy, mosque expansion, educational policy, identity documentation, conversion regulation, and the enforcement of blasphemy provisions together shape a civic order in which religious identity becomes a defining factor in citizenship. While constitutional language continues to equality before the law, the institutional reality reflects a system in which Islamic identity functions as the normative foundation of national belonging.

Religious institutions remain subordinate to state authority, yet their norms and doctrines increasingly shape public policy, education, legal interpretation, and the boundaries of permissible social expression.

In practice, this evolving system brings Egypt close to a **form of state-managed quasi-theocracy**. Religious authority has not replaced political authority; it has instead become structurally embedded within it. Islamic institutions participate directly in governance, religious norms increasingly shape public space, and legal and administrative mechanisms regulate religious identity and dissent. In combination, these dynamics produce outcomes that resemble many of the transformations; observers feared during the brief rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012–2013. Paradoxically, while the current regime presents itself as a bulwark against political *radical* Islam, **the institutional expansion of state-aligned religious authority has moved Egypt closer to a system in which religion still plays a defining role in governance and citizenship**.

The consequence is not merely symbolic religiosity in politics. Rather, it represents a **gradual restructuring of citizenship** itself. Equal citizenship in Egypt increasingly

operates within a framework that privileges the religious identity of the majority while placing structural constraints on non-Muslims and dissenting voices within the Sunni community itself.

Unless meaningful legal reforms address these structural inequalities, the gap between the constitutional promise of equal citizenship and the lived reality of religious hierarchy will continue to widen, further reshaping the meaning of citizenship itself.

## Key Findings

The evidence presented in this report leads to several key findings regarding the evolving relationship between religion, governance, and citizenship in Egypt.

### 1. **Islamization operates through institutions.**

The integration of Al-Azhar, the Ministry of Awqaf, and Dar al-Ifta into the structures of governance reflects the structural embedding of Islamic religious authority within the machinery of governance.

### 2. **Religion functions as a governance category.**

Mandatory religious identification on national identity documents and asymmetric recognition of religious conversion institutionalize religious identity and hierarchy within the administrative system.

### 3. **Constitutional equality is structurally constrained.**

Article 2's designation of Islamic law as the principal source of legislation shapes judicial interpretation and limits the development of a unified civil legal framework.

### 4. **Religious infrastructure and education extend institutional Islamic influence.**

The expansion of mosques, the vast Azhar educational network, the revival of mosque-based kuttab instruction, and religion-based curricula in public schools extend religious authority across both formal education and broader socialization.

### 5. **Christian institutions face structural regulatory constraints.**

Church construction regulations, security-controlled settlement mechanisms, and legal challenges to historic Christian institutions—including legal challenges to the historic ownership and autonomy of Saint Catherine's Monastery—illustrate the institutional limits placed on Christian religious institutions.

### 6. **Islamic norms increasingly shape public life and state symbolism.**

Public religious practices, dress norms, and the pervasive presence of religious symbolism in state institutions and media contribute to the normalization of Islamic norms in everyday life.

### 7. **Enforcement mechanisms restrict religious dissent.**

Blasphemy prosecutions, restrictions on conversion, and documented cases involving the disappearance of Coptic women illustrate how administrative and security practices enforce religious governance.

### 8. **Political rhetoric reinforces religious framing of citizenship.**

Presidential discourse increasingly frames national identity and moral legitimacy in explicitly religious terms.

## 9. External narratives of moderation coexist with domestic asymmetry.

International messaging that emphasizes tolerance and religious coexistence contrasts with internal governance structures that sustain structural religious asymmetry.

### Implications for Governance and Citizenship

The trends outlined in this report carry important implications for governance, social cohesion, and the future of equal citizenship in Egypt. As religious institutions become increasingly **embedded** within the structures of the state, legal and administrative asymmetries are becoming further institutionalized rather than gradually reformed. This trajectory may deepen divisions between religious communities while limiting the space for pluralism within Egyptian society itself.

The expanding integration of Islamic religious authority into governance also reshapes the boundaries of civic participation. When citizenship rights are mediated through religious identity—whether in education, administrative procedures, or access to public office—the space for equal and pluralistic civic participation narrows. Over time, this dynamic reinforces social divisions and limits the development of a unified civic framework that treats citizens primarily as equal members of the state rather than as members of religious communities.

For policymakers and international partners, these trends raise important questions regarding **religious freedom, equal citizenship, and the long-term stability of governance structures** built upon institutionalized religious hierarchy. International narratives emphasizing religious moderation in Egypt should therefore be evaluated alongside the domestic legal and administrative practices examined in this report.

If these structural dynamics continue without meaningful reform, religious hierarchy will become a permanent feature of the Egyptian state.

Coptic Solidarity is an advocacy organization seeking to help minorities, particularly the Copts, of Egypt. We support those in Egypt working for freedom, and the protection of the fundamental rights of all Egyptian citizens, and advocate in cooperation with the affiliated organizations in Canada and in Europe (Solidarité Copte).

Visit: <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/>

For more information, contact: [coptadvocacy@copticsolidarity.org](mailto:coptadvocacy@copticsolidarity.org)

Coptic Solidarity is established in Virginia, U.S.A., as a public charity organization under section 501 (C)(3) of the IRS Code.

# EROSION OF CITIZENSHIP IN EGYPT

State-Managed Religious Governance and  
Institutional Islamization Under  
President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi

