

Background: persistent tension and attacks in al-Galaa

The Copts of al-Galaa, located in the Samalout district, number 1,500 out of 4,000 local residents. They have held worship services in the Church of the Virgin since 1977; the church is built of mud brick and is a 60 square-meter, dilapidated structure. In 2004, local Copts obtained a permit to build a new church in another part of the village, but some local Muslims refused to permit them to do so. They built a mosque in front of the plot of the land designated for the new church and asked the Christians to pray in the old church. Copts resumed their attempts and in late January 2015 obtained a permit to demolish the old church and rebuild it as an expanded structure of 400 square meters, following the architectural plans sent to the current Minya governor. The EIPR obtained a copy of a letter from the governor to the Samalout archbishopric approving the reconstruction and saying he had informed the local administration.

When local Copts began demolishing the old building from the inside, a group of local Muslims objected and asked the construction workers to suspend their activities and leave. The security bodies were notified and subsequently asked the Copts to “placate the feelings of the Muslim side.” A delegation of Copts visited the homes of the major families in the village, some of whom agreed to the church, but the majority refused to allow them to demolish and rebuild the church. According to eyewitnesses, some of them expressed their displeasure at the order even allowing the establishment of the church, saying that “they would not permit them to repeat this disgrace.”

A group of village Copts organized a protest in front of the Minya governorate building on February 16, 2015 and met with Gen. Salah Ziyada, the governor, urging him to implement his decree for the reconstruction of the church. He promised to resolve the situation. The deputy chief of the Samalout police station and other officials intervened with his blessing and convened a customary reconciliation session in the home of the village mayor. The following conditions were drawn up as a condition for the approval of the church:

- The church should be one story without a dome, tower, or bells.
- It should have a small door that opens on a side street, with no entrance on the main street.
- It should be built without concrete pillars to preclude the possibility of additional stories being added in the future, with the proviso that Muslims observe the construction process.
- The church pastor and village Christians must pledge to not submit any future applications for the renovation, alteration, or reconstruction of the church, even if it were demolished for any reason.

- This agreement should be documented and registered at the public notary.

The head of investigations and the deputy police chief asked the Coptic representatives to sign off on the agreement with all of its conditions, which they refused.

Several Copts organized a second protest on March 1, 2015 in front of the Samalout archbishopric during a visit by Pope Tawadros II and in the presence of governorate leaders. The deputy chief of the Samalout police station met the protestors and promised to resolve the issue within days. Following this, police officials from the Samalout station met on March 3 with several prominent village Muslims, including those who objected to the reconstruction of the church, in an attempt to persuade them to change their conditions, but they refused. That evening, several Muslim youths and women from the village organized a protest march against the church on the village streets. They threw stones at some Christians' homes, breaking several glass windows.

The next day, Father Daoud Nashed, the secretary of the Samalout archbishop, met with the police chief and deputy chief. They urged him to remain calm and wait until the situation improved.

In the following days, several marches of mostly women, children, and youth were held to protest the construction of the church. The marchers repeated religious slogans and others rejecting a church in the village. They also pelted random Coptic homes with stones. Several fights were purposely provoked with local Copts to create the impression of ongoing tension in the village that would not be calmed if the approval order were implemented. The agricultural land of some Copts was also attacked and their crops destroyed.

After several preliminary meetings, on Friday, April 3, 2015, a reconciliation session was held that included representatives of Muslim and Christian families. During the meeting, Copts agreed to several of the Muslims' conditions: that the church would be a one-story structure without a tower or bells measuring 8 meters high; that it would occupy an area of 400 sq meters with a door on the main street; and that local Copts would apologize for media reports about the village instead of offering an official apology published in a newspaper. Representatives of the Muslims families also asked for an apology for the "offenses" published against them in the press and online. Father Daoud Nashed visited several village Muslims in an attempt to seal the deal, and it was agreed that ten village Christians would visit the homes of Muslims to apologize for what was reported in the media. A conference was scheduled in the village for April 5, to be attended by the governor, to announce the agreement, but it did not take place in light of subsequent events.

At 10 am on Saturday, April 4, sectarian attacks began when unknown persons threw stones at a vehicle carrying Christian girls to schools in Samalout. This was followed by arguments, and several Coptic home sand shops were stormed, destroyed, and looted. On Sunday at dawn, unknown persons uprooted the crops on Coptic-owned land.

During the attacks, nine Copts sustained cuts that required medical treatment at the Samalout General Hospital; two remain in the hospital for continued treatment. Two Muslims were injured during the stone throwing. Ahmed Rasmi, the village mayor, said in a telephone interview about the attacks that some were limited to the smashing of windows and that a reconciliation session was being organized to calm the situation in the village.

According to eyewitnesses, security forces detained injured Copts in the police truck for two hours while allowing injured Muslims to leave the village to file police reports at the Samalout police station against several Copts. Many Copts were also locked in their homes based on orders from security forces inside the village.

Various sources said that security forces randomly arrested citizens from both sides who were not a party to the events; some of them were returning from work.

On Sunday, April 5, the Samalout Summary Prosecution detained 38 people (20 Christians and 18 Muslims) for 15 days pending investigation on charges of cutting a public road, thuggery, exploiting religion to create civil strife, infringing on personal freedom, causing injuries to citizens, and destroying agricultural crops.