



Egyptian Initiative
for Personal Rights



Pending Further Review

One year of the church regularization committee

Pending Further Review

One year of the church regularization committee

First edition November 2018

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

14 al Saray al Korbra St., Garden City, Al Qahirah, Egypt.

Telephone & fax: +(202) 27960197 - 27960158

www.eipr.org - info@eipr.org



All printing and publication rights reserved. This report may be redistributed with attribution for non-profit purposes under Creative Commons license.

www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher and officer with EIPR's freedom of religion and belief program. Karoline Kamel contributed to the report and provided documentation for some sections. The report was edited by Amr Abd al-Rahman, the director of the civil liberties unit, and proofread by Ahmed al-Shabini.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION 6

I. SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AND TENSION IN CONNECTION WITH CHURCHES THAT APPLIED FOR LEGAL STATUS 8

II. CABINET DECREES LEGALIZING CHURCHES 12

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 17

DOCUMENTATION OF SECTARIAN ATTACKS AND TENSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LEGALIZATION OF CHURCHES 17

Introduction

It has been one year since the committee for the regularization of churches' status began work. Under Law 80/2016 on the construction of churches, the committee is tasked with granting existing, functioning churches all necessary permits, thus legalizing their status. The deadline for the submission of applications for status was September 28, 2017. A total of 3,730 applications were filed on behalf of churches and religious services buildings that already existed, regularly hosted religious services and rites, and were known to state institutions. Over the past year, the Cabinet has issued Three decrees approving several applications. The same period also saw the closure of existing churches that had filed applications for licenses with the committee. This spurred much criticism from Christian religious leaders and citizens who complained that the state was not complying with the terms of the church construction law. That law explicitly states that functioning churches that do not receive official licenses or do not meet the licensing conditions should nevertheless remain open and be permitted to continue offering religious services.

In this report, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documents the work of the regularization committee over the past year, reviewing the two decrees issued by the committee and offering a documentary narrative of the sectarian attacks and security violations connected to Christian citizens worshipping in existing churches that submitted the necessary papers to the legalization committee. The report covers the period from September 28, 2017, the end of the deadline for the submission of applications for legal status, to the end of October 2018.

The report relies on official prime ministerial decrees published in the Official Gazette relevant to the regularization committee, dozens of testimonies obtained by EIPR researchers from the site of sectarian attacks, along with statements obtained through telephone interviews. We also rely on court documents for cases in which the EIPR intervened on behalf of victims of these attacks.

With this report, the EIPR continues its campaign in support of the right to worship and the right to build houses of worship without restriction. In November 2016, the EIPR issued a report, titled "Closed on Security Grounds: Sectarian Tensions and Attacks Resulting from the Construction and Renovation of Churches,"¹ examining the findings of legal and field research into the difficulties Christian citizens face in exercising the right to worship, which the church construction law failed to grasp in their entirety. It was hoped that the campaign and the study—organized and issued to coincide with the parliamentary debate of Law 80/2016 on the construction of churches—would help to clarify the magnitude of the crisis and spur the competent government bodies, MPs, civil society organizations, and religious institutions to assume their responsibility to ensure that implementing the law did not further hinder the construction of churches. It was also hoped that these efforts would lead to the future revision of inadequate legislation.

Nearly a year after the law was adopted, in December 2017, the EIPR issued a new report, "As You

1- Available in English at <https://www.eipr.org/en/publications/closed-security-grounds-sectarian-tensions-and-attacks-resulting-construction-and->

Were: The Law on the Construction and Renovation of Churches One Year Later.”² That report documents and analyzes the application of the law with a view to determining whether the law had helped resolve sectarian tensions related to the construction of churches and discrimination in the right to worship. The EIPR also evaluated the role of major actors based on a reading of decrees for the establishment of new churches, the formation of the church legalization committee, and incidents of sectarian tension that year.

2- Available in Arabic at https://www.eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/a_year_on_the_churches_law_dec17.pdf.

I. Sectarian violence and tension in connection with churches that applied for legal status

In the past year, from September 28, 2017 to October 2018, the EIPR documented 15 instances of sectarian tension and violence related to the regularization of 15 churches that had been functioning for several years and were well known to state institutions and local residents alike. In addition to those incidents, we have documented 35 cases of violence and tension since the church construction law was issued. This number does not include incidents associated with the construction of new churches, nor does it include incidents that occurred prior to the period under review. This figure represents the incidents about which the EIPR was able to obtain ample statements. The security establishment shuttered several churches for which we were unable to obtain complete information.



Among these 15 incidents, 11 churches were closed



Two churches have reopened after the closure, one in Shubra al-Kheima a week after the incident and a second in the Minya governorate two and a half months later.

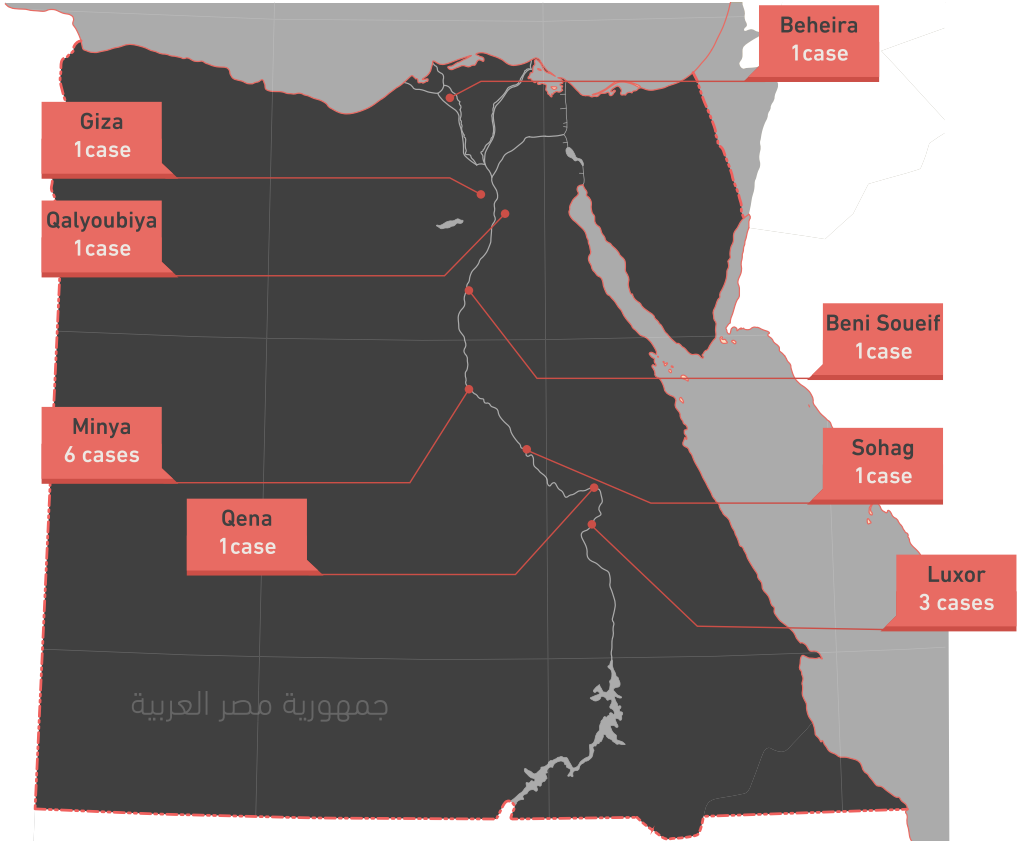
nine churches were closed indefinitely and have not reopened

Among these 15 incidents, nine churches were closed indefinitely and have not reopened. Two churches have reopened after the closure, one in Shubra al-Kheima a week after the incident and a second in the Minya governorate two and a half months later. In Zawiyet Sultan in Minya, residents were compelled to again worship in the old, dilapidated church while the adjacent new building, which had applied for status with the regularization committee, was shut down. In Dimshaw Hashem, the incident arose from objections to a local home being used as a church and the site was closed. Worship services continued to be held without interruption in the remaining two churches.

In a statement to EIPR, Archpriest Mikhail Antoun, the representative of the Orthodox Church on the regularization committee, said:

Article 8 of the church construction law cautions against closing churches that have filed their papers. It's strange that places are being shut down—I don't know the reason—even though they filed their papers and submitted them within the year allowed, from September 28, 2016 to September 28, 2017. I have not been officially informed that the committee will refuse to legalize a church if hardliners reject the presence of that church. If I'm talking about the law, there's nothing in it that says a place won't be legalized because there are hardliners there or it's a hot spot.

The 15 incidents documented by the EIPR took place in 8 governorates. As usual, Minya led the list with six incidents, followed by Luxor with three cases, and one case each in Qena, Sohag, Beni Soueif, Giza, Qalyoubiya, and Beheira.



In several cases, the attacks took place after local committees visited the church to survey in it in advance of submitting their report to the district church regularization committee. Other incidents occurred after lists of churches filed by various dioceses were leaked. For example, hundreds of Muslims in al-Toud, located in the Abu Tisht district in northern Qena governorate, assembled to protest the legalization of the Church of the Virgin in the village and demand its closure. At the time, a committee composed of several local and housing officials was on its way to town to conduct a survey of the church, which had filed the necessary papers to the regularization committee, but they were unable to conduct the survey and the church was shut down.

Based on an analysis of the incidents documented by the EIPR last year, most followed one of two patterns.

In the first, state agencies shutter the church despite the lack of any objections from local residents, officials' awareness that the church exists, and the fact that Christians use it for worship. In several cases, for example in al-Qusheiri in the Minya district, security forces closed a church to preempt a potential attack from hardliners who might object to its presence, saying that a complaint had been filed that Copts were preparing cement to pave the floor of the church.

Arbitrary, preemptive decisions to shutter churches were not made only by security forces. Some local officials also acted to close churches on the grounds that they had no construction permit or violated zoning regulations. Such decisions were often coupled with steps by government directorates to cut basic services to the buildings, such as electricity and water. For example, the local unit in al-Hager in the Sohag governorate shuttered the Church of Mar Girgis and Abu Seifayn saying that the building was in zoning violation and had been given a demolition order. A few days earlier, the local unit had cut off electricity and water to the church. This pattern was repeated in Shubra al-Kheima in the Qalyoubiya governorate. Water and electricity to the Church of Pope Kirolos and Archdeacon Habib Girgis in the Bigam area were cut on the grounds that the church was unlicensed and had been built without a permit. The security establishment subsequently closed down the building.

In the second pattern, churches are shut down as a result of protests by some local Muslims who oppose the legalization of a certain church or services building; the security apparatus or local government then yields to these pressures and closes the church. Such protests typically involve hundreds of people roaming the village streets chanting slogans against the presence of the church and protesting its legalization. In most cases, the protestors force their way into the church in question, wreck its contents, and set the building on fire. In several cases, as documented in detail in testimonies or prosecution reports, Copts' homes are stormed as well and their contents looted and appliances vandalized, often leaving behind several injured victims. In Kafr al-Waslin in the Atfih district and Ezbat Zakariya in Minya for example, hundreds of local Muslims took to the streets regularly after the Friday prayer, coming out of mosques near the church in the complete absence of security. The crowd chanted religious and anti-Copt slogans and demanded the demolition of the church. Protestors then stormed the building in question, looted it, and set it on fire. Demonstrators have also prevented local committees from surveying churches that applied for status with the legalization committee.

Testimonies indicate that tensions are often running high in these villages in the days leading up to the attacks, with clear signs of looming violence like the appearance of social media accounts inciting violence and the distribution of flyers in town against the church, as happened in Kafr al-Waslin and Dimshaw Hashem. Despite such signs, state agencies did not take preemptive measures to deter attacks and protect citizens, their property, and their right to worship. Moreover, in some incidents, eyewitnesses said that security forces arrived hours after the attacks began, after the mobs had already broken into and looted homes.

Security forces did not arrest suspects in several of these incidents despite attacks on churches and private property and although they were present on the scene. In other cases, people on both sides of the conflict were arrested, although the Christians were the victims.

Many of these attacks ended in customary reconciliation with the support of state institutions and local officials after the arrest of several victims. The deals reached in reconciliation sessions often entail the victims forfeiting their legal claims and the closure of the church. For example, in the reconciliation session held in al-Toud, Qena governorate in the home of a prominent resident, representatives of the town's Muslims rebuked Christians for applying for status with the church regularization committee, saying this was the cause of the strife. The session concluded with the rejection and closure of a church in the village. During the session, Copts were not permitted to speak about their right to worship, and there was no discussion of the attacks on some of their homes or the construction of a wall blocking the street in the Coptic-majority neighborhood. This pattern was seen as well in al-Qusheiri in Minya, Kawamir in Luxor, and Beni Menin in Beni Soueif.

In some incidents in which Copts and their property came under assault, security forces arrested several people on both sides, particularly after church leaders discussed the details of these incidents in the media. Eyewitnesses said that typically people were arbitrarily arrested from their homes after the attacks were over and subsequently referred to the Public Prosecution. In other incidents, despite clear incitement and attacks, no person involved was arrested. In al-Toud, in the Abu Tisht district of northern Qena governorate for example, protestors attacked the church, breaking windows and the electrical meter. After some local residents urged them to leave and not storm the church, they pelted nearby Coptic homes with stones. They then proceeded to build a brick wall about 1.5 meters high at the entrance to the street leading to the church, all the while chanting slogans such as, “Up and down and all around, we’ll bring the church tumbling down.” When the housing committee arrived to survey the church for the regularization process, it found the situation heated and left without conducting the survey. As soon as the committee left, the protestors dispersed; security forces reached the village around the same time and made no arrests.

The EIPR found that in seven cases referred to the Public Prosecution, prosecutors questioned suspects and remanded them to custody. In five of these, the suspects were later released, sometimes with bail and sometimes without. The Public Prosecution filed the same charges against persons arrested on both sides, most commonly:

- Assembly, thuggery, violence, and vandalism;
- Engaging in acts likely to cause discrimination against individuals and a class of people because of their religion and belief, which resulted in the disturbance of the public peace;
- Exploiting religion with intent to agitate and being boisterous to incite sectarian strife, which resulted in harm to national unity;
- Blocking public roads, rioting, disturbing domestic security and peace, and inciting fear and panic among Muslims and Christians (although Christians were the victims of these attacks and did not participate in the events).

Other charges were added against Christian suspects in particular, most importantly:

- Committing the crime of constructing a building (a home or a church) without a permit and engaging in construction and renovation works without a permit from the competent administrative body.

The two cases referred to court were the incidents in Waslin, Atfih district and in Beni Manin, Beni Soueif. The following judgments were issued:

1. On January 31, 2018, the Atfih Misdemeanor Court sentenced 19 Muslim defendants to one year in prison, suspended for three years, and fined each defendant LE500 in addition to court costs after they were convicted of vandalism and entering a property by force and acquitted of assembly and thuggery. Eid Atiya was fined LE360,000, twice the value of the facilities he had built without a permit; he was acquitted of building a kindergarten without a permit.

In a statement to the EIPR, Said Munir, a member of the defense team for Eid Atiya and an attorney for the Atfih Bishopric, said that the court took an intransigent position toward the defense and refused to add the Atfih Bishopric as a party to the case, despite submissions of evidence that the church had filed an application with the regularization committee and a stamped copy of the building’s sale contract. Instead, the court treated the case as a building code violation and

fined the defendant twice the building's value. (The Atfih city council had valued the building at LE180,000.)

2. Regarding the attacks in Beni Manin, the Fashn Prosecution, pursuant to an order from the public solicitor for the Beni Soueif Prosecutions, split the case into two parts. The first was the trial of 45 defendants, among them 26 Muslims (8 present and 18 in absentia) and 19 Christians (10 present and 9 in absentia), on charges of thuggery, assembly, and possession of bladed weapons. The case was entered as no. 142/2018/State Security. On May 14, 2018, the Fashn Misdemeanor Court, State Security emergency division, sentenced all defendants to one year in prison, suspended. The defendants submitted a customary reconciliation report to the court that was concluded two days before the court hearing.

The second part of the case involved the prosecution of the same 45 defendants on the charge of engaging in acts likely to discriminate against individuals and a class of people because of their religion and belief resulting in the disturbance of the public peace. The Fashn Misdemeanor Court acquitted all defendants on May 22, 2018.

II. Cabinet decrees legalizing churches

The Cabinet issued three decrees in the period under review based on the opinion of the church regularization committee. They were:

1. Cabinet Decree 17/2018 issued on May 1, 2018 regarding churches whose status was regularized by the main committee on February 26, 2018.³

Article 1 of the decree states, “The legal status of 35 churches and 18 buildings, for a total of 53 churches and buildings, shall be regularized, with due regard for the completion of the civil protection requirements for the churches and buildings in question.”

Article 2 reads, “The competent bodies must take the necessary measures to satisfy and claim the state’s rights in regard to two churches and one services building, since they do not meet the fifth condition for compliance with laws regulating state public and private property and urban communities enumerated in Article 3 of Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017.”

2. Cabinet Decree 18/2018 issued on May 1, 2018, which states⁴:

- The legal status of 103 churches and 64 buildings for a total of 167 churches and buildings shall be regularized, legal representatives of the accredited ecclesiastic communities having submitted applications for the regularization of their status.
- The bodies overseeing zoning affairs shall take measures to license the completion of the civil protection requirements for the churches and buildings within four months of the date of the issuance of these permits.
- Approval shall be granted for worship in two churches and two service buildings after fulfilling the necessary measures for demolition and reconstruction or renovation pursuant to the laws organizing these matters. The competent governors shall facilitate this.

3. Cabinet Decree 41/2018 issued on October 18, 2018 regarding the regularization of 120 sites, 76 churches and 44 buildings, which states⁵:

- The legal status of 76 churches and 44 buildings for a total of 120 churches and buildings shall be regularized, legal representatives of the accredited ecclesiastic communities having submitted applications for the regularization of their status, provided the civil protection requirements for the churches and buildings in question are completed within four months of the date of this decree.
- The competent bodies must take the necessary measures to satisfy and claim the state’s rights in regard to 11 churches and one services building named in this decree.

3- Official Gazette no. 17 (bis) (b), May 1, 2018.

4- Official Gazette no. 17 (bis) (c), May 1, 2018.

5- Official Gazette no. 42, supplement (a), Oct. 18, 2018.

- The competent confessional community shall undertake measures to procure all permits and licenses and execute all required renovation works for two churches and two religious buildings. Immediately upon completion of these works, the competent confessional community shall obtain a statement attesting to the structural integrity of each church or building from the bodies overseeing zoning affairs. The competent confessional community shall submit this statement to the committee formed pursuant to Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017, in advance of submission to the Cabinet, which will take measures it deems fit.
- The competent confessional community shall undertake measures to procure all permits and licenses and execute all required demolition work for 15 buildings and churches. The bodies overseeing zoning affairs shall issue decrees designating the same location with the same area for each church or building issued a demolition permit. The competent confessional community shall obtain all reconstruction permits and licenses from these bodies.
- The bodies overseeing zoning affairs shall take measures for re-licensing upon completion of the civil protection requirements for the churches and buildings enumerated in Schedule 5, which are covered by Cabinet Decree 17 (51 churches and buildings) and Cabinet Decree 18/2018 (163 churches and buildings), and this within four additional months of the date of the enforcement of this decree.
- In each governorate, a committee shall be formed by the governor's decree, presided over by the governor and including one representative each from the governorate, civil protection, and accredited ecclesiastical confessions, and representatives from the competent bodies. This committee shall monitor the execution of all decrees issued by the Cabinet regarding the regularization of churches and buildings whose legal representatives filed applications for regular status.
- The committee shall submit a monthly report to the committee formed pursuant to Prime Ministerial Decree 199/2017, including therein observations, recommendations, and proposals, supported by all necessary documentation, in advance of submission to the Cabinet, which will take measures it deems fit.

A reading of these three decrees raises several pertinent observations:

1. The Cabinet issued conditional decrees regularizing the status of 340 churches and buildings, out of a total of 3,730 applications filed by three Christian confessions to the regularization committee. Continuing at this pace, it will take the committee 12 years to review all applications. Moreover, according to the Cabinet decrees, these approvals are not final and are conditional on the completion of other measures, including civil protection.
2. The decrees cover 214 churches and 126 buildings. It should be noted that one site may include a church and several associated religious buildings, but the Cabinet decrees treat each building as a discrete unit, rather than addressing the site as a whole. By this count, there are 218 churches and associated buildings affiliated with the Orthodox Church and 22 churches and associated buildings affiliated with the Evangelical Church.
3. The decrees contain an item specific to several churches that do not meet the fifth condition in the church construction law regarding compliance with laws regulating state public and private property and urban communities. The regularization committee approached such cases in two ways. For some churches, it approved legal status while requiring the competent bodies to take measures to satisfy the state's rights; in other cases, it withheld status while notifying churches that they must take measures to satisfy the state's claim.

4. The decrees name several churches and religious buildings that require simple renovations or demolition and reconstruction. They state that the competent confessional community should undertake all measures to obtain the necessary licenses and permits. After completing the renovation or reconstruction works in the same area as the previously existing structures, the confessional community should obtain a statement on the structural integrity of each structure from the competent zoning body. Then the confession must submit the statement to the church renovation committee once more before referral to the Cabinet, which will take measures it deems fit. This series of bureaucratic measures could hinder the completion of renovation and reconstruction works or stoke sectarian tensions.

5. The third decree includes a list of 214 churches and buildings named in the first two decrees that had not yet fulfilled the civil protection requirements. This is out of a total of 220 churches and buildings that were regularized in the first two decrees. In other words, only six churches and buildings had completed all measures required for legal status in the 13 months of the committee's work, an extremely small number.

6. The wording of the third decree differs from that of the first two, which had provided for regularization "with due regard for the completion of the civil protection requirements..." In the last decree, the fulfillment of these requirements has become a condition for regularization.

7. The sites that received legal status are located in 20 governorates: 58 in Giza, 47 in Qalyoubiya, 32 in Assiut, and 27 in Sohag. In Minya, which has a substantial Christian presence and regularly leads lists of sectarian violence and tensions associated with Christian worship, the first two decrees regularized no sites. The third decree granted status of 23 churches and buildings in the governorate, located in nine different sites and just six villages.

8. Churches did not receive official documents from state institutions notifying them that their legalization applications had been approved, including a copy of the relevant Cabinet decree. Several officials for churches whose names were published in the Official Gazette told the EIPR that they had receive phone calls from religious leaders telling them that their churches had been regularized.

For example, Archpriest Bakhom al-Malak, the priest at the Church of the Virgin and Father Ibram in Zaqaziq, Sharqiya governorate, and Father Arsanius al-Malwan, the priest of the Church of the Virgin Mary in al-Salamiya, located in the Naga Hamadi district, northern Qena governorate, told the EIPR on October 15, 2018, "We haven't received any official paper yet. I mean, we know that the church has been approved and was put on the list, but we got no documents."

In a press statement, the Cabinet stressed that churches and their associated buildings must meet the civil protection requirements and those built on state lands must satisfy the state's rights. Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouli said he had decided to personally contact the heads of the Christian confessions to urge them to undertake the necessary civil protection measures in order to protect lives and property and to speak to the Interior Ministry's civil protection division to urge them to facilitate the implementation of these procedures.

The prime minister ordered the formation of a technical committee in each governorate to follow up on the implementation of church regularization decrees. The committees are to include representatives of the Christian confessions, civil protection, and other relevant bodies. These committees will monitor churches' fulfillment of the civil protection requirements and their satisfaction of state claims, sending monthly reports to the main regularization committee and its technical secretariat.

Father Mikhail Antoun, a representative of the Orthodox Church on the regularization committee, told EIPR⁶:

I hope the state and officials will facilitate action to meet civil protection requirements and also that these requirements are possible to meet. If I'm a church and there's a hospital next to me or a school, the procedures are the same. The same procedures for all are similar according to the site—meaning, I ask for water hoses from a certain place, and that is the normal procedure followed, and we will do it insofar as is possible. I hope that the difficult things will be resolved and there won't be any especially onerous demands made of us. We have many places in many governorates. I've noticed that every governorate seems to be moving at the same pace.

Asked about when the ministerial committee will finish reviewing the applications submitted by all churches and buildings, Father Antoun said:

The law did not specify a timeframe for the work of the ministerial committee to regularize the status of churches or buildings, and that's because the law has no implementing regulations. But there may be some regulation that the ministerial committee should urge the committees to complete their work so the file can be closed. Actually, I don't know when the regularization of all churches or buildings will be completed...The law gives the prerogatives to governors, not the president. Each governorate has its own vision, and it deals with the survey committees from the Ministry of Housing and the governorate committee on the basis of this vision. The governor asks municipalities to form a committee to go with the Ministry of Housing committee. On January 4, I spoke with the technical committee and told them we want to enforce Article 8 of the law regarding the non-closure of sites, and they did send clarifications to governors in 14 governorates that no site should be closed and no worship services suspended.

Speaking of how the committee chose churches for regular status, Father Antoun said, "Of course, the priority is places where there is some tension, so that their documents can be rapidly finalized so things can settle down."

Some Christian clerics objected to the conditions imposed on churches by the civil protection committees, such as the installation of alarm systems, automatic sprinkler systems, and iron gates. The critics argued that such systems are not found at all in rural areas, even in state facilities close to schools and health units. The clerics said that such systems are extremely costly and beyond the means of churches, some of which are no larger than 200 square meters and are found amid Christian homes in small villages.

Archpriest Bishoy Discorus, the pastor at the Mar Girgis Church in Nazlet al-Hager, located in the Goheina district, Sohag, told the EIPR in a telephone interview on October 16:

The civil protection procedures are really demanding for us and we can't do them. This is a one-story church measuring 17 by 17 meters, located in a small town. I mean, they're asking us to install an automatic sprinkler system, place fire extinguishers every 5 meters, and get an electronic gate, water hoses, and a hydrant. The hydrant alone costs LE50,000. These things are very expensive for the church. Where will we get the money for it all? We all know each other in the village and know who's coming in to pray—what do we need

6- Telephone interview, Oct. 3, 2018.

a metal gate for? We have some boy scouts at the church door...Demands for these kinds of civil protection measures are just intransigence. We have fire extinguishers and that's enough. These major requirements might work for new churches built in big cities that are very crowded, but in small towns covering no more than a few meters, there's no other reason for them but intransigence because you've already brought out a committee that surveyed everything. The building's old but good and there are no problems. They saw the schematics, the proof of land ownership, and the building. There's no problem and we're not missing anything.

Findings and recommendations

The foregoing review indicates that generally the right of worship and the right to build houses of worship are becoming more precarious. The stated purpose of the church construction law—to regularize the legal status of churches and facilitate the construction of new churches—has been wholly undermined. Existing churches have been shuttered, whether as a result of social pressure against recognized churches or at the initiative of security officials and local governments.

The EIPR calls for the issuance of a single Cabinet decree that would legalize the status of all churches that filed applications with the regularization committee, regardless of whether they meet the conditions set forth in the church construction law and without any further surveys or input from the security apparatus or local governing bodies. The EIPR believes that such a decree would most faithfully enact the provisions of the church construction law, however flawed, as well as treat the causes of sectarian violence, which is largely rooted in bureaucratic obstruction and clear recalcitrance on the part of the security apparatus.

The EIPR also reiterates its demand for a wholesale revision of the church construction law, which is premised on discriminatory and sectarian logic. The legislation should be replaced with a new uniform statute regulating the construction of houses of worship on a non-discriminatory basis to uphold the constitutional right of freedom of worship for all citizens.

Documentation of sectarian attacks and tensions associated with the legalization of churches

1. Closure of the Church of the Virgin in al-Sheikh Ala in Minya, reopened several months later

October 15, 2017

Security forces closed down a building owned by the Minya and Abu Qurqas Bishopric. Used regularly for worship services, the building was known as the Church of the Virgin. It was closed following a mass attended by hundreds of village Christians. The bishopric issued a statement saying that the building had come under attack by “hardliners” in 2015, after which the security apparatus shut down the facility. On October 15, 2017, village Copts reopened it for worship after security refused to respond to many requests for a license. Security forces again shut down the building that same evening and denied local Copts access to it. The priest staged a sit-in inside the building, and the guard posted on the building was permitted to take food to him.

One eyewitness from the village said:

In 2014, the Minya bishopric bought a house owned by a Christian citizen, to avoid tensions that might arise if it bought a plot of land, and said it would build a church there. The bishopric tried using it for prayer service in 2015, but several local Muslims stormed the place. The security forces came and instead of arresting the assailants, they closed down the building and demanded a license from the competent bodies. We applied several times for a license with no result, so locals, with the priest, held mass again there, but the church was shut down again.

The two-story church covers an area of 170 square meters. The first floor is set aside for an events’ hall and administrative offices and the second is used for worship services.

The church was reopened on Christmas Eve (January 6, 2018) and a mass was held. Religious services have since been held regularly in the church with no objection from local Muslims.

2. Closure of Church of Mar Girgis and Abu Seifayn in al-Hager, Sohag

October 21, 2017

A joint force of security personnel and municipal officials closed down the Church of Mar Girgis and Abu Seifayn in al-Hager, located in the Saqlata district, Sohag, saying that the building was in violation of the zoning code and had been ordered demolished. A few days earlier, the local unit had cut off electricity and water to the church.

According to statements from some local residents, they built the church in 2006 to serve their community (the nearest church, the Church of the Virgin in al-Galawba, is 3 km away). Worship services began regularly in 2013. At that point, the local unit issued a demolition order for the building. Representatives of local Copts appealed the order and won their suit. Worship services have been held regularly since that time, and a security detail was posted on the site for protection.

The building sits on an area of 350 square meters and consists of four stories: the first is the rectory; the second is the church, which goes by the name of the Church of the Virgin and the Two Martyrs Mar Girgis and Abi Seifayn; the third floor is used as a kindergarten; and the fourth is a social services annex.

According to the village priest, a committee from the local unit came to survey the building and he accompanied them on the tour, after which they left. The next day, a Sunday, the water and electricity was cut by the head of the local unit for al-Galawba, and security forces prevented worshippers and visitors from entering, citing security concerns due to several complaints about the church from “hardliners.”

Sohag Governor Ayman Abd al-Meneim met with the delegation from the Akhmim and Saqlata Diocese and decided to close the building while monitoring the situation.⁷

3. Church of Father Musa in al-Qusheiri, Minya

October 22, 2017

Dozens of residents of Ezbat al-Qusheiri, part of Nazlet Esmant and located in the Abu Qurqas district of Minya, attempted to storm a building known as the Church of Father Musa the Black and owned by the Minya and Abu Qurqas Bishopric because they objected to worship services held there. The crowd set fire to the building’s iron gate and broke the surveillance camera set on top of it. The security forces set up a cordon in the village in the wake of the events.

The Minya Bishopric purchased the building in July 2015. The first floor, used as a kindergarten, opened in September 2017. Part of the first floor also functioned as an events hall while the second floor was set aside for worship.

Eyewitnesses told EIPR that the Minya diocese organized a mass a week before the attack, with the knowledge of the security establishment. The village sheikh and watchman were also present to secure the mass, and there was no crisis. But following the dusk prayer, several young people assembled in front of the Qusheiri mosque, which is next to the church. They organized a march in the village streets, chanting, “Up and down and all around, we’ll bring the church tumbling down.” During the march, the protestors assaulted Atef Shafiq, Boqtor Nadi Yassi, and Ibrahim Ishaq Yanni, inflicting light injuries. They also threw stones at some Copts’ homes and vandalized the car of Fawzi Labib.

Pursuant to police investigations, Ahmed al-Touni, the public solicitor for the South Minya Prosecutions, issued an order sequestering the building pending adjudication before the competent administrative body.

The source added that security informed representatives of local Copts that the building had been shut down on security grounds and in fear of Christians’ safety in the village, following objections from other local residents to the opening of the church.

A customary reconciliation session was convened on October 27, during which it was agreed that the church would be closed and both sides would forfeit all legal claims.

Father Macarius, the bishop of Minya and Abu Qurqas, issued a statement on October 28 criticizing the closure of the church, the failure to arrest assailants, and the convening of a customary reconciliation session. The governor of Minya responded in a statement saying that 11 assailants had been identified by the security establishment and that an arrest warrant was being procured from the prosecution.

7- Based on a statement from a priest with the diocese, Oct. 25, 2017.

4. Closure of the Abu Seifayn Church in al-Karm, Minya

October 22, 2017

According to the Minya and Abu Qurqas diocese, Minya security forces shuttered the Abu Seifayn Church in al-Karm in fear of an attack by “persons who reject the presence of the church.”

According to a local resident, religious services have been held regularly in the building, which was purchased by the Minya diocese from a Copt and designated to serve the village’s Coptic population. A two-story structure, the first story is set aside for religious services while the second is used for Sunday schools. A guard was posted by one of the village watchmen. A security force shuttered the building saying that a complaint had been filed after Copts began preparing cement to pave the church floor.

5. Assault on a church in Ezbat Zakariya, Minya

October 27, 2017

After the Friday prayer, dozens of residents of Ezbat Zakariya, located in the Minya district, attempted to storm the Mar Girgis Church but were deterred by security personnel guarding the building. The crowd then organized a march through the village streets, threw stones at the homes of Copts, and lightly injured a Christian woman.

Security reinforcements were brought in. They arrested 15 people involved in the attacks and several prominent townspeople helped to calm the situation.

At dawn the next day, three sheds used as livestock pens on agricultural land owned by Copts were torched.

The building in question holds a kindergarten and the Mar Girgis Church. Village Copts, who number more than 1,500, used to regularly attend church services in an old building. The building was then renovated to hold the kindergarten and church, and a security detail was posted to guard the church and protect prayer services.⁸

6. Closure and reopening of the Pope Kirolos Church in Shubra al-Kheima

November 9, 2017

Shubra al-Kheima neighborhood officials cut off basic water and electricity services to the Church of Pope Kirolos and Archdeacon Habib Girgis in the Bigam area, on the grounds that the church was unlicensed; the security apparatus subsequently shut down the church.

According to Father Salwanus Rasmi, the church’s priest, civil servants cut off services to the church, where religious services had been regularly held, after a survey by the church regularization committee on Monday, November 6, 2017. The church had applied for legal status with the committee under the church construction law and the survey was documented.⁹

8- Based on statements from several local residents, Oct. 28, 2017.

9- Based on several statements obtained by EIPR on Nov. 9–10, 2017.

He added that threats of an attack had prevented the mass on Friday, November 10, 2017:

On Thursday, we found them trying to cut the electricity in the church without showing anything that proved they were subordinate to the electric company. At one point, they cut electricity in the whole neighborhood so they could cut the cables to the church. This is even though several electric meters are legally installed and all bills have been paid.

Father Salwanus added:

The locals were saying that a demolition order had been issued for the building, which made Copts angry and spurred them to stage a sit-in in the building. They refused to leave, despite a call from Father Morqos. With much effort, we persuaded them to leave. Today, it's been confirmed that the investigating bodies issued this order. A temporary stay was granted. The odd thing is, not one building in the area had a permit before construction—it's classified as an informal area.

Dozens of Coptic youth, after calling for assistance from church officials, decided on Thursday night to stay in the church in fear of an assault or closure by security forces, particularly after mass was cancelled on Friday pursuant to orders from Cairo governorate security officials.

Father Morqos, the bishop of Shubra al-Kheima and environs, urged Copts not to assemble in front of the church after threats to attack them and asked priests to send away the people assembled inside the building. In his statement, he said he had “contacted security forces to step up the security guard on the church. Equanimity and calmness in such matters is needed.” He added that he had asked officials to legalize the church's status two months earlier.

The church was built three years ago and applied for official licenses. Worship services are held regularly with the oral approval of the security establishment. The church serves several thousand people who have no other Christian houses of worship to attend, according to church leaders in Shubra al-Kheima.

Church officials denied that the church was closed because of objections to prayer services by Muslim neighbors. In fact, many of the neighbors visited the church on Friday, November 10, 2017, in the company of Mahmoud Atiya, the MP for the area.

The church was reopened according to Father Armiya Adli, a priest with the Shubra al-Kheima Bishopric. He told the EIPR, “It was agreed with security services to use the church for prayers once more, and it was opened a week after the crisis began. Now we're praying in it normally and holding masses there. We've faced no other attack from local residents, and security is aware that we've started using it for prayers again.”¹⁰

7. Attack on the Amir Tadros Church in Kafr al-Waslin, Atfih district

Friday, December 22, 2017

The Amir Tadros Church in the Kafr al-Waslin, located in the Atfih district of Giza, was attacked and destroyed by hundreds of village Muslims after the Friday prayer. Most of them had prayed at the Sheikh Abd al-Hamid Mosque, located just a few meters from the church, while others came from

10- Statement given on Dec. 12, 2017.

other mosques around the village. Amid the total absence of security, the crowd chanted religious and anti-Copt slogans demanding the demolition of the church. Video footage of the incident posted online shows dozens of people in front of the church chanting, “Up and down and all around we’ll bring the church tumbling down.” Other images posted show the magnitude of the damage to the church.

The two-story Amir Tadros Church is situated on a 1,200-square meter tract of land, which used to be owned by a Christian, Eid Ibrahim Atiya. The building situated on it had been used as a church since 2001 with the oral approval of the security apparatus and with the knowledge of village Muslims. In 2014, Eid Ibrahim sold the land to Father Zosima, the bishop of Atfih, and the sale was registered. The old structure, a mud-brick construction, was demolished and rebuilt without a bell tower or any exterior religious markings.

Milad Eid, the son of Eid Atiya said in a statement¹¹: “We’ve been praying in the church since 2001. At first, the building was mud brick, with a wood and palm thatch roof. In 2014, it was renovated. We made it two stories, so we could worship there every Sabbath. We offer services to people and sometimes we organize medical caravans and hepatitis C tests and treatment for Muslims and Christians.”

This was confirmed by Hani Samir, the attorney for the Atfih Bishopric, who told EIPR, “The building was sold by Eid Atiya to the Atfih Bishopric in a preliminary contract signed by both parties in 2014. The prosecution affirmed the validity of the signatures and the contract, and the church filed its papers with the committee to regularize churches without a permit under the church construction law.”¹²

Tensions had been running high in the village a few days before the attack and there were indications of impending sectarian violence, according to various sources spoken to by EIPR. An official Facebook page for the village featured several posts urging Muslim residents to demonstrate and attack and demolish the building because it was being converted into a church.¹³

Following these calls, the Atfih Bishopric notified security leaders of their fears of possible attacks on the Amir Tadros Church and local Copts’ homes, particularly in light of escalating mobilization and incitement. Father Morqos, the church priest, filed a report that he had received threats to destroy the church, affirming that the building was owned by the Atfih Bishopric and was under its religious supervision.

Father Zosima, the bishop of Atfih, said:

Security knew about the groups on Facebook calling for an attack on the church before it happened. Security spoke to us saying there was a rumor, or people had filed a report that we had put a bell on the church. We told security, is there even a bell tower for us to put a bell in? And if we installed a bell, who would it bother? But we didn’t do it because the site can’t accommodate a bell, and there’s no truth at all to this rumor. Some people from the district and the city council came and looked around, and they found nothing.¹⁴

11- Given on Dec. 23, 2017.

12- Statement given on Dec. 24, 2017.

13- The EIPR has saved a copy of the posts.

14- Interview with Father Zosima on the Coptic MeSat channel, Dec. 23, 2017.

A few hours before the attack, several police personnel were on guard shifts at the church, but they withdrew a few minutes before the end of the Friday prayer and were nowhere to be seen at the time of the attacks. Several Christians in the church and religious officials attempted several times to contact the chief of the Atfih station and security leaders, but to no avail.

Eid Abd al-Shahid said¹⁵:

On Friday morning at 10 am, some people from State Security and the district, and from the village chief's guard, came to the church and wandered all around, but five minutes before the Friday prayer ended, they all left—this is all on camera—they just left the church. When security left, there were church officials with us who tried several times to call the police chief, to ask for assistance because people were assembling around the church, but no one answered. People gathered around the church, then they stormed it and smashed everything inside

After smashing the surveillance cameras, dozens of people forced their way into the church grounds. They broke down the gate to the two-story church building then stormed the courtyards. They then entered the church, smashing the altar, religious items, and the wooden pews. Some projection screens were also stolen. Although security forces and an ambulance arrived a half hour after the attack began, they were not able to enter the church due to the crowd of local Muslims, who stood chanting and supporting those vandalizing the church inside. Abd al-Wahhab Khalil, the local MP who was in the village when the incident began, urged Copts to carry the injured outside to the ambulance. Copts refused to do so, asking for security forces to intervene, which they did two hours after the attack began.

The Atfih Bishopric issued a statement the evening of the incident: “The Amir Tadros Church, located in the village of Kafr al-Waslin, was attacked by hundreds of people, who assembled in front of the building after Friday prayer, chanting hostile slogans and calling for the demolition of the church. They then stormed the church, destroyed its contents, and assaulted Copts present inside.”

The attacks resulted in the injury of Eid Atiya (the previous owner of the piece of land sold to the church), his son Nadi, and his cousin Samir Saad Ibrahim, all of whom sustained bruises and abrasions.

Milad Eid, Eid Atiya's son, said, “People came and broke in on us. They hit my father and knocked him on his head and beat and pushed my uncle. Then they went into the two floors of the church and smashed everything there. We had heard before this that people would gather and we filed police reports.”

According to some statements, some local Muslims upbraided other Muslims living next to the church, mocking them for not doing anything when the church was built or when it began to be used for Christian worship services. Several neighbors of the church participated in the attack after smashing the surveillance cameras.

Abd al-Wahhab Khalil, the MP with the Future of a Nation party, called for a customary reconciliation session the following day, on Saturday, December 23, in which Copts would withdraw their police reports. Father Zosima refused.

The Saff Prosecution, headed by Judge Mohammed Ali Hamoud, heard the statements of the three

15- Telephone statement given on Dec. 24, 2017.

injured parties. It released Nadi Eid and Samir Saad, but detained Eid Atiya, the former owner of the land sold to the Atfih Bishopric, for four days, on charges of converting his property into a church to host ritual practice without a license. Meanwhile, lawyers with the diocese submitted documents to the chief prosecutor proving the church's ownership of the house and showing it was purchased from its owner in 2014. At that time, an application had been submitted to the Cabinet to annex the house to the church for services, but that application is still pending.

The prosecution detained 15 Muslims for four days pending an investigation into charges of fomenting sectarian strife, forcefully entering a residence with a criminal purpose, fomenting riots, thuggery, and assembly. One minor defendant was also placed in a care facility for one week. The prosecution also ordered the immediate arrest of four more suspects in the Atfih church incident.

Investigations found that 20 suspects, among them a minor, had stormed a property in the Atfih area after the Friday prayer, after its owner had converted the building without a license into a church known as Amir Tadros and used it for worship services. It was also found that the assailants had destroyed pews, icons, and crosses.

The prosecution charged 19 Muslim defendants with assembly, exploiting religion with intent to provoke, shouting to incite sectarian strife causing harm to national unity, premeditated property destruction, entering a property with intent to commit a crime, and the assault of Eid Atiya. The prosecution also brought two charges against Atiya: constructing buildings (a house and a church) without a license—it came to light that the property was facing a demolition order for building code violations—and operating a kindergarten before obtaining the necessary permits.

On January 31, 2018, the Atfih Misdemeanor Court sentenced the 19 Muslim defendants to one year in prison (suspended) and a fine of LE500 plus court fees after finding them guilty of premeditated destruction and entering a property by force. The court acquitted them of assembly and thuggery. In addition, the court fined Eid Atiya LE360,000, twice the equivalent value of the facilities established without a license, and acquitted him of establishing an unlicensed kindergarten.

In a statement to the EIPR, Said Munir, a member of the Eid Atiya's defense and a lawyer for the Atfih Bishopric, said¹⁶:

The court was unyielding with the defendant's defense team, refusing to enter the Atfih Bishopric as a party in the case, even though the church has filed its papers with the church legalization committee and a copy of the stamped contract of sale was submitted. It treated the case like a building code violation and so levied a penalty equivalent to twice the value of the buildings. The Atfih city council assessed the value the building at LE180,000, so the fine came to LE360,000. We'll file a motion to pay the sum in installments to secure the release of Eid Atiya and then we'll appeal the judgment.

8. Closure of the Church of the Virgin in al-Toud, Abu Tisht district

March 21, 2018

Hundreds of Muslims in al-Toud, located in the Abu Tisht district in the northern Qena governorate, assembled to protest the legalization of the town's Church of the Virgin and demand its

¹⁶- Telephone statement given on Jan. 31, 2018.

closure. A committee composed of local officials and housing department employees was on its way to survey the church, which had filed an application for status with the church regularization committee, but the committee proved unable to conduct the survey.

Several eyewitnesses said that news of the committee's visit had leaked the day before the incident, after which people began inciting violence against the church from several mosques and in the streets. The demonstrators attacked the exterior of the church, breaking some windows and the electric meter, but some residents persuaded them to leave and not storm the church. The crowd then threw stones at the nearby homes of Copts and proceeded to build a brick wall roughly 1.5 meters high at the entrance of the street leading to the church. While doing so, they chanted slogans such as "Up and down and all around, we'll bring the church tumbling down." When the housing committee arrived at 3 pm and found the village in a state of unrest, it left without conducting the survey. As soon as the committee left, the demonstrators dispersed, which coincided with the arrival of security forces. Security arrested no local residents.

Social media sites were used to incite to the closure of the church. The offending accounts were linked to people from the village, and included postings (copies of which are held by the EIPR) such as:

Praise God who makes all good works possible. Good news for the honorable residents of al-Toud following the survey of the committee from the Abu Tisht council regarding the renovation and construction of a church in town and the testimony of witnesses. One of them was brother Gadallah Shaker Masoud, who was asked if there was previously a church on this site. He answered that the site was a home and remains a home and there is no church.

Another person wrote:

Al-Toud is sick, but it will not die. Salutes and esteem to all the youth of al-Toud. Al-Toud is above all. Apologies to the Copts, but in our lovely town there will be no house of worship but for Muslims.

On March 22, a customary reconciliation session was convened in the home of a prominent local resident. During the meeting, village Muslims criticized Christians for seeking legal status for the church with the church regularization committee, saying that this was the cause of the strife. The meeting ended with a rejection of a church in the town and the closure of the site. During the session, Copts were not permitted to speak about their right to worship. The attacks on homes, the newly built wall, and the cutting of access to the street by the Coptic residential area were also not discussed.

9. Attacks on Copts in Beni Manin, al-Fashn district, and the closure of the church

April 14, 2018

Groups of residents of Beni Manin, located in the Fashn district, southern Beni Soueif governorate, attacked village Copts and a building used for religious services, known as the Church of the Virgin and Pope Kirollos, with bricks, stones, and sticks, against the backdrop of village Muslims' objections to the presence of a church in the town. In the days leading up to the attack, the village was already tense, the security services having summoned several Copts and questioned them about the existence of the church absent the requisite permits from the security bodies.

The crisis of the Church of the Virgin began on Wednesday, April 11, when officials with the Fashn police station contacted several Copts and summoned Mansour Shehata, a local lawyer and Copt, for questioning. He was asked about the existence of a church in the village despite the lack of official permits.

In a statement to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Mansour Shehata said:

I received a phone call from a policeman named Mohammed Rabie, who heads the police outpost in the village, inquiring about the church. The policeman said, "You guys formed an association and are praying there." I told him, "The church has been there a long time and it's well known we pray in it." Then I received a call from the outpost informing me that the police chief wanted to see me. I went to the Fashn police station and after a few hours there, I met with officer Ahmed Hassan in criminal investigations. He told me, "What have you been saying, Uncle Mansour? You went and told the head of the outpost that you'd get a big bell and loudspeakers and would blare out your prayer service? I told him that of course that hadn't happened. We've prayed at that site for a long time. It's a one-story building and there's no dome on it for us to install a cross or bell, so that's not true. The police chief said that what I was saying could create strife and light up the town. Then he asked me to just use the events' hall only for funerals and not to hold prayer services there, so there wouldn't be "an outcry."

The next day, Thursday, officials with the Fashn police station summoned Bebawi Hakim Ghali, the former owner of part of the building. He sold his share of the building to Rushdi Labib, a local Christian, who in turn sold it to Father Estafanus, the bishop of Biba and al-Fashn, ten years ago. The Fashn Prosecution questioned Bebawi Ghali pursuant to a police report filed by the municipal unit of the district and city of Fashn (no. 6969/Fashn district misdemeanors) against Bebawi Ghali and Bebawi Munir Suleiman, both of whom are residents of Manin. The report alleged that they had made interior changes to a house they owned, converting it to a church. The Fashn Prosecution ordered their release from the police station.

At the Fashn police station, the chief of investigations asked Bebawi Ghali to sign a demolition report for the building because it was in violation of building codes, but he refused. He was then asked to sign a report to cease the code violations. He added to the report that the building was owned by his father, he had sold it a decade ago, and it was currently functioning as a church hosting religious services.

The church building was originally composed of several neighboring houses. The homeowners all sold the properties to Rushdi Labib Mansour, who annexed them to his home and then sold the entire parcel to Father Estafanus, the bishop of al-Fashn. The EIPR obtained a copy of the contract between Rushdi Labib Mansour and Father Estafanus, dated May 7, 2010. The contract shows that the first party sold and relinquished to the second party, in his official capacity, an area of 460 square meters in Beni Manin, consisting of a building for worship for the Orthodox Coptic rite that included a communion room, altars, a bathroom, and a services building. The contract was validated by a ruling of the Fashn Summary Court on March 11, 2017. The EIPR also obtained a copy of the list of churches and service buildings for which the Biba and Fashn diocese is seeking licenses; number 52 on the list is the Church of the Virgin and Pope Kirolos in Beni Manin. The file also contains a certificate from the Engineers Syndicate declaring it fit for use, and the certificate notes that the building is the Church of the Virgin and Pope Kirolos, a house of worship.

Initially, prayer services were held irregularly. The mass was held once a month in the building,

typically in the early hours of the day and attended by a small number of Copts, in order to avoid drawing undue attention. With time, the mass began to be held weekly, usually every Saturday morning, open to anyone who wished to attend.

A priest with the Biba and Fashn diocese told EIPR:

We've been holding prayer service in the church since 2010, when Rushdi Labib sold the building to the bishopric. At first, prayers were held at long intervals, once a month, then every 15 days. We held the mass early, before people went to work. With time, we started holding the mass every Saturday. The priest would come and oversee the mass and then leave. On other days, we'd hold meetings. It was known that we held prayer services in the building. The church is made of stone blocks. It's one story, with a wooden roof, and is situated amid Christians' homes. There's an events hall attached for funerals. Inside, there's a prayer room, two altars, and wooden pews. That's where the prayer service is. When local residents learned of the building, they didn't object. They said to go ahead and pray in it, there was no problem, and none of them filed an official complaint.

On Friday, several officials from the Beni Soueif governorate and Fashn district were scheduled to inaugurate the Yatim Mosque in the village. At 6 am, the governorate security director and several executive and local officials visited the church and toured it. The events hall was used as a resting room for the security forces that had come to the village for the occasion. According to local Christians, the security director told them, "Congratulations on the church." Several local Christians also congratulated worshippers on the new mosque after the Friday prayer, offering soft drinks, and the Muslim worshippers congratulated them in turn for the church.

Mansour Shehata received a phone call from a security person, named Atef, asking about the date of the next prayer service in the church, in order to coordinate a guard detail. Atef asked whether mass was held on Sunday. In his statement, Mansour said, "I asked the priests and we decided to hold the mass on Saturday evening, from 6 to 8 pm. At the appointed time, three policemen who had guarded the church the previous day left—Shaaban Mohammed, Gomaa Abd al-Hamid, and Mohammed Gaballah. When a local Copt contacted them, they said they were no longer on duty and it wasn't their business, adding that Copts should just go ahead and finish the mass."

Some sources said that tensions had surfaced in town after a local Copt named Gamal published a call to hold a religious celebration at the church on April 13 on his Facebook page. Some local Muslims took this as a provocation, seeing the building as an association and not an official church. In the wake of this, threats were received indicating an intention to attack the building. Church leaders contacted security services officials, who asked them to cancel the celebration, calm things down, and not post on Facebook. The village Copts ended the meeting just a half hour after it began, based on communications with religious leaders.

At around 7 pm, dozens of local Muslims organized a march in the streets through Christian areas, repeating hostile slogans. They pelted Christians' homes with bricks and stones, and violently rattled doors and windows then they headed for the area of the church. There, too, they threw stones and bricks, after which security forces arrived. Security stood next to the church and formed a cordon, taking control of the situation in the village. The police station filed incident report no. 2003/2018/Fashn administrative.

Speaking to EIPR, Ashraf Samir said:

Our homes are around the church. When we learned of the attack, everyone went home

and locked their doors and went up to the roofs. There were many young men from the village with stones and sticks, and they were throwing bricks at the houses. They banged on the doors and cursed us. The electricity was cut right at the beginning of the attack. Some people threw bricks from the houses' roofs to get them to leave, and then some Muslims like Sheikh Gomaa Abbas intervened and made the young people leave. He defended the home of Mr. Sabri and his wife and chased the youths away. On the other side of the church, there were some Christian youths and when they saw the attack near the church, they threw bricks at the demonstrators to keep them away. The events lasted about three hours then security arrived. By then, everything had calmed down. Some doors were damaged in the attack. At Mansour's house, the gate and windows were broken, and so was the door to Samir Aziz's bakery. A pickup windshield and the front window of Dr. Makram's pharmacy were also smashed.

Attacks were renewed at 8 pm on Monday, April 16. Dozens of young people organized a march chanting anti-Copt slogans then set fire to two livestock pens owned by Samir Aziz and Ezzat Aziz. A livestock pen owned by a local Muslim, Shehata Kamal, was also torched; he had purchased it from a Christian. Two irrigation machines were damaged. Incident report no. 2033/2018/Fashn administrative was filed.

Ali Riyad, the parliamentary representative for the Fashn district said:

The situation is secure and stable. This was done by kids, not even youths. The local authority told them [Copts] that if they have a permit, great. There are conditions for churches and mosques, and if they meet them, they can build a church. No one's above the law. There was a building there they would meet in to pray. Security is fine, there's nothing wrong. It was an incident of the kind that happens anywhere and then is over. Security is in control of the situation now.

At dawn on Sunday, April 15, security forces arrested 22 people, 11 from each side. Eleven Muslims and nine Christians were referred to the Public Prosecution, which questioned the defendants on charges of assembly, thuggery, the use of bladed weapons (stones), and fomenting riots. All defendants denied the charges, and the prosecution ordered them detained for four days, later renewed for 15 days, pending investigation.

Two Christians, Milad Mahrous Adli and Nageh Hakim Ghali, were detained at the Fashn police station lockup and were not referred to the Public Prosecution. After renewed attacks, security forces arrested another five Copts—Milad Rushdi Labib, Awad Ayyad Sadeq, Hani Raouf Adli, Faragallah Shehata Faragallah, and Emad Bebawi—bringing the total number of Christians held in the police station to seven.

Pursuant to an order from the public solicitor of the Beni Soueif Prosecutions, the Fashn Prosecution split the charges. In the first case, 45 defendants were tried, including 26 Muslims (8 present, 18 in absentia) and 19 Christians (10 present, 9 in absentia), on charges of thuggery, assembly, and possession of bladed weapons (case no. 142/2018/State Security). On May 14, 2018, the Fashn Misdemeanor Court, State Security emergency division, sentenced all defendants to one year in prison (suspended). The defendants submitted to the court the report of the customary reconciliation session, which had been convened two days before the trial.

In the second case, the same 45 defendants were tried on charges of engaging in acts likely to cause discrimination against individuals and a class of people, which resulted in the disturbance of the public peace. Three of the defendants—Bebawi Hakim Ghali Mikhail, Magdi Rushdi Labib Man-

sour, and Bebawi Munir Suleiman Estafanus—were prosecuted on additional charges of engaging in construction and renovation works without a permit from the competent administrative body. On May 22, 2018, the Fashn Misdemeanor Court acquitted all defendants.

The same incident also entailed a misdemeanor case for two child defendants: Mohammed Abd al-Wahhab Muawwad Abd al-Wahhab (aka Mahmoud Heiba) and Abd al-Rahman Nagi Abd al-Naim Shamardan. They were charged for participation in the same incident, and their papers were referred to the Beni Soueif Plenary Child Prosecution.

10. Closure of the Father Karras Church in al-Halila, Luxor governorate

April 16, 2018

Security forces shut down the Father Karras Church in al-Halila, located in the Esna district of the Luxor governorate, after dozens of local youths gathered in front of the church chanting slogans against it and a local Christian cleric. Security forces arrived swiftly and immediately terminated the assembly. The security establishment then told the town's Christians to close the church and not to use it for any ritual practice, after which security deployed a guard on the church.

Father Boulos, the church priest, told the EIPR:

The church was established in the 1990s. It was a very primitive structure and prayer services were held there irregularly. It was then expanded and prayers began being held regularly, and officially, in 2015, with the knowledge of local Muslims and the security establishment. The church filed an application backed with documentation to the church regularization committee, and a few days prior to the incident, a local committee with the church regularization committee visited the church for a survey. The church is built on an area of 200 square meters and serves about 120 families: 86 from al-Halila and 32 from the surrounding hamlets. Local officials cut electricity to the church on April 28.

11. 2. Closure of the Mar Girgis Church in Komir, Esna district, Luxor governorate

May 8, 2018

Events leading to the closure began on March 31, 2018, when several hundred Muslims in Komir organized a march through the town's streets protesting measures to legalize the Mar Girgis Church and demanding its closure. The marchers cut off the railroad tracks for the sugar cane train and threw stones and bricks at Copts' homes, chanting religious slogans like "There is no god but God" and anti-Copt slogans such as "The church fell and the priest is dead, we don't want a church." Village Copts, who number about 1,000, stayed inside their homes according to local religious officials. A large security contingent was dispatched and broke up the assembly.

Security forces arrested 15 Muslims and 7 Copts. On March 31, 2018, the chief of the Esna police station filed incident report no. 2041/2018/Esna administrative, stating that rumors had spread in Komir that Copts were turning a guesthouse into a church. The Coptic defendants said in their statements that the building was a church that had hosted religious services since 1985, not a guesthouse, and that the site was owned by the Esna Bishopric.

The incident report stated that local residents had assembled at the entrance to the village and organized a demonstration. They had repeated slogans such as “God is great, no to the church.” Security forces were dispatched and dispersed the assembly.

The Public Prosecution charged all defendants with cutting a public road (the railroad) and delaying the sugar cane train, disturbing domestic security and peace, and terrorizing and frightening Muslims and Christians.

The prosecution detained the defendants for 15 days pending investigation; the custody order was renewed for another 15 days on April 28.

A customary reconciliation session was convened on April 26, attended by prominent families in the town and neighboring villages and the district reconciliation committee. A reconciliation report was signed and submitted to the Public Prosecution stating that the incident involved a dispute between village Christians and Muslims and that they had agreed to resolve it and all parties had relinquished any legal claims. The agreement did not address the status of the church. The church had been shut down by the security services, which posted a guard on the site and denied access to it. Local Copts are now forced to attend prayer services at the Martyrs’ Monastery Church in Esna, located 13 km from the village.

On May 8, 2018, the Esna Misdemeanor Appellate Court ruled to release 15 of the defendants. Ashraf Shakir, the lawyer for the Copts, said in a telephone interview with EIPR that the defense had appealed the 15-day remand order. The appeal was granted and all defendants were released on bail of LE2,000 each. He added that the report of the reconciliation session, convened just a few days earlier, would be submitted to the prosecution and that there were no victims, since all defendants had cut the road and disturbed the public peace.

The village church remains closed since the incident because, according to security officials, Muslims refuse to allow Copts to reopen the building for prayer services.

12. Attack on the Mar Morqos Church in al-Shaqqaf, Housh Eissa district, Beheira

May 26, 2018

Dozens of Muslim residents of al-Shaqqaf, located in the Housh Eissa district of Beheira, attacked a building used as a church that had applied for legal status with the church regularization committee. The assailants organized a march in the village streets, during which they chanted hostile slogans rejecting the presence of the church, and threw bricks and stones at Copts’ homes. As a result of the attacks, eight Copts were lightly injured. Some of the church’s contents were smashed and the main gate torched. The car of Father Aghabius, the church priest, was smashed and a motorcycle was set on fire.

According to statements given to the EIPR, the three-story building was constructed in 2011, with one floor set aside for worship services, known as the Mar Morqos Church. The church has submitted the necessary documents for legal status under the 2016 church construction law. As soon as Muslim residents learned of the existence of the church, some began to build a mosque next door. It is from this mosque, still under construction, that many of those who attacked the church exited.¹⁷

17- According to several telephone interviews with clerics associated with the church.

The attacks began at 3:30 pm as Copts' homes were pelted with stones. The wooden gate to the church was then set on fire, but the church was not stormed. A nearby motorcycle was set on fire and the priest's car windshield was also smashed.¹⁸ As soon as the attacks began, Father Aghabius contacted security officials, but security forces only arrived three hours later, about ten minutes after the attack was over. Security forces asked the priest, who was inside the church at the time, to leave, but he refused. Security arrested 11 people and a reconciliation session was convened. As part of the terms, all police reports filed on both sides were withdrawn and the arrested persons released. It was also agreed that religious services could continue on the site.¹⁹

According to a statement from a Christian cleric in the Housh Eissa district, about two months prior to the attack on the Mar Morqos Church, a church in Shoka al-Hager about 1.5 km away was also attacked. Some hardliners had assembled in front of the Church of the Virgin and the Martyr Abanob but did not force their way in.

13. Tension in Ezbat Sultan, Minya, due to objections to church

July 6, 2018 and subsequent days

Dozens of residents of Ezbat Sultan Pasha, located in the Minya district, assembled in front of the Father Karras Church in town, protesting Copts' use of a building adjacent to the church and chanting anti-Copt and anti-church slogans, such as "We don't want a church." Some prominent residents prevented the crowd from attacking the church. The next day, dozens of women and children organized a march in town also in protest at the church. Security forces prevented them from reaching the church, but made no arrests.

According to various statements given to EIPR,²⁰ about eight years ago, village Copts had begun holding irregular worship services in a country house measuring about 130 square meters. The owner of the house had transferred ownership to the Minya and Abu Qurqas Bishopric, where meetings and masses were held more regularly. The house was then converted into a church and a cleric was appointed. Townspeople and the security apparatus were aware of the church's presence.

A few months ago, the Minya Bishopric moved prayer services to a building adjacent to the church, measuring 200 square meters. The new space consists of three stories: the first holding an events hall, the administrative office, and bathrooms; the second, the prayer hall; and the third, a kindergarten and social services. The building features no dome or bell tower.

The Minya and Abu Qurqas Bishopric applied for legal status for the new building with the church regularization committee, under the name of the Father Karras Church in Ezbat Sultan Pasha. The bishopric included copies of all official documents and the interior schematics of the building with the application.

On July 13, 2018, protests were again organized, this time after the Friday prayer. Dozens of villagers assembled to chant slogans rejecting a church in the village and other religious chants. Following the protest, the security apparatus shuttered the new building, allowing worship services to proceed only in the old building.

18- The EIPR retains photos demonstrating the magnitude of the attacks.

19- Telephone interview with Reda Nasif, a parliamentarian.

20- The EIPR took statements from several local residents and religious officials in the period around the events in question.

The Minya and Abu Qurqas Bishopric issued a statement, condemning the attack on the Father Karras Church and the demonstrations held on July 6, 7, and 13. The bishopric further condemned a statement by one official that the protestors' demand would be considered, saying, "We deplore this acquiescence to those who have no right to object at the expense of the Copts."²¹

In the statement, the church further rejected the notion of "any person, whoever he may be, imposing his will on Christians. We are certain that honorable state officials do not accept this and they have been contacted. They have affirmed their total rejection of what happened and promised to deal decisively with the instigators and take all measures necessary to prevent a recurrence of this odious incident."

On August 25, 2018, some townspeople assembled for a fourth time in front of the church after the Friday prayer. Refraining from attacking the church, they chanted, "We don't want a church." The priest immediately notified the security establishment of the church's inadequate security detail. A security force arrived after the call and dispersed the crowd.

Some crops belonging to Copts were also vandalized, including the corn crop of Shehata Adel Shehata, who filed a police report. A water pump owned by Wael Nashaat was also destroyed.

On August 26, security forces arrested three people who had allegedly removed the church's surveillance cameras and participated in the assembly. They were released the following day.

14. Closure of the Church of the Virgin, al-Zaniqa, Esna district, Luxor

August 22, 2018

Dozens of villagers in al-Zaniqa, subordinate to the municipal unit of Asfun, located in the Esna district of Luxor, assembled to protest Copts praying in the Church of Virgin. Located in the jurisdiction of the Armant and Esna Bishopric, the church filed its papers with the regularization committee as part of the bishopric's roster.

According to statements from local residents, Archpriest Hezqial Abd al-Nour, the church priest, purchased the house on behalf of the Esna Bishopric on February 2, 2003. With an area of 260 square meters, the building has two stories: one used as an events' hall and baptismal and the other, measuring 160 square meters, as the prayer hall and the priest's office. Prayer services were initially irregular before they grew more organized and local residents came to know the church.

On Wednesday morning, during the mass for the Feast of the Virgin, several local residents and youths gathered in front of the church, protesting its existence. Security forces arrived and dispersed the crowd. They also shut down the building, suspended the service, and posted a guard on the building.

This is the fourth incident involving churches in the Esna and Armant diocese. Other churches have been closed in Komir, al-Halila, al-Kiman, al-Mataana, and al-Gharira. The survey committee has reviewed some of the buildings that applied for status and only a few remain, including two churches in al-Zaniqa and al-Kiman.

At dawn on Friday, August 24, security forces arrested ten people, among them five Copts, and detained them at the police station. The forces also thwarted attempts by locals to again demonstrate after the Friday prayer, arresting another 10 people, bringing the total to 20.

21- The statement was published on the bishopric's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/abafees-gmail/photos/a.622430224495794/2088067681265367/?type=3&theater>.

On August 25, the Esna Prosecution ordered all defendants remanded to custody for 15 days pending investigations, including the five Copts. The Christian suspects were accused of holding ritual practice, spreading a false rumor that the site of prayer was church, and fomenting a spirit of strife. The Muslim suspects were accused of assembly, possession of bladed weapons, sticks, and clubs, blocking the road, and inciting a spirit of strife.

On September 22, 2018, the Esna Appellate Misdemeanor Court ruled to release all defendants on bail of LE1,000.

An attorney for the Coptic defendants said that the charge of staging ritual practices without a license is not true: the building is owned by the Esna and Armant Bishopric, and none of the defendants have any connection to it. Moreover, the person who leads the prayer is a priest, not a layperson, and the building has filed its application with the church regularization committee under the church construction law.

15. Attack on Copts in Dimshaw Hashem, Minya

Friday, August 31, 2018

Copts in the village of Dimshaw Hashem, located in the governorate of Minya in Upper Egypt, were the object of sectarian attacks after dozens of local Muslims assembled in front of local Copts' homes after the Friday prayer. The crowd chanted hostile slogans and declared their rejection of a church in town, then forced their way into the homes of Adel Said Rizq, Reda Abd al-Sayyed Rizq, Kamel Fawzi Shehata, and Fawzi Shehata Botros. The assailants stole gold jewelry and money, smashed electrical appliances and household furniture, and set fire to the houses.

According to statements obtained by the EIPR, the attacks began at 1 pm after the Friday prayer and lasted until about 4 pm. Security forces arrived approximately four hours after the attacks began. As a result of the assaults, Adel Sayyed Rizq, 54, sustained a scalp wound and Fadl Atteya Nagib, 45, was wounded on the upper lip. Both were taken to the Minya General Hospital.

According to a statement from Father Macarius, the bishop of the Minya, security forces had been notified that village Copts were being targeted by local residents and therefore had prior knowledge of the defendants' intent to engage in these actions. Nevertheless, security personnel only arrived after the assailants finished the attack.

Father Macarius said in the statement:

Extremists in the neighboring town, Ezbat Sultan, did the same thing several weeks ago, and because of the lack of a deterrent, the contagion spread to this village. Among other chants, the perpetrators chanted that they were doing the same as the men of Sultan village. It is therefore possible that this could spread to other villages if the instigators are not punished and the assailants deterred.

A statement from the Minya Bishopric said that Copts in Dimshaw Hashem had faced sectarian attacks in 2005, which prompted some Christian families to leave town; none of the perpetrators were punished. The statement also referred to incitement against Copts in these towns on social media.²²

22- The EIPR retains samples of the incitement circulated on Facebook.

Although security forces were present in town starting on Friday evening, the police arrested no suspects until the incident began to make the rounds on social media and Father Macarius issued a statement. The police acted the following day, September 1, arresting more than 30 local residents and imposing strict security measures to prevent renewed attacks. The prosecution surveyed the damages to Copts' property.

Father Macarius discussed the atmosphere in the village prior to the attacks in a sermon²³:

An official called us three or four days before Friday to tell us that it would be better if the priest who went there to lead the mass didn't go for a while because of the tension. For the sake of peace and concord, we complied. We told the priest not to go on that Friday and Sunday. Of course, priests go to every village and hamlet in the diocese to visit our children and pray mass in homes, even the villages that don't have a church. This is totally normal. They visit people and attend to their needs even if they don't have a church. But I told the priest not to go that week, just in case.

Father Macarius added:

What is also lamentable is that in Ezbat Sultan and Dimshaw Hashem, the force tasked with maintaining security is hosted in the homes of some of those now wanted for justice. I mean, a person who is wanted for justice invites the security force over for an evening, and they eat and drink at his place. It's like they're legitimizing him, telling him to continue his offences and hurt Copts.

On Sunday, September 2, the Minya Prosecution detained 21 suspects for four days pending investigation on charges of inflaming sectarian strife, disturbing the public peace, and attacking others' property. Their detention was later renewed for 15 days.

Father Macarius told the EIPR,²⁴ "This time the attacks were not about the construction or renovation of a church, but because the hardliners rejected the presence of Christians in the village."

The EIPR obtained several statements saying that some executive officials had pressured Christian residents to accept customary reconciliation and waive their legal rights for the sake of peace and calm in the village.

The Reconciliation and Peace Association in Dimshaw Hashem issued a statement titled "Appeal" saying:

Seeking to preserve the unity of the town and the fabric of the undivided nation, maintain security, ensure continued amity between the people of one nation, and cooperate with security personnel responsible for the nation's security, the committee is pleased to invite officials with the Family House in Minya governorate to cooperate with the committee to repair the rift between local residents and bring them together.

Responding to the appeal, Father Macarius tweeted on September 9, "We wholly reject any customary reconciliation and do not recognize its outcome, and we deplore the pressure exerted on some folks to join it. It squanders rights, and typically an agreement is reached at the expense of Copts. We are with the rule of law and citizenship as advocated by President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi."²⁵

On September 27, 2018, the judge with the Minya Summary Court ordered the release of all defendants.

²³- Sep. 5, 2018.

²⁴- Telephone interview, Sep. 2, 2018.

²⁵- <https://twitter.com/AnbaMacarius/status/1038882608439074816>.