

EGYPTIAN PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE LEGALISES 127 CHURCHES

By Mike Burnard

A presidential committee tasked with rectifying the status of unlicensed Christian places of worship, chaired by Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, approved on Monday [1 July] legalising 127 churches and service buildings that used to be operating without permits. This brings to 1,021 the total number of unlicensed Christian places of worship and service buildings that have been granted legal status so far [since 2016]. In a statement, Cabinet Spokesman Nader Saad said the committee was convened in the presence of the ministers of justice, antiquities and parliamentary affairs along with representatives of the bodies concerned. Meanwhile, the premier issued strict instructions to all governors to take all measures necessary to ensure that the newly legalised churches and service buildings are only used for performing religious rituals. (*Al Ahram News*)

Restrictions and discrimination

After 160 years of tight restrictions on building churches in Egypt, these legalisations are not only ground-breaking in legal terms but also revolutionary within a Middle Eastern Christian framework. To place this in context, statistics provided by *Fuller Studio* are particularly noteworthy:

- There are 44 Muslim-majority countries in the world stretching from North Africa through the Middle East and into Asia with a combined Muslim population over 1.1 billion.
- With approximately 1.6 billion total adherents to Islam in the world, 72% of the world's Muslims live in a country where they are the majority.
- While in Lebanon, Muslims comprise 61% of the total population and 64% in Malaysia, these are the exceptions. The average adherence to Islam in a Muslim-majority country is 90.4%.
- In 38 of the 44 Muslim-majority countries (86%), Christianity is the largest religious minority.

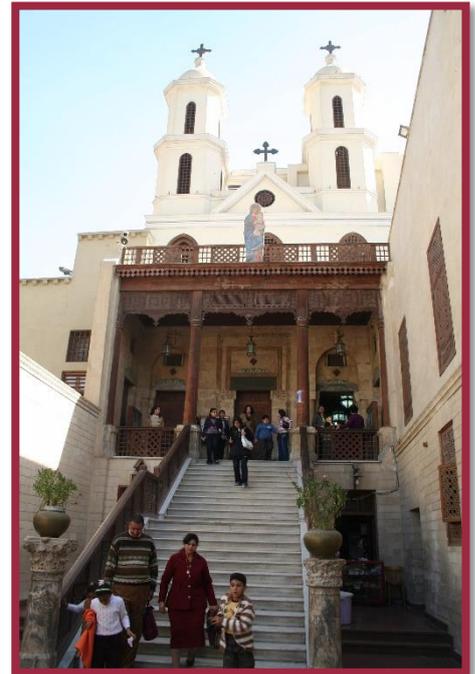
Christians living as a religious minority in Muslim-majority nations, like Egypt, generally face a form of 'silent structural discrimination' that is seldom addressed and rarely reported. 'Structural discrimination' limits Christian fellowship and often results in a 'slow death' through progressive isolation. According to a recent *Pew Research* report, 81% of Muslim-majority countries (or 36 out of 44) currently maintain either significant social hostilities or government restrictions. These restrictions manifest themselves in numerous inhibiting laws, policies and structural practices such as a lack of freedom to build or repair places of worship, interference during religious worship, limitations or prohibitions on public preaching and various laws making evangelism, conversion and the distribution of religious literature illegal.

In the past, Egypt was notorious for their 'structural discrimination', ensuring that church construction projects – unlike mosque construction projects – required a special permit from the president of the country and long, arduous rounds of paperwork, with the process often dragging on for years.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The Arab world comprises the 22 Arabic-speaking countries that are members of the Arab League. These countries are found in the Middle East, North Africa and parts of East Africa, and share Arabic as a common denominator. The contemporary Arab world has a combined population of around 422 million inhabitants, over half of whom are under 25 years of age.

According to Egyptian political sociologist Saadeddin Ibrahim, around 21 to 30 million Christians live in the Arab world, about five to eight percent of the total population. Egypt is home to about 10 to 12 million of these Christians – mostly Coptic believers – who constitute close to 50% of all believers in the Arab world. In this regard, Egypt



becomes the 'gateway' to the Arab world and one of the most strategic nations from a Christian perspective. Strengthening these Egyptian Christian communities is vitally important from a regional development standpoint. Moreover, these Christians offer perhaps the most strategic opportunity for mission activities, evangelism and multi-faith engagement in the other 21 Arabic-speaking nations.

The legalising of churches therefore finally gives Egyptian Christians, both Coptic and Evangelical, the freedom to build places where they can legally gather to worship and contemplate the Word of God. This will not only impact Egypt but the region as a whole.

PRAY

- **For Egyptian Christians to be encouraged and emboldened by the legalisation of the churches**
- **For increased favour for Christians in Egypt so that they have more of a voice and influence in their communities**
- **For Egyptian Christians to be mobilised to reach out to their Arab neighbours**

IMAGE SOURCE:

https://i1.wp.com/www.spiritualtravels.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/IMG_2904.jpg?fit=2304%2C3456&ssl=1