

# ISSUE BRIEF **10.05.18**

## **Ethnic/Religious Communities in Egypt: Grievances and Inclusive Prospects**

Hala Nouhad Nasreddine, Lebanese American University

Egypt is ranked 36th out of 178 states in the 2018 Fragile States Index conducted by The Fund For Peace.<sup>1</sup> The index placed Egypt under the “high warning” category—in which higher scores indicate higher levels of fragility—with a score of 88.7 out of 120. The report suggests that Egypt is most fragile in the areas of human rights and the rule of law (9.9/10) and group grievances (8.9/10) (Figure 1). While Egypt is a state founded on equal citizenship regardless of religious or ethnic identity, long-standing grievances among minority groups such as the Copts, the Shiites, the Nubians, and the Bedouins indicate fundamental problems with regard to the state of pluralism in Egypt.

This brief examines the status of Egypt’s different ethnic and religious communities and intercommunal divisions, with an emphasis on the policy implications of entrenching pluralism. Specifically, questions to be explored include: What grievances have the different minority groups in Egypt experienced? How can Egypt become a more inclusive state for the different ethnic and religious groups? The analysis focuses on the following communities: Copts, Nubians, Shiites, and Bedouins in Sa’id and Sinai.

Pluralism in Egypt is an urgent issue. Violence against minorities is increasingly becoming the principal mechanism for resolving intercommunal conflicts. This is evident in recent attacks against the Copts, the Sufis, and the Shiites; for instance, two Christian churches and one Sufi-affiliated mosque (Rawda mosque in Sinai) were bombed in 2017, which

resulted in the deaths of about 50 and 305 individuals, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Copts and prominent Shiite figures were targeted and assassinated in several different incidents; for instance, four Shiite figures were assassinated in 2013 and two Coptic churches were bombed on Palm Sunday in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Despite Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi’s emphasis on inclusion, progress has been minimal in part because the state refuses to acknowledge discrimination against different religious and ethnic communities. Moreover, these ethnic and religious minorities are marginalized by the state, the media, and other societal actors, worsening the problem.

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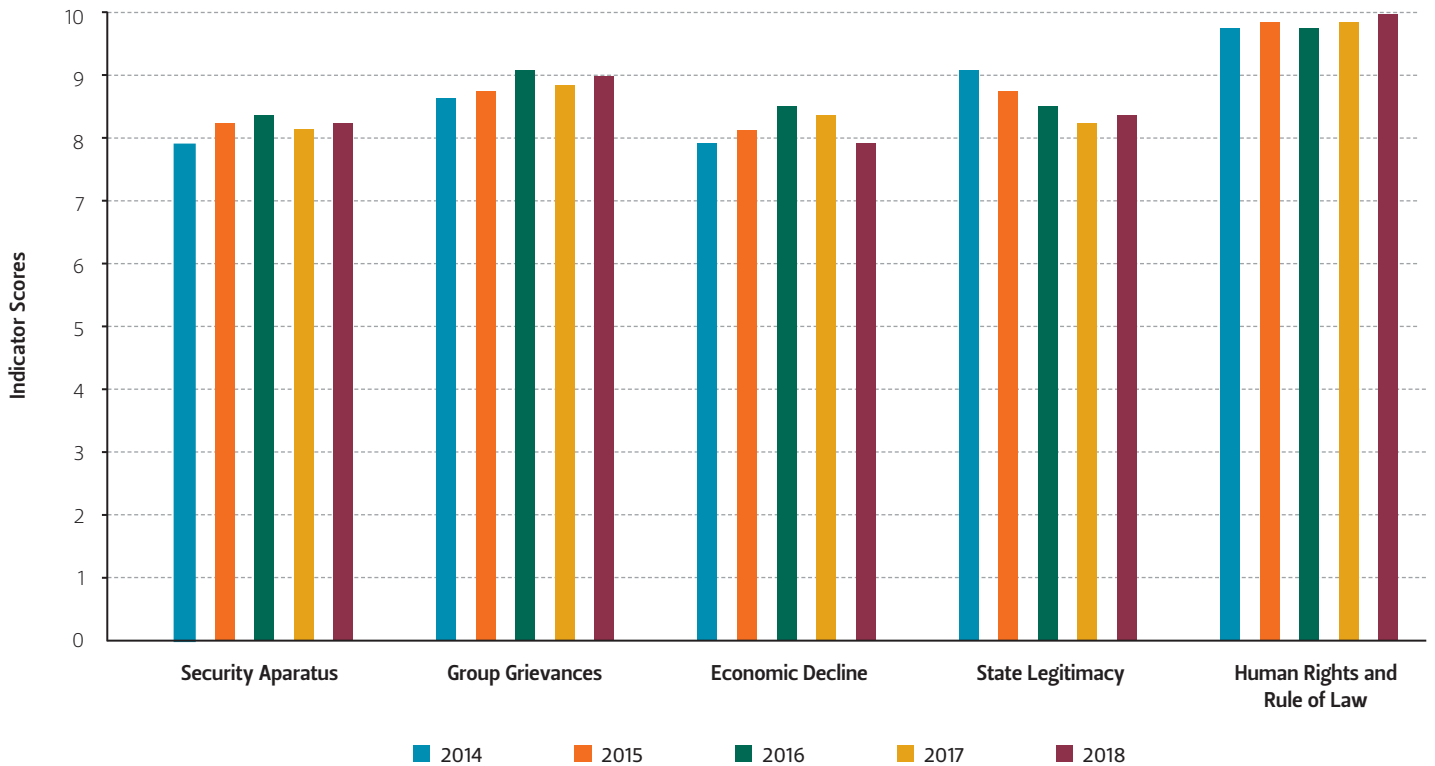
### **I. COPTS**

The Copts are the largest minority group in Egypt and constitute the majority of the Christians in the country. They account for approximately 10% of the country’s overall population.<sup>4</sup> There are three “clusters” of Copts in Egypt: in the Minya-Assiut region (17.6% of the region’s total population), in the Assiut-Sohag region (15.1%), and in the Greater Cairo region (9.4%).<sup>5</sup> The Copts have been allocated 24 seats in parliament based on a religious quota,<sup>6</sup> which was instituted in the 2014 electoral law codified under interim president Adly Mansour. The law stipulates that parliamentary members may be elected through individual campaigns for specific seats and via closed absolute lists whereby voters can only vote for the list



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FIGURE 1 — EGYPT'S RANKING IN THE FRAGILE STATES INDEX, 2014–2018



SOURCE The Fund for Peace

as a whole, and that each party list should include at least three Christians among its 15 candidates.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the 24 allocated seats, 12 individual Coptic candidates were elected to parliament, bringing the total number of Coptic members of parliament to 36 out of 596 total MPs.<sup>8</sup>

Egyptian Copts face various challenges to their inclusion into the country's social, economic, and political realms. One of the main challenges is their relative absence from prominent public roles; few Copts serve as university presidents or governors, or in sensitive military and security positions, for example. Likewise, Copts are largely excluded from Egypt's political life, particularly with regard to cabinet positions; their presence in the cabinet recently dropped from three out of 36 ministry positions to just one out of 32 (MP Nabila Makram), following El-Sisi's cabinet changes in June 2018. Copts had always been nominally represented in the cabinet since Egypt's independence in 1952,

holding between one and three ministry positions under the Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, and Morsi administrations.

Additionally, Copts suffer the effects of discriminatory language in official discourse that categorizes them as second-class citizens. Although the 2014 constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it also declares Islam as the official religion of the state and prohibits conversion to any other religion.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, attacks against Christians in Northern Egypt who sought to build new churches were reported in May 2018.<sup>10</sup>

Copts also are often subject to eruptions of violence.<sup>11</sup> Various radical Islamist groups in Egypt like Wilayat Sinai (an Islamic State affiliate in Sinai) have targeted Coptic churches, religious figures, and church-goers of all ages. For instance, on Palm Sunday in April 2017, Coptic churches St. George's Coptic Cathedral in Tanta and St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in

Alexandria suffered deadly attacks, with about 50 people killed.<sup>12</sup> In April 2013, several Coptic churches were destroyed following a sectarian clash between Muslims and Christian Copts in the town of Khosus in northern Cairo. The Egyptian government promised to reconstruct the damaged sanctuaries; however, these pledges have thus far not been fulfilled.<sup>13</sup> Less importantly, yet still significant, Copts also face discrimination in sports; some Coptic football players “had been excluded from national and international competitions due to their religious identity.”<sup>14</sup>

## II. NUBIANS

Nubia was an ancient African kingdom around the Nile that extended from the Nile River Valley in Upper Egypt eastward to the shores of the Red Sea, south to Khartoum, and west toward the Libyan Desert. Nubia had its own autonomy within Egypt under King Farouk and had minimal relations with Egypt prior to the 1952 revolution.<sup>15</sup> Yet post-1952, the Egyptian regime became overtly involved in Nubia after the Aswan High Dam flooded the Nubians’ residences in the Nubian valley and consequently ruined it. This was detrimental to Nubians; the 7,000-year-old kingdom has nothing left of its historical boundaries but “a thin, sparsely populated strip of land along the Nile that’s now bisected by the Egypt–Sudan border and is crossable only by boat.”<sup>16</sup> While the U.S. Library of Congress estimated that there were around 160,000 Nubians in Egypt in 1990, *National Geographic* in 2014 estimated their population to be around 300,000,<sup>17</sup> divided across three different linguistic groups: “the Kenuzi in northern Nubia; the beduin-descended Arabs in central Nubia; and the Fadija-speaking people in southern Nubia.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Nubians have been subjected to racist comments due to their dark skin, which distinguishes them from Egyptian Arabs.<sup>19</sup>

Although Nubians were resettled twice under British mandate due to the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1902 and its transformation into the Aswan Low Dam between 1913 and 1933, their major

displacement took place between 1963 and 1964, when around 50,000 Nubians were displaced into 33 villages north of the city of Aswan following the flooding caused by construction of the Aswan High Dam and the consequent Lake Nasser. Although the government compensated the Nubians with new homes following their resettlement in the 1960s, Nubians were largely dissatisfied because they were provided uncomfortable, cement-block houses that were very different from their old homes. Moreover, their resettlement “disrupted family ties and ignored historical rivalries among the three Nubian ethnic groups,” since Nubia had its own pluralism; the different tribal groups in Nubia spoke different languages and had competing interests. Further, the resettlement of Nubians did not take into consideration the Nubian identity, as many schools in the new areas taught only Arabic, thereby weakening the younger generations’ ties with their Nubian identity and history.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the government forced certain conditions upon the Nubian farmers, such as requiring them to join agricultural cooperatives and pressuring them to add commercial crops like sugarcane that were not part of their traditional agricultural heritage. All of these issues led the Nubians to start reconstructing their own villages in their ancestral lands around Lake Nasser’s shores. By the 1980s, they succeeded in building about four villages.<sup>21</sup>

Today, Nubians’ main demand is the right to return back to “their ancestral home” around the Nile River Valley in Upper Egypt. Although the post-revolution constitution of 2014 recognized the land as belonging to the Nubians and declared that the area would be developed within 10 years (Article 236),<sup>22</sup> a decree issued by El-Sisi in January 2016 proclaimed this area “off-limits and under military control.”<sup>23</sup>

## III. SHIITES

The estimated Shiite population in Egypt ranges between 800,000 and 2 million, according to a 2016 U.S. Department of State Report.<sup>24</sup> However, there is no official census or data from the Central Agency for

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Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) on the size of this religious community. They cannot practice their religion openly and do not have any official representation in parliament or in the government. The Ministry of Religious Endowments, which runs the affairs of all mosques in Egypt in accordance with Sunni doctrine, does not officially recognize Shia mosques, congregations, or rituals.<sup>25</sup> Shiites in Egypt have been prohibited from commemorating the Day of Ashura—the day that the prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain ibn Ali was assassinated—in the Al-Hussain mosque since 2011, when seven Shiites who were part of a larger group that attempted to commemorate Ashura were arrested, leading to subsequent clashes with Salafists. Two days prior to Ashura day in 2016, the ministry decided to close the mosque to prevent any sectarian clashes on the grounds that “observing the day of Ashura in Cairo has been subject to rising sectarian tensions over the last few years, leading religious authorities to ban any form of congregation at Al-Hussein Mosque on this day.” Moreover, on May 18, 2015, a Shiite religious leader, al-Taher al-Hashemi, was arrested under allegations “of attempting to spread Shia Islam in Egypt.”<sup>26</sup>

Shiites have long been subjected to defamation and hate speech, as some Salafi and Islamist groups do not accept Shiites as Muslims.<sup>27</sup> For example, the prominent Sunni sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi has been known for his anti-Shiite rhetoric; he has explicitly expressed his dissatisfaction that Shiites are not only present in Egypt but also write books and appear on television. Qaradawi's anti-Shiite discourse is significant because he has millions of followers and is highly regarded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and some Salafi groups.<sup>28</sup>

In 2013, four Shiites were assassinated by a mob in Giza, including prominent sheikh Hassan Shehata, a famous former Sunni scholar who converted to Shiism, who was stabbed 21 times.<sup>29</sup> Shehata's murder raised the possibility of a sectarian clash in Egypt between Sunnis and Shiites, since Bahaa Al Anwar, a spokesman for the Shiites in Egypt, blamed the Muslim

Brotherhood and then-Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi for the attack, stating that the assassination occurred within an “organized terrorist context against the Shiites in Egypt.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, private sector employers often discriminate against Shiites.<sup>31</sup> Shiites have also been subjected to arbitrary arrests, and their books are often confiscated or prohibited.<sup>32</sup>

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#### IV. BEDOUINS (NOMADS) IN SA'ID AND SINAI

The Bedouins are indigenous people characterized by their nomadic lifestyle, traditional living conditions, and unique culture. Bedouins in Egypt mostly reside in Sinai; their population in the peninsula is estimated to be around 380,000, divided over about 26 different tribes.<sup>33</sup> Most of the Bedouins in Sinai migrated from the Arabian Peninsula between the 14th and 18th centuries.<sup>34</sup> Bedouins are also scattered within Egypt, mainly in Sa'id.

Bedouins face three major problems in Egypt as a distinct minority community: poverty, illiteracy, and economic and social exclusion.<sup>35</sup> Due to historical neglect, Bedouins in Sa'id and Sinai have suffered from extreme poverty, unemployment, and deteriorating public services and facilities in areas such as sanitation, health, education, and housing.<sup>36</sup> For instance, 49% of Sa'idis in rural areas, who are mostly nomads, suffer from poverty, compared to 27% of the urban Sa'idi population.<sup>37</sup>

Al Sa'id, which encompasses 25% of the Egyptian population and 10 governorates, suffers from sharp tribal divisions in the absence of an inclusive approach by the government to resolve the long-standing conflicts.<sup>38</sup> Bedouins in Sinai lived under Israeli occupation from 1967 until the early 1980s, creating a wedge of distrust between them and the rest of Egyptian society. The nomads of Sinai have experienced mostly violence from the state as their interactions have primarily involved the military, including the previous Israeli occupation and military actions in response to the state's concern about spy activity and the rise of the extremist threats over the last decade.

Consequently, Bedouins are the victims of recurrent stereotypes not only among the Egyptian population but also by government officials. They are mostly perceived as drug dealers, terrorists, spies, or smugglers. Since poverty and unemployment have become their daily reality, Bedouin tribes have resorted to smuggling goods to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. However, in 2012, the Egyptian government blocked them from smuggling by launching an anti-terror campaign in Sinai and destroying approximately 120 tunnels between the two sides.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to their marginalization, the nomads' limited access to the Nile River Valley has created a sense of economic entrapment and discrimination among the Bedouins. Sinai is a dry and infertile area, and until 2017, the proportion of developed land in Sharm el-Sheikh that was being used by Bedouins did not exceed 1.6%, while the rest of the region was utilized for tourism activities;<sup>40</sup> Bedouins are excluded from the tourism sector, as they are denied jobs in the field and do not benefit from the economic gains of tourism.<sup>41</sup> This discrimination is rooted in years of "land dispossession, underdevelopment, and neglect."<sup>42</sup> The state does not acknowledge any Bedouin land ownership rights but rather considers these lands as state property; in fact, the government established the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) as an official manager of the area under the 1991 law number 7. Specifically, Article 2 stipulates that the TDA has the right to manage and use the desert lands for tourism purposes.<sup>43</sup> The TDA has been implementing its tourism vision in Sinai and sold land to private companies without the slightest concern for the Bedouin inhabitants in the area.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the people in Sinai have been suffering immensely from the state of emergency imposed on their territory since August 2013 following the assassination of 25 soldiers by anonymous gunmen. The state of emergency imposes curfews over the peninsula's residents (generally from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m.) and leaves them vulnerable to harassment and arbitrary arrests.<sup>45</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

In light of these issues, several steps can be taken to improve the state of pluralism and inclusion in the Egyptian state and society. The most important step would be the official recognition of the different ethnic and religious minorities in Egypt, followed by an outspoken acknowledgment of the de facto discriminatory incidents that have been occurring. Such acknowledgment will pave the way for launching official measures and constructive actions to counter discrimination and ensure equality and justice among all citizens regardless of religious affiliation or tribal background. Discourse on national unity and a unified national identity that is not reflected in state policies and actions amounts to no more than an attempt to veil an existing conflict, ultimately exacerbating the problems. The pertinent challenges need to be articulated and addressed openly in order to include the different factions in the country and work toward a more inclusive state.

Ensuring fair representation for minority groups in parliament and the government requires an accurate population count for the different minority groups in the country. In this regard, a census conducted through CAPMAS that identifies the size of the various ethnic and religious groups in the country will be a positive step toward assuring equal representation of all groups.

As mentioned above, the state of emergency imposed on Sinai in August 2013 undermines the daily life and rights of Bedouins by subjecting them to arbitrary detention and restricting their freedom of movement, which is a fundamental violation of the Bedouins' nomadic lifestyle. The state of emergency has to be lifted if the state seeks to ensure a normal and peaceful life that restores the full rights of Bedouins.

Finally, economic development policies in areas where Nubians and Bedouins live are critical to overcoming the longstanding economic disparities these groups have experienced. Reconstruction of the Nubians' homeland and stimulation of their sociopolitical and economic life through governmental plans and institutions are

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essential steps in this direction. Likewise, restoring previously removed government subsidies for water and other agricultural products, mainly Egypt's renowned cotton crops, would rejuvenate agricultural production. Introducing industrialization within these two areas can also open many job opportunities.

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## AUTHOR

**Hala Nouhad Nasreddine**, is a 2018 graduate of the School of Arts and Sciences at the Lebanese American University, where she obtained an M.A. graduate in international affairs. She conducted her thesis on "Egypt: Resurrecting the Deep Nasserite State in the Post-Muslim Brotherhood Era."

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