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Human Rights Abuses in Egypt

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify today. For the past three years, Egypt has undergone enormous political upheaval with four different regimes ruling the country. Despite significant differences between those regimes, human rights violations have continued to be the norm and not the exception. The focus of my testimony today will be on the plight of Egypt's indigenous Christians; the Copts, and their continued persecution under Egypt's various regimes.

On the 28th of November two separate attacks on Copts took place in the southern Egyptian governate of Menya. In the village of El Badraman, a mob angered by rumors of a sexual relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman attacked Christians and burned several of their houses. In Nazlet Ebeid, the mob action followed an attempt by a Christian to build a house in a piece of land he owns in a neighboring Muslim village. In the aftermath of both attacks, security forces arrested Christians and Muslims from the villages indiscriminately and forced a reconciliation session to calm local feelings.

Unfortunately the latest attacks are neither random, novel, nor the last that will take place. While the scale of attacks and persecution of Egypt's Christians has varied under the various regimes that have ruled Egypt, it has been part of a continued and increasing pattern.

Under President Hosni Mubarak, Copts suffered both from widespread discrimination at the hands of the Egyptian government as well as being targets of violent attacks on their persons, property and churches at the hands of Islamists. In the last years of Mubarak's regime, the increasing participation of ordinary citizens in mob attacks on Copts became a worrying phenomenon as the level of anti Christian hatred swelled.

Official government discriminatory policies included tremendous restrictions on the building and renovation of churches, exclusion of Christians from key government positions, punishment of converts to Christianity, and a variety of favorable policies towards Islam as the official state religion.

The Islamist insurgency that brought havoc to Egypt's southern governates in the late eighties and until 1998 was especially brutal on Copts. Islamists, who viewed Copts as warring infidels targeted their businesses and their churches. In many southern towns and villages, Copts were forced to pay special payments, termed *Jizya*, to Jihadi groups in order to protect themselves from attacks. The violent attacks forced many Copts to flee the southern governates where they were historically concentrated to the capital, Cairo, and further to the West.

In the last years of the Mubarak regime, Islamists were increasingly replaced with ordinary citizens as the main source of attacks on Copts. Mobs composed of ordinary citizens often formed at the slightest rumor regarding a perceived Coptic affront to Islam. The three main causes of the mob violence were; rumors of a sexual relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim women, which is not permissible in Islam, rumors of a Coptic attempt at building or renovating a church, and rumors of a perceived insult to Islam or its prophet by a Copt. The details of each attack varied, the end result would not. A mob immediately formed and started attacking Coptic homes and shops, ransacking and burning them. In some cases the mob attack would leave a number of Copts killed.

Attacks on Copts took place in situations of complete police absence. While often aware early on that mob attacks were to occur, the police never intervened to prevent those attacks. Arriving at the scene after the attacks, the security forces resorted to arresting both Christians and Muslims, often randomly and in equal number to appear even handed. No distinction being made between victim and victimizer. Arrested Copts were used as a bargaining chip by the security forces to force Copts into a reconciliation session involving local community and religious leaders. Those sessions forced Copts to drop any legal charges against the attackers and often forced Copts to sign agreements prohibiting them from building a church and forcing Copts perceived as having offended Islam into leaving the village. No punishment was ever brought on the perpetrators of those attacks creating a culture of impunity.

The increase in the level of attacks on Copts reached its conclusion in the last days of the Mubarak regime with the bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve.

The hopes unleashed by the Egyptian revolution of a new era of harmony between Egypt's religious groups and an end to discrimination against Copts came to naught. Instead, previous patterns of religious discrimination were reinforced and the number of attacks on Copts substantially increased. The complete collapse of the police and the state's repressive apparatus liberated Islamists from any constraints. While on the national level, Islamists were sweeping elections and dominating the political sphere, on the local level, Islamists, more emboldened by the rise of their brethren nationally, and the collapse of the police were increasingly asserting their power on Egyptian streets and villages and enforcing their views on society. The ruling military regime proved both unwilling and incapable of offering any protection to Copts and putting an end to attacks on them.

Attacks on Copts and their churches swelled dramatically under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and they were no longer limited to obscure villages and shantytowns but spread to the streets of Cairo. Church buildings were attacked and burned, mob violence against Copts was on the rise, and the new horror of forced evacuations from villages was becoming more common. Copts in small villages were increasingly forced to adhere to the Islamists' standards and vision enforced on the ground. Violence against Copts reached its height with the Maspero massacre in October 2011 when army soldiers shot Coptic protestors and ran them over with armored vehicles. Continuing with practices developed by the Mubarak regime, reconciliation sessions were held after attacks and perpetrators were not punished. It was only natural that a culture of impunity would soon become a culture of encouragement.

A new development was blasphemy charges, mostly brought against Copts accusing them of defaming and insulting Islam. Seven Copts were accused in such cases under the rule of SCAF with four of them receiving prison sentences. Their crimes varied from being blamed for a facebook page insulting religion to simply being tagged in an offending picture on facebook. Sentences increased during that period from two years to six. Immediately as news of the perceived affront to Islam spread, an angry mob would attack the home of the accused Copt looting and burning. Families of the accused were forced to flee the area either willingly out of fear of harm or forced by reconciliation sessions. Trials of the accused were a mockery of justice, with courts surrounded by an angry mob and the accused denied legal representation.

Mohamed Morsi's election to the Egyptian presidency aggravated an already deteriorating situation. While the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi paid lip service to ideas of tolerance and inclusiveness and promised equality for all of Egypt's citizens, such promises were made in English for international consumption. The reality was strikingly different. During his one year rule, attacks on Copts dramatically increased on the local level as well as exclusion on the national level.

On the national level, the scarce Coptic representation that existed in the government further declined. As attacks on the local level increased, the government was unwilling to take any action to protect Copts and punish the perpetrators of the attacks. President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood pushed forward a constitution writing process that alienated non Islamists. After the withdrawal of non Islamist members and church representatives, the suggested text, passed the following month in a popular referendum, enshrined the Islamic nature of the state and the second class states for Copts severely limiting equality and religious freedom.

The constitutional articles were a setback for equality and religious freedom. They included dropping language prohibiting forced evacuations within the country (Article 42), limiting the freedom to practice religion and build houses of worship to "heavenly religions" (Article 43), a blasphemy article (Article 44), a limitation on all the freedoms and rights of the constitution as being exercised insofar as they do not contradict the

principles in the section on state and society (read Sharia) (Article 81), a body to control religious endowments (Article 212), and a very narrow definition of “the principles of sharia”, which according to Article 2 were the main source of legislation (Article 219).

The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties and leaders insisted on using sectarian rhetoric that inflamed local angers against Copts. Copts were used as scapegoats for the problems Egypt was facing from train accidents to opposition demonstrations. The Islamists’ incitement against Copts was especially vicious during electoral competitions. Islamists publically warned Copts of blood being spilled and severe repercussions if anything would happen to the Islamist project. Islamist media outlets continuously fabricated stories about secret Christian militias that were behind street violence. The level of incitement by Islamists contributed to the increase of the number and scope of attacks on Copts.

On the local level, both the number and scope of attacks on Copts increased under President Morsi. The mob had a completely free reign to exercise its will on Coptic victims. In April 2013, in an unprecedented and alarming development the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo, the very center of Christianity in the country, where the Pope resides and where the remains of Saint Mark the Evangelist are buried came under attack. The attack, which lasted for a couple of hours and which Egyptians watched live on their television screens shocked Copts and was the clearest indication of the indifference the Morsi government held for the plight of Copts.

The number of blasphemy cases increased during President Morsi’s one year rule with more Copts receiving prison sentences, and seven Copts receiving the death sentence for their alleged roles in the anti Islam movie. Blasphemy accusations were accompanied with attacks on the accused homes, forced evacuations and financial penalties levied by reconciliation sessions.

President Morsi’s forceful removal from office by Egypt’s military was hailed and supported by a wide spectrum of politicians and public figures in the country. The Coptic Pope’s participation in the coup announcement meeting was however signaled out by Islamists as a grave crime. Incitement against Copts reached unprecedented levels on websites and in speeches of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups. Immediately upon the announcement of the coup, several churches were attacked. Church walls were filled with anti Christian slogans, and Christian homes were marked in many villages in the south of Egypt. In all of those attacks, the police was completely absent.

One telling example was the brutal attacks on the Copts of Nagaa Hassan near Luxor on the 4th and 5th of July 2013. As the angry mob moved house to house looting and burning and searching for the Christians to kill, they finally found a group of Christians hiding in a home. The police, which arrived at the scene before the killing was to begin, negotiated with the mob on taking the women and children out and leaving the men to be killed. Four men were butchered in that house the second the police left with the women and children. Major Khalid Hassan, Luxor director of security informed Human

Rights Watch later that he found nothing wrong with the police's performance. "There was no reason for the police to take any special measures, it's not [the police's] job to stop killings, we just investigate afterward."

On the 14th of August, and as news of the military's massacre of Morsi supporters in Cairo spread around the country, angry mobs incited by Islamists ransacked, burned and attacked churches and Christian owned businesses. Throughout the day, the mob was completely free to act as it pleased with the police nowhere in sight. The destruction was immense. Among the destroyed churches was one built in the 4th century. In many instances, the mob was able to return and continue its attack for a number of days. The attacks that day were the single largest attack on churches in Egypt since the 14th century.

Despite hopes held by many Egyptians and especially Copts that the Muslim Brotherhood's removal from power would result in an improvement of their condition, Egypt's new regime has shown little interest in dealing with the root causes of the sectarian problem. The free rein given to the Egyptian security forces in their fight against Islamists has meant a continuation of previous patterns of security practices against Copts. The security forces have done little to prevent attacks on Copts from occurring and less to find and punish the perpetrators. They have resorted to indiscriminate arrests of Christians and Muslims in order to force reconciliation sessions that ensure that the guilty party escapes punishment.

Egypt has witnessed tremendous political changes in the past three years with revolutions and military coups taking place in a quick pace. After thirty years in power, Hosni Mubarak was sent to a prison cell, and Mohamed Morsi moved from a prison cell to the presidential palace and back again to a prison cell. Throughout those three years however, the plight of Christians has not seen any positive change, but has instead gravely deteriorated. No matter who rules Egypt, the twin phenomenon of the growing hatred of Christians and the willingness of their neighbors to attacks them, and the failure of Egyptian governments to protect them and stop the attacks have become the hallmarks of the Copt's continued plight.