

Introduction

Welcome to the second issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2016. This issue looks at the rise in religious fervour in Egypt over the past few months, which has led to a slew of blasphemy cases in the country. It also features a report on the reactions from Christians and Muslims to a religious bill that has placed new restrictions on faith communities in Kaduna State, Nigeria.

Blasphemy cases targeting Muslims and Christian in Egypt

Two years have passed since the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from power in Egypt over fear of political Islam, but a new rise in religious fervour has led to a succession of blasphemy cases in recent months. Though President Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi came to power by promising to eliminate religious extremism and is generally popular among Christian Copts, Egypt's largest religious minority, authorities continue aggressively to pursue those who insult Islam. In February, three Coptic teenagers were sentenced to five years in prison on the charge they were mocking Islamic prayers, even though they insisted that in the video used to convict them they were not mocking Muslim prayer but recent beheadings performed by members of Islamic State. A few months earlier, a Christian from a village near Luxor received a six-year prison sentence for posting an offensive cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook, though he said he had no memory of the cartoon.

There have also been a number of high-profile blasphemy cases involving Muslims in recent months. In January, poet Fatma Naoot received a three-year prison sentence for comments on Facebook in which she was critical of Islam's ritual slaughter of animals at the feast of Eid al-Adha. Activist Mustafa Abd el-Nabi was sentenced to three years in prison for Facebook posts about atheism, and popular TV host Islam el-Beheiry was sent to prison for one year after challenging certain Qur'anic interpretations by conservative religious scholars. Even Justice Minister Ahmed el-Zind sparked a public outcry over remarks considered blasphemous, which resulted in his firing by the Prime Minister Sherif Ismail on 13 March. El-Zind had stated in a televised interview that he would send to jail anyone who violates the law, even if it was 'the Prophet [Muhammad]'. Despite a public apology for his 'slip of the tongue', he received heavy criticism on social media and from Islamic scholars, forcing his dismissal. Human rights advocates and legal experts have argued that such lawsuits are contrary to Egypt's constitution and are used too often to target critics of the regime.

Al-Masry Al-Youm, *Egypt Independent*, 'Justice minister apologizes for Prophet jailing remarks', 13 March 2016,

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/justice-minister-apologizes-prophet-jailing-remarks>

Maggie Michael, *Associated Press*, 'Blasphemy cases rise in Egypt and Christians bear the brunt', 25 March 2016,

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/8fe87c2622d146bcbcaef4b95f9de08/blasphemy-cases-rise-egypt-and-christians-bear-brunt>

To receive future issues online, contact Stuart Buchanan nifcon@anglicancommunion.org

Toqa Ezzidin, *Daily News Egypt*, 'El-Beheiry to serve 1-year sentence after motion to appeal is denied', 3 February 2016, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/02/03/el-beheiry-to-serve-1-year-sentence-after-motion-to-appeal-is-denied>

Mohamed Saied, *Al-Monitor*, 'Blasphemy trials on the rise in Egypt', 1 March 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/egypt-lawsuits-religious-hisbah-freedom-expression.html>

Nour Youssef and Declan Walsh, *New York Times*, 'Egypt Sentences Coptic Teenagers to Prison for Insulting Islam', 25 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/world/middleeast/coptic-teenagers-sentenced-egypt.html>

Commentary Cornelis Hulsman, *Editor-in-chief Arab-West Report* (Cairo)

Egypt, like so many other countries in the Arab World, is deeply divided between those who want a strict application of Islamic law in society and those who advocate more restraint. In Syria, Iraq and Libya this division has resulted in civil wars. Egypt has been spared such a nightmare, but this does not mean differences do not exist. The various political parties seem more interested in sidelining one another and wiping out their influences than in seeking political compromises and working towards unity.

Egypt's Christians are among the staunchest opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood, who enjoyed power for a brief period when Muhammad Morsi was president. Many engage in strong anti-Brotherhood rhetoric, and no one has forgotten that Morsi supporters destroyed tens of churches in the aftermath of the bloody removal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in August 2013.

Today the army is rebuilding churches. I went in January 2016 with a group from the St John's Episcopal Church in Maadi, Cairo, to see the church they had rebuilt in such a beautiful way in Bilhasa, Maghagha. A local priest said that in the late 1990s the Coptic Orthodox Church in Minya had obtained from state security the permission to build new churches, many in areas where there had previously been no church. Bilhasa is such a village. The church that was built was small and modest. But, as in previous cases of tensions around church building, a number of local Muslims could not accept their village being changed by this new addition. Village Muslims rarely have difficulties with church buildings that have been there for a long time in their areas, but accepting a new building is seen by local Muslims as a Christian attempt to change the image of the village.

Copts have the current government on their side - President Abd el-Fattah al-Sisi visited the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral during the Christmas celebrations of January 2015 and January 2016, which no president before him has done - but since the percentage of political Islamists is so large in Egypt and Copts are seen as mostly anti-Islamist, it is no wonder that a number of Islamists are stirring up local sentiments against Christians, some of whom, rightly or wrongly, are seen as offending Islamic beliefs. Local tensions against Christians exist, and the judiciary has made unexpected rulings. But it needs to be borne in mind that Christians have been siding with a government that, for understandable reasons, is strongly opposed to Islamists. This makes Christians a soft Islamist target, and it is maybe surprising that there are not more incidents. But most Christians are well aware that, despite a Christian-friendly government, they still live in a society with political Islamists who believe that Christians are a major obstacle to them realizing their goal of a state ruled according to a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Christians must

To receive future issues online, contact Stuart Buchanan nifcon@anglicancommunion.org

always, therefore, take care not to give opportunity for retaliation by violating Muslim sensitivities.

Kaduna State religious bill criticized by Christians and Muslims in Nigeria

A bill before the House of Assembly in Kaduna, Nigeria, has sparked controversy among Christian and Muslim communities throughout the state. Kaduna State governor, Mallam Nasir El-Rufai, said he introduced the bill to provide a framework for regulating religious preaching and activities so they do not threaten public order, and to ensure 'citizens live in peace, with every one practising his religion'. Critics say the bill could lead to further chaos in a region that has seen religious violence between Muslims and Christians over the years. A main provision of the bill – which is to repeal and replace a rarely enforced 1984 law introduced during a period of military rule – would require religious preachers to be licensed by the state each year and before they offer any sermons. It would also limit the use of 'cassettes, CDs, flash drives or any other communication gadgets containing religious recordings' to houses of worship or inside one's home. The bill would also prohibit the use of loudspeakers anywhere other than inside a mosque or a church during prescribed prayer times, the abuse of religious books, and inciting any disturbance of public peace. The penalty for violating the proposed bill would be a fine of ₦200,000 and/or imprisonment for up to two years. The proposed law would create committees for issuing licenses to preach and regulating the two main religions in Kaduna State, Christianity and Islam. It would also establish an inter-faith ministerial committee to advise the governor on religious matters.

Members of the two largest religious associations in the state, Jama'atu Nasril Islam and the Christian Association of Nigeria, have largely opposed the bill, fearing it would stifle religious freedom, incite inter-communal violence, and/or lead to the creation of underground extremist groups. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria has encouraged Kaduna State to rely on existing laws and enforcement powers to 'maintain religious harmony...instead of reinventing the wheel'. Spokesman Rev. Fr. Evaristus said not only should Governor El-Rufai tread carefully on this matter, but also that President Muhammadu Buhari should clarify the issue at the national level. 'Our constitution is like a hermaphrodite, neither completely secular nor religious. A secular constitution guarantees the rights and dignity of all under the law', he said. Bishop Marcus Amsani Ibrahim of the Anglican Diocese of Yola stated he was concerned there might be discrimination in the process of issuing licenses and further limitations on religious activities in Kaduna State were the bill to become law.

Tom Garba, *The Nigerian Voice*, 'Clerics In Yola warns El-Rufai against Proposed Religious Bill', 30 March 2016, http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/211537/clerics-in-yola-warns-el-rufai-against-proposed-religious-bi.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+TheNigerianVoiceNews+%28The+Nigerian+Voice+News%29

Chris Irekamba, et al., *The Guardian*, 'A licence to worship God: knocks, kudos trail proposed Kaduna State's 'religious preaching law'', 27 March 2016, <http://guardian.ng/sunday-magazine/ibru-ecumenical-centre/a-licence-to-worship-god-knocks-kudos-trail-proposed-kaduna-states-religious-preaching-law>

Godwin Isenyo, *Punch*, 'Proposed religious bill: Time bomb in Kaduna', 19 March 2016, <http://www.punchng.com/proposed-religious-billtime-bomb-in-kaduna>

To receive future issues online, contact Stuart Buchanan nifcon@anglicancommunion.org

Paul Obi, *This Day*, "No Governor Can be an Emperor" Catholic Church Tells El Rufai. Urges Buhari to revisit national confab', 22 March 2016, <http://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/03/22/no-governor-can-be-an-emperor-catholic-church-tells-el-rufai-urges-buhari-to-revisit-national-confab>

John Shiklam, *AllAfrica*, 'Nigeria: Critics of Preaching Bill Ignorant, Says El-Rufai', 30 March 2016, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201603310841.html>

Commentary Sati Umaru Fwatshak, *Professor, University of Jos (Nigeria)*

Governor Nasir El-Rufai's Executive Bill for 'the religious preaching law' is, as he sees it, aimed to promote peaceful religious practice in Kaduna state. The 16-section bill requires preachers to be authorized or licensed to preach in Kaduna state by government committees that are yet to be established, and restricts the broadcasting of religious messages to defined spaces and to a time limit. Violation will be penalized with a fine or jail term. However, controversies have trailed the bill ahead of the Kaduna State House of Assembly deliberations. Muslims and Christians, as well as some members of the general public are in opposition.

From the point of view of Kaduna state's deadly religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s and its fragile religious peace, the state no doubt needs to end the violence and build trust and tolerance to live up to expectations as an emerging, modern mega city. Ordinarily, Governor El-Rufai's proposed law accords with existing regulations in many of the countries we regard as developed. There, worship centers are sound proofed, ensuring that all sounds during worship are contained within them. To this extent, the proposed law, if passed and objectively implemented, would go a long way in reducing noise pollution. It would also eliminate the broadcasting of hate-messages that generate tensions and conflicts.

However, the key problem is a lack of trust in the actual intentions of the governor. There are a number of complicating factors. First, the Muslim governor is alleged to have made anti-Christian statements in January 2013, causing him to fall under heavy suspicion among Christians. Having previously demolished unapproved buildings – including worship centers in Abuja, while he was Federal Capital Territory Minister – and continuing to do so in Kaduna as governor, he falls under suspicion among both Muslims and Christians. Such suspicions are likely to affect people's reactions to the implementation of the law, if passed, and worsen Muslim-Christian relations in the state. For example, a decision by the religious committees, which include government officials, to deny a Muslim or Christian preacher 'authority' to preach in Kaduna state, or to deny Muslims or Christians plots of land to build worship centres in any part of the state, would be interpreted as discrimination against the aggrieved religious group or sect, with violent reactions as the likely consequences. An example is the 1991 religious riots in Kano that erupted after Reinhard Bonnke, a Christian evangelist, was permitted to preach in the city while a South African Muslim was denied an entry permit.

Governor Nasir El-Rufai's Executive Bill reads well, but with the people distrusting its intended purpose and in its neutral and impartial implementation, even if it does pass the House State of Assembly it is unlikely to create a peaceful worship atmosphere or improve Christian-Muslim relations in the immediate future.

To receive future issues online, contact Stuart Buchanan nifcon@anglicancommunion.org