

Memo to the Prime Minister from the Human Rights Forum on practical steps to ensure full citizenship

The reactions to the illegal bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria demonstrate that religious and sectarian tensions have reached dangerous levels that threaten to shatter what remains of the foundation for a peaceful existence between Muslims and Copts. This incident comes after the security establishment has been given monopoly over all incidents involving religious tensions, and state institutions have ignored the issue by not acting on the principles of citizenship, equality, and equal opportunity for all citizens, regardless of their religion. For many long years, the state has chosen political expediency over using the rule of law and the demands of justice to address crimes of sectarian violence. In practice, this has established a norm of impunity for these crimes, and exacerbated the hatred encouraged by advocates of religious extremism among both Muslims and Copts. In this tenuous culture of bigotry and mutual suspicion, any fleeting incident or rumor is enough to inflame sectarian passions across Egypt. Ad-hoc measures are no longer enough to contain these sectarian troubles, and they threaten civic peace and coexistence, for which all Egyptians will pay a catastrophic price.

The official reaction to the Alexandria bombing reflects, in one form or another, the government's awareness -perhaps for the first time- of the ruinous consequences of the current sectarian climate. This is true even if investigations reject the existence of sectarian motivation, or assert the involvement of some foreign entity. We believe that this recognition, even if late, belies hope that the sectarian crisis can be treated, if it is addressed based on a coherent diagnosis of the causes and contributing factors, and if it is addressed head on.

We also believe that dealing with the manifestations of sectarian and religious tension requires a reconsideration of an entire array of policies. First and foremost by:

1. Activating the constitutional provisions related to citizenship, equality, and equal opportunity. Legislative and administrative measures must be taken with all due speed in order to safeguard the rights of all Egyptians, regardless of religion or belief, to build houses of worship and to freely practice their religion. Of course, this involves removing all legal restrictions as well as administrative and bureaucratic interventions on the construction, renovation, expansion, and repair of churches. It also involves ending all forms of religious discrimination in civil service employment and in high state offices.

2. Implementing academic curricula that promotes the humanistic values shared by all religions and faiths, and that strengthen the values of tolerance and mutual respect between the followers of different religions, faiths, and beliefs. This should be reflected in the school curriculum for history, Arabic, and religion. Training and educational programs should be adopted to teach instructors and students at education colleges how to adopt these values in their professional lives.

3. Restoring the rule of law when dealing with sectarian crises, including crises that assume a social or spontaneous or sporadic nature, and reject the political expediency that has thus far dictated the treatment of these issues. In many cases, this sort of treatment has meant that acts of sectarian violence go unpunished.

4. Ending arbitrary interference by the security and investigative authorities in the freedom of religious belief. State institutions must ensure protection for all individuals to worship freely and they must treat cases of conversion with full transparency. This requires ending the harassment and

pressure on certain people because of their religion or belief. State authorities must also adopt a resolute stance on all pronouncements of unbelief (*takfir*) and any incitement to religious hatred or racism.

5. Acknowledging that civil society is a large and important element to the state's ability to contain sectarianism and to ending sectarian violence and tension. The pillars of the civil state have been eroded over the past decades as a result of the increasing use of religion by the Islamic and Coptic religious establishments in both politics and the public sphere. State institutions bear the primary responsibility for this exploitation of religion and its infusion into politics. With time, it has induced Copts' isolation, estrangement, and dependence on their own religious institutions. The role of the latter was gradually shifted to become the political mediators or representatives of the Copts in a country that suffers from enormous arbitrary restrictions on the right of association, and that lacks real political parties capable of embracing both Copts and Muslims.

As such, preventing sectarian crises depends to a large extent on an integrated program for democratic reform that will promote a civil and democratic state in which political parties, trade and labor unions, and civil society can occupy and act in the political and public sphere. This requires:

- The reconsideration of Article 2 of the constitution, which contains implicit discrimination against one religion and impeaches the state's impartiality toward all its citizens.
- The abolition of restrictions on the freedom to establish political parties, provided that they comply with the constitution, the principles of the democratic, civil state, and operate peacefully.
- The reform of the electoral system and the adoption of an unconditional proportional list system. This will provide better opportunities and guarantees that election results are a true reflection of the political, social, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of Egyptian society.
- The end to all restrictions and interventions in civil society activities, which will enable these institutions to play an effective role in promoting a culture of citizenship and human rights and which will renounce violence, religious hatred, and bigotry.
- The end to state authorities infusing religion in the public sphere and using religious institutions to play political roles beyond their mandate. For their part, religious institutions must produce a modern religious discourse that rejects religious extremism and hatred and that promotes enlightenment and moderation.
- The activation of press and media honor codes adopted by journalists, to confront the dissemination of religious hatred.

Finally, we believe it is important to establish a subordinated commission to the Prime Minister composed of several independent figures, whose primary mission will be to eliminate all forms of discrimination. Its mandate should consist of drafting legal proposals to entrench equality and discourage discrimination, monitor compliance among state institutions, and advise on solutions to the problems resulting from discrimination and marginalization in all its forms. The commission should include representatives of social sectors that face discrimination and social or cultural marginalization, such as Copts, Shiites, Bahais, Sinai Bedouins, and Nubians, as well as representatives from human rights organizations. The commission may consult experts in the field and should forward its proposals and reports to the Prime Minister.

First on the agenda of this commission should be the following:

1. Assessing and monitoring compliance with the equal right to build and restore houses of worship, regardless of religion or faith.

2. Assessing and monitoring compliance with the equal right to occupy high state office and civil service positions, including in the security establishment, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or place of birth; and, a consideration of the abolition of the slot for religion on national identity cards as a means of containing discrimination.

3. Assessing and monitoring the security establishment's performance in addressing incidents of tension, protest, and sectarian violence as well as its compliance with one unified standard that abide with the legislative framework in dealing with such incidents.

4. Assessing and monitoring the role of religious institutions in connection with citizenship, and encouraging these institutions to choose one of their own qualified members to oversee all the commission's publications.

5. Assessing and monitoring the performance of the media in connection with the religious hatred.

6. Assessing and monitoring a thorough review of all academic curricula with a view to promoting the values of citizenship and equality, as well as removing any material promoting discrimination or religious hatred.

Signatures

1. Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies
2. Arab Network for Human Rights Information
3. Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression
4. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
5. Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services
6. Group for Human Rights Legal Aid
7. Hesham Mubarak Law Center
8. Land Center for Human Rights
9. New Woman Research Center
10. The Arab Penal Reform Organization
11. The Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement
12. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights
13. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
14. The Human Rights Association for the Assistance for the Prisoners