

Freedom of Religion and Belief in Egypt
Quarterly Report
(October - December 2008)

Freedom of Religion and Belief Program
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
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This report

This report addresses several of the most significant developments seen in Egypt in the field of freedom of religion and belief in the months of October, November, and December of 2008. The report observes continued sectarian tension and violence all over Egypt and documents cases in the governorates of Cairo, Alexandria, Qalyoubiya, Sharqiya, Kafr al-Sheikh, Minya, and Luxor. As usual, Minya accounted for the lion's share of incidents of sectarian violence, with cases in the district of Matay, the village of Kom al-Mahras, and the district of Abu Qurqas, as well as events in the village of al-Tayiba in the Samalut district in October. The latter were the worst of the fourth quarter of 2008, leaving one Christian dead and four other people injured, among them one Muslim. Homes, lands, and property were also torched and damaged.

The report also notes increased tensions and clashes as a result of Copts establishing "service centers" to use for social occasions, prayers, or religious lessons in neighborhoods and villages that have no nearby churches or in cases where Copts have failed to obtain permits to build a new church or renovate an existing church. The report discusses several instances in which the establishment of such centers, or rumors that attempts were being made to convert them into churches, led to sectarian clashes. Events in November in the Ain Shams area of Cairo received the most media coverage in this regard, but two similar incidents took place in the village of Kafr Girgis in the Minya al-Qamh district of Sharqiya and in the al-Iraq village in Alexandria's al-Amiriya neighborhood.

The report observes the mounting problems resulting from restrictions on the right to change one's religion, as Muslims who want to convert to Christianity resort to obtaining falsified identification documents. In the period under review, two prison sentences were issued in criminal courts in Giza and Shubra in two separate cases involving Muslim women who had obtained falsified documents allowing them to convert to Christianity and marry Christians. In December, the Cairo airport police arrested a woman and her husband on similar charges while they were attempting to leave the country.

The report documents the ongoing use of the Emergency Law to violate citizens' basic rights. Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman was placed under administrative detention for adopting Qur'anist thought, and Christian blogger Hani Nazir remains in detention without charge or trial on the grounds that he allegedly published material insulting to Islam on his blog.

On a positive note, the report documents a legal ruling issued in Cairo allowing a Baha'i youth to return to school at Alexandria University; the university had suspended him when he proved unable to obtain a personal identity card, although his Baha'i religious affiliation is listed on his 1987 birth certificate. Another court ruling allowed a Christian citizen to document his re-conversion to Christianity in his official documents more than 30 years after he converted to Islam. The report also notes that the Fayoum provincial authorities paid financial compensation to Copts harmed in sectarian attacks that took place in June 2008 in the village of al-Nazla, located in the Youssef al-Siddiq district.

FRB Quarterly Reports

The aim of the Freedom of Religion and Belief Quarterly Reports is to provide legislators, policymakers, researchers, the media and other stakeholders with a primary source for documented information on the most significant political, legal, and social developments affecting freedom of religion and belief in Egypt. This report does not offer an analysis of the facts, but only documents them as a basis for further analysis.

In preparing this report the Freedom of Religion and Belief Program of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) relies on field research by program staff, complaints received by the EIPR during the reporting period, information gleaned from news reports and confirmed by researchers, and laws and governmental decrees related to freedom of religion and belief as published in the Official Gazette. This report is not a comprehensive overview of all pertinent developments, but is limited to the facts the report's authors view as most significant and were able to confirm.

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Yara Sallam, researcher for the Freedom of Religion and Belief Program, compiled and researched the information contained in the report. Nader Shukri assisted in monitoring and documentation. Research assistance and legal review was provided by Adel Ramadan, Legal Officer of the FRB Program. Hossam Bahgat, Executive Director of the EIPR, reviewed and edited the report.

I. Court rulings and trials

1. On 12 October 2008, the Giza Criminal Court sentenced five people, among them a Christian priest, to five years in prison each on charges related to the falsifying of official documents. The court began hearing the case (no. 4829/2007 Criminal- Qesm Imbaba) in June 2008, after the defendants were charged with helping a Muslim woman obtain falsified identification documents proving that she had converted to Christianity, in order to enable her to marry a Christian man in 2005. These falsified documents were used to draw up a marriage contract and obtain a passport, which the woman used to travel to Jordan with her husband (see paragraph 8 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2008)

The verdict was issued *in absentia* for all the defendants (including the married couple), except for the priest, Mata'os Abbas Wahba, who is currently serving his sentence in the Tora Prison on the outskirts of Cairo.

After the sentencing, several newspapers reported that Pope Shenouda III had criticized the verdict and they quoted him expressing his "strong displeasure" at the sentencing of the priest. He also announced that he had hired an attorney to appeal the ruling. On 15 November 2008, attorney Ramsis al-Naggar appealed the ruling with the Court of Cassation (case no. 220/2008). The court had not set a date for the appeal hearing before this report was issued.

2. In a similar case, the Shubra Criminal Court on 11 November 2008 sentenced three people to three years in prison each (case no. 12201/2006 Criminal -Northern Cairo -Shubra). The court convicted the three defendants for helping a Muslim woman obtain a national identity card containing falsified information in 2002 to facilitate her marriage to a Christian. The defendants also served as witnesses on the marriage contract with the false information (see paragraph 8 of the First Quarterly Report, 2008).

On 17 January 2008, the court had issued a ruling in the same case *in absentia*, sentencing the three defendants and the fugitive couple to ten years each in prison. The re-trial began on 12 February with the attendance of the three defendants, who are currently serving their sentence in the Marg General Prison. The defendants' attorneys appealed the ruling before the Court of Cassation, but a date for the appeal hearing had not been set before this report was issued.

3. On 11 November 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo, headed by Judge Mohamed Ahmad Atiya, issued a ruling requiring the Civil Status

Department in the Interior Ministry to issue a national identity card to Baha'i citizen Hadi Hosny al-Qusheiry and place a dash (—) in the slot designated for religious affiliation. The EIPR had filed a suit (case no. 14124/62) in January 2008 after al-Qusheiry 21, was suspended from the College of Agriculture at Alexandria University, where he was registered as a third-year student. The university suspended the student when he failed to provide deferment papers for his compulsory military service. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense refused to issue the papers because the student did not have a national identity card, and since the student had a birth certificate documenting that he was born to Egyptian Baha'i parents, the Civil Status Department refused to issue him an identity card if he did not change his religion to either Islam or Christianity.

The same court, headed by its former chief judge, Mohamed al-Husseini, issued two similar rulings on 29 January 2008, affirming for the first time the right of Baha'i citizens to obtain official identification documents without mention of religious affiliation. The Interior Ministry had not implemented these rulings before this report was issued in January 2009 (see paragraph 1 of the First Quarterly Report, 2008).

4. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights decided in its biannual session, held in Abuja, Nigeria from 10 to 24 November 2008, to consider a complaint filed against the Egyptian government regarding the case of two Egyptian children, Mario and Andrew Ramsis. After their father converted to Islam, the children's religion was changed from Christianity to Islam and their Christian mother lost custody of them. The complaint (no. 363/2008), filed before the African Union's main human rights body, accuses the Egyptian government of violating four articles of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which was ratified by the Egyptian government and the People's Assembly in 1984. The children's mother, Kamilia Lotfy, was a victim of religious discrimination (Article 2) and her right to equal protection under the law (Article 3) was also violated when she was deprived of custody of her twin sons. The petition also accuses the government of violating the children's right to freedom of religion and belief (Article 8) and its obligation to respect the rights of children (Article 18.3). The Commission accepted the petition and will begin hearing the case in its next session in May 2009; the complainants and the Egyptian government must file their preliminary briefs before 8 March 2009. The suit was filed by the EIPR and the London-based INTERIGHTS- International Center for the Legal Protection of Human Rights.

On 24 September 2008, the Alexandria Appellate Court issued a final ruling transferring custody of Mario and Andrew (both aged 14) to their father, who

had converted to Islam in 2000 and changed his children's religion on their official documents in 2006. The court based its ruling on an interpretation of the principles of Islamic law, although Article 20 of the Personal Status Law states that children should remain in the custody of their mother until the age of 15 and contains no reference to the mother's religion (see paragraph 8 of the Third Quarterly Report, 2008). On 5 November 2008, the children's mother filed a request with the Public Prosecutor (no. 18308/2008) asking him to appeal the custody ruling. No action had been taken before this report was issued.

5. On 29 November 2008, the Public Prosecutor issued a temporary injunction against the three-year prison sentence handed down to Bahiya al-Sisi, who was convicted of knowingly using falsified documents, pending an appeal before the Court of Cassation. The Shubra al-Kheima Criminal Court issued the prison sentence on 20 September 2008 (case no. 14223/1996) after Bahiya al-Sisi was convicted of obtaining a personal identity card in 1994 that documented her religion as Christianity, although her father had converted to Islam in 1994 (see paragraph 7 of the Third Quarterly Report, 2008).

After Bahiya al-Sisi was released, the Public Prosecutor appealed the ruling before the Court of Cassation on 24 December 2008. Al-Sisi's attorney filed a similar appeal on 13 November 2008. No date had been set to hear the appeal before this report was issued.

Egyptians against Religious Discrimination, a group of volunteer activists working on religious tolerance, issued a statement in solidarity with Bahiya al-Sisi on 5 November calling on the Public Prosecutor to suspend her prison sentence pending the appeal before the Court of Cassation.

6. On 18 December 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice in Alexandria ruled that Fathi Labib Youssef had the right to obtain a personal identity card documenting his re-conversion to Christianity from Islam. The plaintiff filed his case (no. 2293/60) in November 2005 against the Prime Minister, the Interior Minister, and the head of the Civil Status Department, asking that a decree refusing to recognize his change of religion be overturned. Youssef converted from Christianity to Islam in 1974 and then re-converted to Christianity in May 2005 following the approval of the clerical council of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In its written ruling, the court referred to the obligation to recognize equal rights and duties for all citizens and the prohibition against discrimination on the basis of religion or creed. The court reasoned that ruling otherwise would violate the constitutionally guaranteed principle of freedom of belief. It added

that the Civil Status Department must document any change to a citizen's civil status on his personal identity card, as long as the change is supported by a document issued by the competent authority, so that the identity card faithfully express a citizen's true civil status.

On 9 February 2008, the Supreme Administrative Court, headed by Judge al-Sayid Noufal, ruled for the first time in favor of 12 Christian citizens seeking personal identity cards that document their re-conversion to Christianity from Islam (see paragraph 2 of the First Quarterly Report, 2008), but as of January 2009 the Interior Ministry had not yet implemented any of these rulings. The Supreme Constitutional Court is currently hearing a case (no. 92/30) referred to it by the Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo, which is seeking a ruling on the constitutionality of Article 47 of the Civil Status Law. That article allows citizens to change their religion on official documents without restriction (see paragraph 3, First Quarterly Report and paragraph 3, Third Quarterly Report, 2008).

7. The daily *al-Ahram* reported on 29 December 2008 that the Cairo Personal Status Appellate Court issued an unprecedented ruling "in favor of a Christian woman's right to custody of her Muslim children as long as the Muslim father knew she was of the Christian faith when they married." According to the newspaper, the court "gave custody of an Egyptian child to his French mother, arguing that the Child Law states that the protection and best interest of the child takes precedence in all decisions regarding childhood." The text of the ruling was not available when this report was issued.

II. Sectarian tension and violence

8. On the evening of 3 October 2008, sectarian violence erupted in the village of al-Tayiba, located in the Samalut district of Minya. The violence left one Christian dead and four people injured (among them one Muslim), and homes, lands, and property were torched and vandalized.

Information collected by EIPR researchers indicates that the incident began when a fight broke out between a Muslim and Christian resident of the Christian-majority village. It is likely that the dispute was sparked when a Muslim youth harassed a Christian girl, after which the girl's brother intervened to defend her. This is the story supported by the police and the prosecutor's office. Information also indicates that the harassment took place amid existing sectarian tensions in the village as a result of a local Copt's intention to sell his home in a predominantly Coptic quarter to a Muslim, to which his Coptic neighbors object.

As the dispute evolved, several Muslims broke into the home of the Christian whose sister was harassed. Most of the contents of his home, as well as his adjacent carpentry workshop and a wood storehouse, were stolen or vandalized, and both were set on fire. Following this assault, a large number of Copts assembled and headed toward the burning house in the eastern part of the village. Muslims began firing live ammunition at them to disperse them and the Copts responded by throwing stones at Muslim homes. Eyewitnesses said that the Copts were not armed, and a police source said that investigations had turned up no evidence that the Copts had used firearms during the events in question.

Coptic eyewitnesses said that they called security forces, which came to the village, but were unable to enter the scene of the events until some two hours had passed because of ongoing heavy gunfire. As soon as the security forces arrived, they threw teargas grenades to disperse the assembled Copts. One eyewitness said that a police officer beat those assembled with a club in order to disperse them and send them to their homes. This prompted Coptic youths to run from the teargas and police forces to the western part of the village, home to several Muslims. Testimonies obtained by EIPR researchers indicate that some Coptic youths, motivated by revenge, attempted to break into the home of a Muslim in the village, leading a neighbor to randomly open fire. Yeshua Gamal Nashed was shot in the face and died shortly thereafter.

Medical sources at the Samalut General Hospital, located 12 km from al-Tayiba, where the injured were taken for treatment, said that Yeshua Gamal, 25, reached the hospital near death and died about 15 minutes later as a result

of a gunshot to the forehead. The hospital also admitted three Copts from the village—Michael Samuel, Philip Ramzi, and Ibram Musa—who were injured by BB pellets, which, when fired at close range, can cause deep tear wounds. They were released from the hospital after treatment. The fourth wounded man, Mahmoud Subhi, reached the Samalut hospital with a head injury, sustained by a blow to the head with a club during the events. He was transferred to the Minya University Hospital. After the incident, the EIPR received reports that crops owned by village Copts were intentionally burned and destroyed on Sunday night, 5 October 2008.

Village residents say that after the events, the police made random arrests of nearly 40 Muslim and Coptic youths, who were released in groups in the following days. The police also arrested Gamal Selim Abd el-Hakim, who was accused of murder by the family of Yeshua Gamal. On 28 December 2008, a Samalut court released him on bail pending a trial on charges of murder. Relatives of the defendant, however, told EIPR researchers that after the prosecutor's office released him, he was placed under administrative detention using the Emergency Law and was taken to the Liman Abu Za'bal facility.

9. On 6 October 2008, a Christian youth in the Amiriya area of Cairo used an automatic weapon to open fire on his sister's family. His sister had converted to Islam two years earlier, married a Muslim man, and had a ten-month-old daughter. The Muslim husband died in the assault and the child was injured; the sister of the killer was injured in her left arm, which was later amputated. The police arrested the youth and his uncle, who helped him commit the crime. Their trial before a criminal court is expected to begin in February 2009. A heavy security presence was visible in the Amiriya area for nearly a month after the assault, in anticipation of revenge attacks against Copts.

10. The village of Sila al-Gharbiya, located in the Matay district of Minya, was the site of mutual attacks between Muslims and Christians on 14 October 2008, which left one Muslim and three Christians, including a nine-year-old child, injured. An eyewitness in the village told EIPR researchers that a dispute erupted between a Christian liquor store owner and a Muslim customer, which ultimately led to several Muslims and Christians throwing stones from the roofs of houses. After the incident, the police arrested some 25 residents of the village, all of whom were released following a traditional reconciliation between the parties to the dispute.

11. On 19 October 2008, five Copts assaulted members of a Muslim family in the district of Sidi Salem in the Kafr al-Sheikh governorate after rumors spread that a Coptic girl from their family had run away with a member of

the Muslim family. The level of sectarian tension increased after the fight, when it was rumored that a Muslim youth had disappeared and that Copts were responsible for it. The police found the Muslim youth and arrested four Copts and two Muslims, all of whom were released a few days later. A church source in the area told EIPR researchers that the girl had converted to Islam and married a Muslim. He added that State Security officers banished the five Copts from the village and prohibited them from returning until a traditional reconciliation session was held between the two families. EIPR researchers learned that the five returned to the village during the first week of January 2009.

12. On 26 October 2008, there was violence between Muslims and Copts in the predominantly Christian village of Kom al-Mahras in the Abu Qurqas district of Minya. The violence left six people injured on both sides, according to statements made by the director of the al-Fikriya District Hospital to EIPR researchers. Information indicates that a fight broke out between a Muslim and Christian, both teenagers, after which dozens of Muslims and Christians gathered and fought with clubs and rocks, leading to the aforementioned injuries and damage to a storehouse owned by a Copt. When security forces arrived on the scene, they detained five Muslims and three Christians. The Abu Qurqas prosecutor's office ordered their release three days after the parties held a traditional reconciliation.

A source who resides in the village (and asked to remain anonymous) told EIPR researchers that the clashes took place amid heightened tensions between Muslims and Christians after the Mar Mina church in the village obtained a renovation permit and work began on bathrooms and a service center for the church.

13. On 5 November 2008, several Copts who live in Mit Nama in the Shubra al-Kheima area of the Qalyoubiya governorate staged a protest in front of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Abbasiya after a Muslim, at dawn that same morning, appropriated a plot of land in the village that belongs to the Shubra al-Kheima archbishopric and built a fence around it. A church source in the area told EIPR researchers that the church had bought the plot of land on 9 January 2002, and completed the official measures needed to build a service center on it. There is no church in the village to serve the more than 500 Christian families, and the nearest church is four km away. The source said that State Security had refused to give Copts a permit for the establishment of the building on three separate occasions, the last on 27 October 2008, citing "security concerns." The source said that the same person who appropriated the land demolished the fence on 6 November 2008, and returned the land to

the church after the intervention of several official and security agencies. Nevertheless, the problem of the building permit remains unresolved.

14. On 23 November 2008, sectarian tensions in the Ain Shams area of Cairo led to clashes between a group of Muslims and security forces and an attack on a building used by Christians in the area for prayer.

A priest in the area told EIPR researchers that the Coptic Church had bought the building about six years ago and transformed it from an underwear factory to a service center; he said that the church intended to hold prayers inside the building for the first time the day of the attack. Coptic eyewitnesses said that that morning several Muslims from the area had hung loudspeakers on the opposite building and broadcast Qur'anic verses. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the loudspeakers were later used to call Muslims to a demonstration to protest the Copts' intention to turn the building into a church. By evening time, hundreds of area Muslims had gathered outside the church and started chanting anti-Coptic slogans, and some threw stones at the building, breaking several windows. Press reports said that 13 Copts inside the church were injured by the stone throwing. Eyewitnesses added that security forces on the scene decided to intervene to disperse those assembled about four hours after they began to congregate. Demonstrators clashed with security forces and, according to press reports, several soldiers were injured. The clashes continued until midnight, when the police managed to help the Copts surrounded in the building to leave.

The police filed a report about the incident (no. 3196/2008 Matariya misdemeanors) and arrested five Muslims and three Copts on charges of unlawful assembly, disturbing the peace, damaging two cars, and injuring police personnel. All the detainees were released pending investigations on 27 November 2008. After the events, church officials said that they had stopped using the building for any purpose, fearing further attacks.

15. Copts in the Izbat al-Nakhl area of Ain Shams in Cairo were assaulted on the evening of 23 November 2008, when a Muslim man on a motorcycle attacked a group of Copts who were leaving a wedding at a church. According to a testimony given to EIPR researchers by one Copt, the incident evolved into a fight with a group of Muslims armed with knives. At least four Copts were injured, and there are indications that five or six others sustained light wounds that they did not report to the police. Two cars owned by Copts were also damaged. The EIPR learned that the Matariya police station filed a police report about the incident (no. 30195/2008) and arrested three Muslims and four Copts and referred them to the prosecutor's office, which released them within a week.

16. On 9 December 2008, a bus belonging to a Cairo church was pelted with stones on the road leading to the All Saints' Monastery in al-Tud, located in Luxor. Father Sarabamun al-Shayib, an official at the monastery, told EIPR researchers that the bus, owned by the Mar Girgis Church in Cairo, was on its way to the monastery when several "Muslim boys and youths" threw stones at it, breaking some windows on the bus and injuring a child among the passengers. He said that he had complained to security several times regarding similar assaults on visitors and priests with the monastery by residents of adjacent villages. He added that following the most recent attack Luxor security forces had secured the road leading to the monastery.

17. On the evening of 10 December 2008, hundreds of Muslims from the village of Kafr Farag Girgis, located in the Minya al-Qamh district of Sharqiya, gathered to protest village Copts conducting prayers for the first time inside a new service center. A church source told EIPR researchers that security intervened to disperse the crowd and closed the four-story building, sitting on a 200-meter plot of land, while also posting six guards to ensure that it remained closed. The source said that village Copts, who number 1,500, have been praying in a service center no bigger than 100 meters for decades and decided to establish another building. Since 1996 they have tried and failed to obtain a permit to renovate and expand the old structure, built in 1936, which has become in dilapidated conditions due to time and the effects of groundwater.

18. In mid-December 2008, the governorate of Fayoum and the Fayoum archbishopric dispensed compensation of LE100,000 (with equal contributions from both parties) to Copts harmed in the sectarian attacks that took place six months ago in the village of al-Nazla, located in the Youssef al-Siddiq district of Fayoum. On 20 June 2008, hundreds of Muslims in the village had attacked Coptic property and homes following rumors that the wife of a village Muslim, who had converted from Christianity to Islam two years earlier, had been kidnapped with her ten-month-old son by her Christian family in Cairo. During the ensuing attacks, several stores owned by village Copts were damaged, their contents stolen or destroyed; several homes were raided and looted; some homes and stores were torched; a car was smashed; the facade of the village church was damaged by stone-throwing; and the car of the church priest was vandalized (see paragraph 12 of the Second Quarterly Report, 2008).

Some of the victims told EIPR researchers that the total compensation covers no more than one-fourth the value of the losses. One victim added that the sum offered to him was so paltry he refused to take it. Nevertheless, the

victims said that the value of the compensation lies in its symbolic effect, not its equivalence to the material damages.

19. On 25 December 2008, hundreds of Muslims from the al-Iraq village in Alexandria's al-Amiriya area assembled outside the home of a Copt to protest his intention to turn a structure built on his private land into a church for village Copts. The owner of the land told EIPR researchers that the building belongs to the Association for Coptic Orthodox Reform in Alexandria, which is registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity. The 80 Coptic families in the village want to use the structure as a place for prayer and religious lessons since the nearest church is located 50 km away in the King Maryout area. The landowner added that he refused to acquiesce to a demand from the protesters that he sign a customary affidavit declaring that "the building is not a church and will not be used for prayer." He said that the assembled Muslims left when security forces arrived. Security also closed the building and posted a security detail outside it.

III. Prosecutions and other security interventions

20. On 3 October 2008, Hani Nazir Aziz turned himself in to the police at the Abu Tisht station in the Qena governorate. Reports in the press and online stated that Hani Nazir, a blogger and social worker at a school, found the police were looking for him in connection with rumors spreading in the village of al-'Aila in the Abu Tisht district that he had published material insulting to Islam on his blog. The reports added that he decided to turn himself in after the police detained his sister for three days to compel him to surrender. Father Kyrillos, the bishop of Naga' Hamadi, told EIPR researchers that a release order was issued for the blogger in late November 2008, but he remained in detention when this report was published in January 2009.

21. On 18 October 2008, the State Security Investigation office in Fayoum summoned three Christians with the evangelical community (two men and one woman) for questioning after receiving complaints from their neighbors and the guard of the building in which they live that they were placing Christian religious publications, flyers, and tapes in front of some of the apartments in the building. A source in the evangelical church told EIPR researchers that the three had been questioned for nearly three hours and released the same day.

22. At dawn on 27 October 2008, State Security Investigation officers in the governorate of Sharqiya arrested blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman due to his adoption of Qur'anist thought and his expression of it on his blog, Justice Freedom Peace. Police officers raided the blogger's home in the village of Abu Hereiz, located in the Kafr Saqr district of Sharqiya, and confiscated his personal computer and several books, CDs, and cassette tapes before taking him to an unknown location. On 29 October 2008, lawyers with the EIPR filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor (no. 17973/2008) asking that the detainee's location be disclosed and his family and attorney be allowed to visit him. The Interior Ministry then moved the blogger to the Tora Prison pursuant to an administrative detention order issued under the Emergency Law.

On 14 December 2008, a Supreme State Security Emergency Court issued an order ending Reda Abdel-Rahman's detention after a petition filed by the EIPR (no. 4823/2008). The Interior Ministry contested the decision, but the court rejected the appeal on 6 January 2009 and upheld its previous decision to release the detainee.

The detained blogger was questioned by the State Security prosecutor while in administrative detention, and on 6 December 2008, the prosecutor charged

him with "contempt of Islam" after questioning him about his religious beliefs and opinions, his faith in the Prophetic Sunna, and his manner of praying. The blogger was also questioned on 8 January 2009, after which the prosecutor ordered his release. Nevertheless, he was still unlawfully detained at the State Security complex in Zagazig when this report was published in mid-January.

The blogger, 32, is a social worker at a preparatory school run by al-Azhar. On his blog, in July 2008, he said that he had been summoned for questioning by the Azhar legal affairs office about articles he had published online. He said he was pressured and threatened to compel him to sign an affidavit pledging "not to publish any articles on the internet or any religious writings."

23. On 13 December 2008, Cairo airport police arrested Martha Samuel and her husband, Fadl Thabet, as they attempted to travel to Russia, after police officers discovered that Samuel's real name was Zeinab Said Abdel -Aziz and that she had falsified her personal identity card to show that she had converted to Christianity, and later married a Christian and obtained a passport using the falsified information. The same day, the police also arrested two administrative employees at the Murqusiya Church in Alexandria on charges of helping her obtain the falsified documents.

The Nuzha prosecutor's office ordered the release of the defendant's husband on 12 December 2008, but EIPR researchers received information indicating that he is still being detained in the Sidi Gaber police station in Alexandria and that he had been questioned by State Security Investigations officers in Alexandria more than once. The other three defendants were still in custody when this report was published.

IV. Laws, decrees, and political developments.

24. In the months of October, November, and December 2008, EIPR researchers documented the issuance of seven presidential decrees regarding churches, all of which concerned the renovation of existing churches. The details are as follows:

a. Decree 301/2008, 9 October 2008, for the evangelical community at the existing Nahdat al-Qadasa Church, located in al-Uqal al-Bahari, al-Badari district, Assyout governorate.

b. Decree 317/2008, 26 October, 2008, for the Coptic Orthodox community at the existing Archangel Michael Monastery, located in Naga al-Deir in the village of Awlad Yehya Bahari, Dar al-Salam district, Sohag governorate.

c. Decree 327/2008, 8 November 2008, for the Catholic Coptic community at the existing Church of the Virgin, located in al-Qatna, Tama district, Sohag governorate.

d. Decree 342/2008, 27 November 2008, for the evangelical community at the existing al-Balimuth Brothers Church, located in al-Tataliya, al-Qusiya district, Assyout governorate.

e. Decree 343/2008, 27 November 2008, for the Catholic Coptic community at the existing Church of the Virgin, located in al-Rahibat street, Sadafa district, Assyout governorate,

f. Decree 366/2008, 23 December 2008, for the evangelical community at the existing al-Rusuliya Church, located in Admu, Minya district, Minya governorate.

g. Decree 367/2008, 23 December 2008, for the evangelical community at the existing al-Ikhwa al-Murahhibin Church, located in al-Nekheila, Abu Tig district, Assyout governorate.

25. On 11 October 2008, the Interior Minister issued Decree 1814/2008, approving the election of the following people to the General Evangelical Council for an eight-year term, starting on 15 June 2008, and ending on 14 June 2016, to replace members of the council whose term had expired:

A. Elder. Samir Gaballah Matta, for the Delta Presbytery;

B. Dr. Nagi Helmi Rizqallah, for Mallawi Presbytery;

C. Dr. Hilmi Samuel Azer, for Assyout Presbytery; and
D. Pastor Dawoud Ibrahim Nasr, for Sohag and the upper regions' Presbyteries.

26. On 16 November 2008, the Interior Minister issued a decree appointing Ms. Eva Habil Kyrillos to the position of mayor in the village of Kom Buha, located in the Dayrut district of Assyout, for a term of five years. This is the first time that a Christian woman has been appointed mayor.

27. The daily independent *al-Masry al-Youm* reported on 30 October 2008 statements made by Minister of Culture Farouq Hosni during his meeting with members of the British Egyptian Business Association on 28 October during which he stressed the need to accept “earthly religions [*al-adyaan al-ardiyya*]” as part of the exercise of freedom of belief. The term is used normally to refer to religions or beliefs other than Islam, Christianity or Judaism. On 2 November 2008, the website of the Muslim Brothers reported that MP Abdel-Fattah Eid, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc, intended to file an urgent question for the Prime Minister and the Culture Minister, asking them to explain these remarks, which, they said, “contradict the established principles and traditions of the nation and the customs of the people.”

28. On 20 November 2008, local authorities in Alexandria demolished a service center in the King Maryout area in Alexandria belonging to the Abu Seifein Orthodox Church. The church's attorney, Joseph Malak, told EIPR researchers that the demolition was carried out pursuant to a demolition order issued on the grounds that the building was constructed without a permit. But the attorney said that the church had bought the land upon which the structure was built from a Christian, who had purchased it from the Maryout Agricultural Company, and that the church had built the service center after informing the security authorities, for use as a home for the elderly and orphans. The attorney added that the church had appealed the demolition order before the Alexandria Court of Administrative Justice as soon as it was issued (no. 6228/63), but local authorities demolished the building while the suit was still pending.

29. On 17 December 2008, the Nahdat al-Qadasa Church in the village of al-Muti'a, located in the Assyout district of Assyout, collapsed. Father Amgad Khalil, the supervisor of the Nahdat al-Qadasa churches in the governorate of Assyout, told EIPR researchers that the two-story church, which served nearly 200 Christian families, had not been renovated since it was built in 1930. For the last four years, he had tried unsuccessfully to obtain permission from the competent authorities to go ahead with repairs. He added that the

governor of Assyout issued an order approving renovations the same day the church collapsed.

V. Reports, publications, and activities

30. The "First Conference of Coptic Organizations in Europe" was held on 8 November 2008, in Paris, with associations from France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, Ireland, Hungary, Germany, and Sweden in attendance. The conference issued a declaration titled "Establishment of the European Union of Coptic Organizations for Human Rights". The declaration elaborated the objectives of the federation, including working to achieve "four requirements for the protection of the Copts: protection of the physical existence of Copts, as stated in the Convention on the Prevention of Genocide; the prevention of the Copts' forced population transfers; the prevention of cultural annihilation of Copts; and the abandonment of the culture of genocide."

31. On 5 December 2008, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies issued its first annual report, titled *From Exporting Terrorism to Exporting Repression: Human Rights in the Arab Region*. In the chapter on Egypt, the report devotes a special section to freedom of belief and minority rights, which refers to the arrest of Qur'anists in May 2008 and the problems faced by Christians who converted to Islam and wish to return to Christianity, as well as the court ruling issued in their favor in February 2008. The report also addresses the difficulties faced by Baha'is due to the refusal of the Civil Status Department to issue personal identification documents until they change their religion to one of the three recognized religions of Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, despite a court ruling issued in January 2008 that allows the slot for religious affiliation to be left blank or noted with a dash (—). The report discussed discrimination against Copts in Egypt in areas such as the construction of houses of worship, jobs, and academic curricula, and it cited the attack on the Abu Fana Monastery as an example of how the law is disregarded when resolving sectarian crises.