

not their religious affiliation in the mandatory section which permits only “Muslim, Christian, or Jew.” While an improvement from not having ID cards at all, Baha’is still were being denied the rights of other Egyptian citizens.

Now more than 18 months removed from the January 25 revolution, as many Egyptians still seek full freedom and equality, the plight of Egypt’s Baha’i community remains a powerful litmus test for where things might be headed. A recent spate of public statements and actions about the Baha’is by various entities in society provides a compelling indicator of the trajectory.

The religion dates back to the 1860s in Egypt. It formed a national governing body in 1924 and suffered only periodic verbal attacks by extremist clerics until president Gamal Abdel Nasser, allegedly under Islamist pressure, issued a decree in 1960 banning all Baha’i activities. For decades since, Baha’is have been harassed, vilified, discriminated against, and imprisoned because of their beliefs.

Over the years, Egypt’s government-controlled media has been a key propagator of false and inflammatory information about Baha’is. In a new Egypt, could things actually be changing for the worse? The appointment this month by the Shura Council of Gamal Abdel Rahim as chief editor of the state-controlled newspaper, Al-Ghomhurryia, bodes ill for Baha’is. Rahim was accused in 2009 of calling for the murder of a Baha’i activist on live television and inciting residents in Sohag to burn Baha’i homes. Three days after the program aired, arson destroyed several Baha’is houses in a Sohag village.

The denigration and repression of Baha’is in Egypt has been fueled by bogus and inflammatory accusations that state media and political and religious leaders have perpetuated for generations. They can be boiled down to three myths.

Myth #1: Baha’is are a Zionist entity and, therefore, not entitled to any rights. Last month, Mahmoud Ghozlan, a spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood, said Baha’is are of “Zionist origin” and, thus, should not be protected under the constitution to practice their faith publicly. What “origin” has to do with constitutional protections for any of Egypt’s citizens is anyone’s guess. Leaving this point aside, the particular accusation is baseless. It is leveled solely because the Baha’i world headquarters is in Haifa, Israel. This, however, was clearly not the preference of Baha’i leaders at the time. The faith’s founder, Baha’u’llah, was imprisoned and exiled throughout the region during Ottoman rule in the 1800s: from Iran and Iraq to Turkey and Palestine. Baha’u’llah died while under house arrest in 1892 in Acre, Palestine. It was his family and followers who established the administrative center of the faith there, more than a half century before 1948, the year the state of Israel was born. Moreover, based on the logic of his position, Ghozlan would be forced to call every resident of Palestine or Israel a Zionist. Clearly, that’s not what he meant, but this demonstrates the absurdity of his claim about the Baha’is. Of the nearly six million Baha’is

in the world today, fewer than 1,000 reside in what is now Israel. They serve as temporary volunteers at the Baha'i World Center and eventually return to their home countries after a short period.

Myth #2: Baha'is are a threat to national security. Like Myth #1, this dubious claim hinges on the location of the Baha'i world headquarters in Israel. This claim is made most frequently by conservative clerics such as Abdel Moneim al-Shahat, a prominent Salafi leader who reportedly once said that Islam forbids playing or watching soccer. In February, he stated that Baha'is are a security threat, claimed that Baha'is deserve no rights in a new constitution, and asserted that Baha'is should be tried for treason. Such irresponsible statements promote the further demonization of Baha'is in society and pour fuel on the fire of extremist attacks on Baha'is.

Myth #3: Baha'is are apostates from Islam and, therefore, should be eliminated by the state. Al-Shahat, and others like him cite Al-Azhar's fatwas declaring Baha'is as apostates. This accusation is based on numerous fatwas issued by the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar University over the years, most recently reiterated in 2003. The gist of the argument is a theological one, that Baha'is claim divine revelation after the Prophet Muhammad, which makes them apostates from Islam because, in their view, Muhammad was the last of the Prophets from God.

However, religion experts explain that the Baha'i faith emerged out of Islam similar to the way Christianity sprang from Judaism and is separate and distinct. In fact, in 1925, Egypt became the first predominantly Muslim state to recognize the Baha'i faith as an independent religion after an Egyptian court ruled that the faith indeed was separate from Islam, and consequently, Baha'is could not be deemed heretics or apostates. This ruling led to greater emancipation for the Egyptian Baha'is in the decades thereafter, and they were legally recognized in the 1930s until the 1960 ban. Since then, conservative clerics and political leaders alike have used Al-Azhar's fatwas and Nasser's ban to justify discrimination, vilification, and incitement.

The Egyptian Baha'i community appears destined toward experiencing another generation of marginalization and, perhaps, outright persecution. To be sure, no one expects the state-controlled press, Al-Azhar, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Salafists to agree with Baha'i views, or for that matter, cease from criticizing its theology. However, the burden rests on them to refrain from inciting violence and hatred, justifying repression on the basis of their faith, and calling for restricting Baha'i rights by insisting that only the "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) be protected by law. If all these entities truly espouse the principles of the January 25 revolution, they would champion the rights of all Egyptian citizens, regardless of religion or belief.

The burden is also on Egyptian human rights defenders and independent media to debunk the myths about the peaceful, law-abiding Baha'is and demand that they, along with their fellow Egyptians who are Muslims, including Sunni,

Shi'a, Sufi, and Quranist, Christians, Jews, atheists, and other persuasions, be protected under the same laws that apply to all citizens. There should be no distinction when it comes to the inalienable right of religious freedom.

Judging by Saad Eddin Ibrahim's sage words in 2006, Egypt's democratic transition appears to be headed in the wrong direction. It doesn't have to be that way.

Dwight Bashir is the Deputy Director for Policy and Research at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The views expressed here are his own, and may or may not reflect the views of the Commission.

METADATA

Views6660 views since posted 2012-08-22; last edit 2012-08-22 UTC;

previous at archive.org.../bashir_litmus_test_egypt

Language

English

Permission

fair use

Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/1829

Citation: ris/1829

select Collection:

Archives

Articles

Articles-unpublished

Audio

Bibliographies

BIC

Biographies

Books

Chronologies

Compilations

Compilations-NSA

Compilations-personal

Documents

East-asia

Encyclopedia

Essays

Etc

Excerpts

Fiction

Glossaries

Guardian

Histories

Introductory

Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations
Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:
author

title

date

tags

adv. search
languages

inventory

bibliography

abbreviations

links

[about](#)

[contact](#)

[RSS](#)

[new](#)

— A Baha'i Litmus Test for Egypt (Used by permission of the curator)