

The Situation of the Bahá'í Community of Egypt

The Bahá'í International Community — August 2005

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Introduction

Once among the most vibrant and active minority religious communities in the Middle East, the Bahá'ís of Egypt are now facing an upsurge of religious persecution and hatred that aims to eradicate the community as a coherent entity.

Of immediate concern is a Government decision, now being implemented, to computerize the national identity card system in a way that will exclude Bahá'ís, making them virtual non-citizens, without access to employment, education, and government services, including hospital care.

More broadly, the Bahá'í community of Egypt has been deprived of all rights as an organized religious community since 1960, when a sweeping Presidential Decree dismantled their religious institutions, banned Bahá'í activities, and enjoined the confiscation of all Bahá'í properties. No explanation for this official act was given. Since that time, the Bahá'í community of Egypt has been battered by periodic arrests, detentions, and imprisonments.

This summary provides an overview of the current situation facing the Bahá'í community of Egypt. It describes the Egyptian Government's effort to marginalize the Bahá'í community by using modern technology as a tool of religious repression. It examines the roots of the current persecution, detailing the little-known but dynamic history of the Bahá'í community of Egypt. And it outlines the Government's 45-year campaign to oppress the Bahá'í community. Supporting evidence, in the form of various documents, reports by human rights agencies and newspaper articles are also cited.

The hope is that by exposing this situation, international attention and diplomatic efforts can be mobilized to convince the Egyptian Government to act in a way that is in keeping with the various documents of international human rights law to which it is a party – and thereby to end the long night of unjust repression inflicted upon the Bahá'í community of Egypt.

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The Current Situation

Deprived of all rights as an organized religious community since 1960, the Bahá'í community of Egypt today faces a fresh crisis that aims to utterly destroy it as a viable religious community.

The current crisis stems from a Government decision, now being implemented, to computerize the national identity card system. The system has been set up to exclude Bahá'ís, depriving them of valid ID cards, making them virtual non-citizens, without access to employment, education, and all government services, including hospital care. Individuals without a valid ID card would even be unable to buy groceries from state markets. Already, a number of Bahá'í young people are currently without valid ID cards, a situation that has forced them out of universities and the army, placing them precariously on the margins of society.

Of equal concern, Bahá'ís have in recent months faced an upsurge in religious prejudice in Egyptian society at large. A number of attacks on Bahá'ís have been published in 2004 and 2005 in the Government-controlled news media. Likewise, in recent years, Muslim clerics in Egypt have issued “fatwas” against Bahá'ís.

A Bahá'í community of thousands, when the 1960 Presidential Decree was issued banning its activities, now shows some 500 members who are under strict and constant police surveillance. Periodically, their homes are searched and Bahá'í literature is taken away and destroyed. As Bahá'ís cannot legally marry, the entire community is without legal recourse in matters involving family allowances, pensions, inheritance, divorce, alimony or custody of children. The climate of hatred also creates a social stigma that affects education and employment.

ID Card Crisis

The immediate crisis concerns the Government's computerization of the national identification card system – an interesting conjunction of modern technology and the oppression of a religious minority.

All citizens must carry ID cards, which must be presented not only for any type of government service, such as medical care in a public hospital or processing for a property title or deed, but also

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to obtain employment, education, banking services, and many other important private transactions. ID cards are also required to pass through police checkpoints, and individuals without such cards are accordingly deprived of freedom of movement.

In Egypt, ID cards require a statement of religious affiliation. Moreover, the system allows for one of only the three recognized religions of Egypt — Islam, Christianity, or Judaism — to be entered.

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Bahá'ís have long refused as a matter of principle to falsely list themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jew. Not only would such a step constitute committing fraud against the state, but such a denial of faith would effectively play into the hands of those who seek to eliminate the Bahá'ís in Egypt.

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Bahá'ís have long refused as a matter of principle to falsely list themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jew. Not only would such a step constitute committing fraud against the state, but such a denial of faith would effectively play into the hands of those who seek to eliminate the Bahá'ís in Egypt. Accordingly, Bahá'ís have simply left the religious affiliation slot blank, made a dash, written “other,” or even sometimes boldly listed “Bahá'í.” With the old paper ID cards, Bahá'ís were thus able to obtain cards and survive as individuals in Egyptian society.

In the 1990s, the Government announced it would be upgrading its identification card system by issuing computerized cards that would be less susceptible to forgery. This, the Government indicated, would help to combat militant Islamic unrest, and improve data collection and access. The Government indicated the shift to the new system would be gradual, but set January 2005 as the deadline for everyone to have the new cards — a deadline which has apparently been extended to 2006.

The system has apparently undergone modifications since it was set up. In 2003, for example, four Bahá'ís sought and obtained new computerized cards in which the religious affiliation field listed “other” — a designation to which the Bahá'í community does not object. More recently, however, the software has been updated so that only one of the three recognized religions can be entered. If the field is left blank, the computer refuses to issue the card.

The Bahá'í community of Egypt has approached the Government on numerous occasions to plead for a simple change in the programming, if not the law, so that they could be issued valid ID cards under the new system. Such pleas, however, have been met with rejection and refusal.

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Accordingly, all members of the Egyptian Bahá'í community face the prospect of being left wholly without proper ID Cards by the year's end — a situation in which they would essentially be denied all rights of citizenship, and, indeed, would be faced with the inability even to withdraw their own money from the bank, get medical treatment at public hospitals, or purchase food from state stores.

Already, the Government has asked young people to start coming in for the new cards, and a number of Bahá'í youth have accordingly been stripped of paper identification cards. Once stripped of ID cards, Bahá'í youth essentially become prisoners in their own homes, since the authorities often set up evening checkpoints to verify the identity of young men. Individuals without proper ID face detention. Likewise, young people without ID cards are denied entrance and continuing enrollment in colleges and universities, as well as service in the armed forces.

Given the Government's refusal to make what would be the simplest of programming changes — such that the cards could be issued with a blank religious affiliation field or perhaps with the word “other” — one can only conclude that the ID card situation is in reality an attempt to further marginalize and eliminate the Bahá'í community of Egypt.

At one point, for example, Government officials offered Bahá'ís the possibility of using passports in lieu of ID cards — a ploy that would set the Bahá'ís apart or even drive them from their homeland. There is concern, as well, that refusing to list Bahá'í in any kind of national identification database enables the Government to officially proclaim that there are no Bahá'ís in the country.

Set against the burgeoning call for freedom and democracy in the Middle East, the Egyptian ID card “scam” offers an interesting twist in human rights oppression: the use of modern technology to nullify a community of one of the most progressive and peace-minded religious groups in the Middle East.

Attacks in the Media

All this comes against bland denials by the Egyptian Government that the Bahá'ís lack fundamental human rights — rights which are ostensibly outlined in the Egyptian Constitution and

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Indeed, the Government and its media have launched what amounts to a public campaign of the character of a chimera, proclaiming their adherence to the principles of human rights by publishing a series of inaccurate and negative articles about the Bahá'í Faith. No opportunity is given for the Bahá'ís to respond.

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On 23 July 2004, for example, a weekly magazine, *Rose el-Youssef*, published a lengthy article insinuating that the Bahá'í Faith was a “dangerous” force in Egyptian society.

Under the defiant headline “The Bahá'ís in Egypt enjoy all rights of citizenship,” the article claimed that Bahá'ís in Egypt have no human rights problems. “The Bahá'ís feel no threat or danger,” the article asserted, while at the same time noting that Bahá'í institutions are banned because they are “dangerous.” The article’s defensive tone was apparently inspired by the July 2004 visit of the United States Committee on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which in fact did meet with members of Egypt’s Bahá'í community as part of their investigation of religious freedom in Egypt.

“What is strange is with regards to the Bahá'ís, they are not suffering any persecution in Egypt,” the article said, referring to the inquiries made by the USCIRF.

Yet the bulk of the article went on to misrepresent Bahá'í teachings and practice. It was claimed, for example, that the Bahá'í teachings “cause strife and differences” among its believers; it asserted that Bahá'ís threaten the unity of Egyptian society.

The writer seemed to feel no need to check even technical facts readily available in libraries or through the Internet. The article states that the Faith, which is established in over 200 countries, is limited to only 35 nations, “mostly the United States of America and Israel.” The article also named as the representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations a man who has been dead since January 2001.

On 1 August 2004, similarly, *Nisf El Dunya* magazine published the first installment of a two-part article that also started by

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mentioning the July 2004 visit of the USCIRF. Once again, the article defended the Government's human rights record on the Bahá'ís, saying "Egypt does not know of any persecution of the followers of any denomination or religious sect..."

However, the article went on at considerable length about how the Bahá'í Faith is a "schismatic faction from under the cloak of Islam." It also repeated old but false attacks on the Bahá'í community of Egypt, implying that they were once spies for Israel and, previous to that, agents of British colonialists.

Fatwas against the Bahá'ís

The Bahá'í community of Egypt has also faced persecution and harassment from the religious orthodoxy in Egypt. Over the years, the Faith has been the subject of at least 15 "fatwas" that deride the Faith as a heresy and accuse its followers of apostasy, a charge which is punishable by death under traditional Islamic law (Shariah).

Most recently, for example, on 15 December 2003, a fatwa by the Islamic Research Academy of the well-known Al-Azhar University described the Bahá'í Faith as "a lethal spiritual epidemic in the fight against which the state must mobilise all its contingencies to annihilate it." The statement goes on ominously to demand "those [Bahá'ís] who have committed criminal acts against Islam and our country must disappear from life and not be allowed to announce their deviation from Islam."

Past fatwas have made similar pronouncements — and they have been repeated and reported on in the press, further fuelling the air of discrimination and oppression faced by Bahá'ís in Egypt.

Although the situation of the Bahá'ís of Egypt has certain parallels to the on-going persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, there are a number of differences: the community is much smaller (and therefore more vulnerable); the restrictions on activities are more explicit (spiritual and administrative institutions and all forms of assembly are banned); and the persecution comes at the behest of a secular government, albeit one that must pay political heed to the cross-currents of Islamic traditionalists.

What is similar to the situation in Iran is the profound hatred long expressed by Muslim orthodoxy towards the Bahá'í Faith.

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Less than non-entities

Against this backdrop, the continuing refusal of the Government to rescind the 1960 Presidential Decree banning Bahá'í institutions is made all the more ominous by the new threat involving computerized identification cards.

As noted, ID cards in general are required to receive virtually any social service. Over the years, Bahá'ís have managed to obtain legitimate ID cards by simply leaving the space designating “religion” blank – something that was possible with old style paper cards.

But once the computerized system is fully operational, if there is no change so as to allow Bahá'ís to register, a change that could be as simple as allowing “blank” or “other” to be input, the Bahá'ís of Egypt will become non-entities – or worse.

In January 2002, for example, an Egyptian Bahá'í went to a Civil Affairs Office to obtain a new ID card. The official refused to accept the form after noting the space indicating religion had been left blank. The Bahá'í was sent to a Directorate level office where he was handcuffed and blindfolded, and ultimately detained for five days. During that time, he was interrogated on such questions as “How did you become a Bahá'í?” and “What are the names of other Bahá'ís?” At one point during the interrogation, the officer took out his pistol, loaded it, and threatened the detainee, saying “Do you know what the penalty for apostasy is?” At another point, the officer said, “You have to be frank with me, or else I shall electrocute you, or break your bones.”

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History of the Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Egypt

Although it faced periodic episodes of religious discrimination through the early half of the 20th century, the Bahá'í community of Egypt's greatest challenge came in 1960, when President Gamal Abdul Nasser issued a decree dissolving all Bahá'í assemblies, banning Bahá'í activities, and confiscating all Bahá'í properties. The Decree remains in effect and is the underlying source of the Bahá'í community's oppression today.

Designated as Presidential Decree 263, the proclamation came without warning or explanation. In just six short paragraphs, issued on 19 July 1960, President Nasser effectively shut down the Bahá'í Faith as an organized religion in Egypt.

“All Bahá'í Assemblies and Centers existing in the two regions of the Republic are hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended,” states the opening paragraph of Decree 263/1960. “Individuals, bodies and institutions are forbidden to engage in any activity, as was conducted by these Assemblies and Centers.”

The Decree further stated that all “properties and possessions” of Bahá'í Assemblies and Centers would be taken over by the Ministry of the Interior. And, indeed, all Bahá'í properties – including the community's national headquarters building, its libraries and its cemeteries – as well as all Bahá'í funds and assets were soon confiscated. These assets have not been returned to this day. Some important properties, such as some 17,000 square meters of land along the Nile that Bahá'ís had purchased for a future House of Worship, were sold at public auction. Other confiscated Bahá'í properties were turned over to the Islamic Association for Teaching the Qur'an.

The Decree further made Bahá'í activities to be criminal offenses, punishable by a minimum imprisonment of six months and/or a fine of 100 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds.

No official reason was ever given for the Decree, and to this day the Bahá'í community of Egypt can only speculate about the Government's motivations. Recent accounts in the Egyptian press have connected the ban with old and entirely false accusations, which are also commonly given in Iran to justify the persecution

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of Bahá'ís there, that Bahá'ís are somehow spies for Israel — an accusation that arises because the Bahá'í World Centre is located in Haifa, Israel. A more likely answer is simply the intolerance that fundamentalist Muslims have for the Bahá'í Faith because of their belief that Muhammad is the “Seal of the Prophets” and no religion can therefore follow Islam.

Effects of the Decree

The Government initially promised that individuals would remain free to practice their religion. In keeping with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government, the Bahá'ís of Egypt duly disbanded their institutions immediately. The Faith's members shifted to a footing that emphasized quiet worship by individuals and families, with limited social and educational activities focused on internal development.

Unfortunately, Bahá'ís in Egypt have nevertheless faced episodes of harsh persecution, along with continuous restrictions on their personal, religious and social activities.

Since 1960, groups of Bahá'ís have been imprisoned on charges related to the Decree and solely because of their religious convictions at least seven times. These episodes include:

- In May 1965, 39 Bahá'ís were arrested and accused of having re-established the Bahá'í administration, and of having held meetings in their homes to which Muslims were invited for the purpose of teaching them the Faith. The court trial continued until 10 November 1977, when the case was thrown out of court.
- In June 1967, immediately after the armed conflict between Egypt and Israel, a number of Bahá'ís were held in detention camps for about six months. They were detained without charges or explanation. During their incarceration, they were physically abused, inadequately fed, and prevented from sleeping.
- In February 1985, 41 Bahá'ís were arrested on the charge of running a group aimed at resisting the basic principles of the State. A subsequent trial generated an intense and widespread campaign in the Egyptian press, featuring more than 200 newspaper articles, that denounced the Bahá'í Faith

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as an apostasy whose members deserved the death penalty. In May 1987, the courts sentenced the Bahá'ís to three years imprisonment with labor. The verdict aroused protest in Western circles, and the decision was overturned on appeal, with all 41 Bahá'ís being ultimately acquitted.

- In March 1997, three Bahá'ís in Al Ghardaqa were arrested. They were questioned directly about Bahá'í belief and teachings. After ten days, they were released without explanation.
- In January 2001, 16 Bahá'ís in Shawraniya near Sohag were arrested in January 2001, on the accusation of “immorality,” according to the semi-official newspaper *Al-Ahram*. The 16 were held for nearly nine months at a Cairo prison but all were ultimately released without charge or explanation.

Both the arbitrary restrictions and the incidents of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment have created a climate of fear that effectively suppresses the Bahá'í community. Moreover, Egyptian legal decisions upheld against the Bahá'ís over the years have reduced them to second-class citizens in matters of family, education, and employment.

Bahá'í marriages are not legally recognized in Egypt, a fact that affects a whole range of family issues. Individuals have no recourse on inheritance, pension, alimony, child maintenance, and divorce. Unrecognized marriage is regarded as cohabitation, equivalent with adultery in Middle Eastern countries like Egypt, and children are stigmatized as illegitimate.

Freedom of worship, likewise, is severely restricted. The Egyptian courts have consistently interpreted Decree 263 as a general ban even on any type of community worship or observance by Bahá'ís, as well as a ban on teaching other people about the Bahá'í Faith. On 27 April 1967, for example, the court of first instance of Al-Zaytoun issued a judgment that even organizing studies based on Bahá'í books or the exchange of Bahá'í materials could be punishable by the Decree.

Bahá'ís have also faced discrimination in education and employment. In 1983, for example, a young Bahá'í was expelled from the University of Alexandria because he insisted on listing his religious affiliation as Bahá'í.

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The Decree and International Law

By any moral standard, the Decree is unfair and unjust. The principles of the Bahá'í Faith stress obedience to duly constituted governments, and the Bahá'ís of Egypt, in keeping with the teachings of their Faith, do not and have never become involved in partisan politics. They are committed to non-violence. They desire only to be recognized as full citizens of their country, actively promoting the progress and advancement of Egyptian society at large. The persecution and discrimination they face comes only because of their religious beliefs.

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In theory, the Egyptian Constitution upholds freedom of religious belief. However, The Egyptian Supreme Court issued a decision in 1975 that upholds the Decree. The Court characterized the Bahá'í belief system as “evil,” immoral, and a threat to public order. As the “Constitution guarantees the freedom of practice only to those religions recognized by Islam, i.e., Judaism and Christianity,” the Court concluded that: “Belief in the Bahá'í Faith is considered apostasy. Therefore, the practice of that Faith is against Public Order, which is essentially based on Islamic Law (Shariah).”

However, religious discrimination such as that faced by the Bahá'ís of Egypt is clearly counter to international human rights treaties and covenants to which Egypt is a party. Specifically, Egypt was one of 48 members of the United Nations that in 1948 jointly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which recognizes that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” including the right “to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance,” either alone or as a community.

Moreover, Egypt in 1982 ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, an international treaty that further codifies the rights outlined in the UDHR. The Covenant even more clearly spells out the right to freedom of religion, stating in Article 18 that:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others

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and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

While Egyptian Government officials have told the United Nations that the “public order” provision of Article 18 applies in their refusal to recognize the Bahá'í Faith as a legitimate religion, international human rights experts have rejected Egypt's argument and stated that Article 18 clearly applies to Egypt in the case of the Bahá'ís.

In 1993, for example, the UN Human Rights Committee that oversees implementation of the Covenant, said this about Egypt's compliance under the treaty in relation to Bahá'ís: “[T]he Committee is worried about restrictive legal provisions existing in Egypt with regard to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, assembly and association. Restrictions not in conformity with article 18 of the Covenant regarding various religious communities or sects, such as Baha'is, are a matter of particular concern.”

The Bahá'í Faith is, of course, widely recognized as an independent world religion, clearly falling under the terms of the Covenant. And even if Egyptian statements that the Faith is an apostasy were to be accepted, it would nevertheless be no excuse under the framework of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Through the years, Bahá'ís have fought for their rights in the courts — with no success. They have also sought to deliver corrective statements to the press, virtually none of which have been published. Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community have also sought redress for their co-religionists in Egypt at various international forums. Bahá'ís can only guess at the reasons for the Government's unresponsiveness.

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Incitement to Hatred

Although Egypt's secular Government is not formally bound by traditional Islamic law under the Constitution, it has nevertheless apparently paid close attention to the fatwas issued by the Islamic hierarchy.

The source of many of the fatwas and statements against the Bahá'ís is the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar University, which, as noted, issued the 15 December 2003 fatwa, along with numerous others. Often containing a profuse amount of erroneous information about the history, teachings and practices of the Bahá'í Faith, these fatwas and statements essentially boil down to a venomous portrayal of the Faith as a heretical “false creed,” while characterizing its followers as “unclean,” “infidels,” and/or “immoral.” Some of the fatwas also wrongly connect the Faith with Zionism and/or colonialism – buzzwords that seem calculated to incite hatred.

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Members of the Academy of Islamic Research of the Al-Azhar University are government appointees, whose salaries come out of the public purse, thus giving these fatwas tacit official approval.

While Bahá'ís cannot presume to know the precise motivation for such attacks, they believe that they stem in large part from the characteristic sense of misunderstanding and fear that often occurs when a new religion emerges from the matrix of a well-established orthodoxy. It is a pattern that has been repeated through the ages; virtually all of the world's great religions have faced intense persecution in their early years.

Central to Bahá'í belief is the idea that God has progressively revealed religious truth to humanity through a series of Divine Messengers, each of Whom has founded a great religion. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad; the most recent of such Messengers is Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), who lived in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Palestine.

The idea that there should be new Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy. In the Qur'an, Muhammad referred to Himself as the “Seal of the Prophets,” and most Muslim scholars interpret this to mean that He would be the last Messenger of God. Many of the Egyptian fatwas make

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reference to this point – albeit with much irrational vituperation against the Bahá'í view.

Bahá'ís, however, believe that the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh pose no contradiction to Islamic teachings or those of any of the other revealed religions. Bahá'ís understand that Muhammad ended or “sealed” the prophetic cycle. Then, in fulfillment of the promise found in all of the world's religions for a long anticipated era of peace and enlightenment, Bahá'u'lláh brought new teachings suitable for the creation of a peaceful and prosperous global civilization.

Further, Bahá'u'lláh advocated a series of progressive social principles. These include: equality between women and men; the elimination of all forms of prejudice; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the independent investigation of truth; the harmony of science and religion; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

As well, some fundamentalist Muslims find the progressive nature of these teachings, such as the equality of the sexes and the harmony of science and religion, as antithetical to Islam.

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History of the Bahá'í Community of Egypt

The Bahá'í community of Egypt was once among the most vibrant and active in the Middle East, with Spiritual Assemblies and local groups established throughout the country, and an impressive array of administrative, educational, and social institutions.

The community was among the first to be established outside of Iran, birthplace of the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'í merchants settled in Alexandria and Cairo in the 1860s. In the mid-1890s, one of the most respected early Bahá'í scholars, Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, arrived in Cairo. He subsequently lectured at Al-Azhar, where his scholarship attracted many adherents to the Faith.

By 1900, a number of Arabic language Bahá'í books were being published in Cairo, and Egypt had become a transit point for Western Bahá'ís coming to and from Acre in what was then Palestine, where the son of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was imprisoned.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, himself, visited Egypt in September 1910, shortly after his release from prison, and there made the acquaintance of a number of intellectuals and other influential figures. He had already won the sympathy and interest of the most prominent of these liberal Islamic thinkers, Muhammad Abduh, who had spent time with him in Beirut during the 1880s. The two had subsequently maintained a correspondence on the subject of Islamic reform. On his return to Egypt, Abduh was appointed Grand Mufti and became a leading teacher at Al-Azhar University. He extended a particularly warm welcome to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, despite the opposition of some of the more insular elements in his own intellectual circle.

Significantly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent a total of almost two years in Egypt, visiting on two other occasions. He became quite well known and influential – as evidenced by extensive press coverage in Egypt of his funeral in 1921. For Bahá'ís around the world, the extended visits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá give Egypt a special significance.

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The growth and progress of the Bahá'í Faith in Egypt, however, did not come without opposition. In particular, fundamentalist Muslims launched periodic attacks on the Faith and its followers throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

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The Bahá'í community of Egypt grew steadily among the general population during the period from the turn of the century to the mid-1920s, and included individuals from minority groups such as those of Kurdish, Coptic, and Armenian origin. A photograph from the early 1920s, for example, shows some 47 Bahá'ís in Port Said. And Bahá'í communities in Cairo, Port Said, and Alexandria were sufficiently prosperous to be able to send to the United States of America a donation to help fund the construction of a Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the West.

In 1924, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt was formed. This represents the highest administrative body on a national level in the Bahá'í Faith, a sign of a community's maturity.

Opposition Grows

The growth and progress of the Bahá'í Faith in Egypt, however, did not come without opposition. In particular, fundamentalist Muslims launched periodic attacks on the Faith and its followers throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

A 1925 court proceeding, over whether the marriages of Muslim women to Bahá'í men should be annulled, focused the issue of whether the Bahá'ís should be considered heretics. Its proceedings offer a glimpse into the one of the main reasons for Muslim intolerance for the Bahá'í Faith in Egypt — and, in an ironic twist, its resolution did much to establish the independent nature of the Faith.

In handing down its opinion over whether three Muslim women in the province of Beni Suef in Upper Egypt should be forced to divorce their Bahá'í husbands, the Appellate Court of Beba wrote:

...God sent His Messenger and Prophet, Muhammad, as a blessing to the world. This blessing He put in the form of the religion of Islam, the last of the heavenly religions. It has abrogated all other religions and can be repealed by none, until the world shall perish.... To depart from Islam is heresy and... religious law states that heresy dissolved the contract of marriage.

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At the same time, however, the Court also undertook a careful study of the Bahá'í Faith and concluded that:

The Bahá'í Faith is a new religion, entirely independent, with beliefs, principles and laws of its own, which differ from, and are utterly in conflict with, the beliefs, principles and laws of Islám. No Bahá'í, therefore, can be regarded a Muslim or vice-versa, even as no Buddhist, Brahmin, or Christian can be regarded a Muslim or vice-versa.

This opinion, that the Bahá'í Faith is indeed independent from Islam, ultimately contributed to the wider recognition of the Faith by government authorities. At one point in the 1930s, a member of the Egyptian Parliament made a public tribute to the Faith. And in 1934, the National Spiritual Assembly achieved legal incorporation. As well, authorities allocated four plots to serve as Bahá'í cemeteries in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Isma'iliyyih, having decided it would not be lawful for Bahá'ís to be buried in Muslim cemeteries.

In May 1944, the community celebrated the Centenary of the Faith's founding in an impressive and newly completed national headquarters building in Cairo. More than 500 Bahá'ís from around the country attended, along with some 50 guests who were Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

At the same time, however, such progress disturbed fanatic elements in Egyptian society. In the early 1940s, the custodian of the national headquarters building was at one point beaten, suffering a broken arm. In Tanta, a Muslim leader lectured against the Faith, leading to violent demonstrations against the small Bahá'í community there.

Post-war Flourishing

By 1946, local Spiritual Assemblies — freely elected local governing councils that oversee all spiritual and administrative activities in a given locality — were functioning in seven cities. In a number of cities, women were elected as members. Also, Bahá'ís had founded libraries in many of those cities, and several Bahá'í cemeteries had also been established. In another sign of the community's vitality, money was frequently given in support of Bahá'í projects in other parts of the world.

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During the 1940s and 1950s, as well, Bahá'í festivals and public meetings were commonly publicized in the media and regular Bahá'í meetings were open to the public. Official statistical publications listed the Bahá'í Faith among the religious movements active in Egypt. In April 1955, the community purchased some 17,000 square meters of land on the banks of the Nile for use as the future site of a Bahá'í House of Worship. By the late 1950s, local Assemblies had been established in 13 cities and towns, and Bahá'í groups existed in another 11 localities. By one count, there were more than 5,000 Bahá'ís in Egypt at this time.

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All of this changed without warning or explanation in 1960 when President Gamal Abdul Nasser signed a short, six paragraph Decree stating that “all Bahá'í Assemblies and Centres” are “hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended. Individuals, bodies and institutions are warned to refrain from any activity.” All Bahá'í properties — including the national headquarters building, the libraries and cemeteries — as well as all Bahá'í funds and assets were confiscated. The assets have not been returned to this day.

The government promised that individuals would remain free to practice their religion. In keeping with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government, the Bahá'ís of Egypt duly disbanded their institutions immediately. The Faith's members shifted to a footing that emphasized quiet worship by individuals and families, with limited social and educational activities focused on internal development. Unfortunately, they have nevertheless faced episodes of harsh persecution, along with continuous restrictions on their personal, religious and social activities.

Excerpts from Recent Human Rights Reports

From the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Spring 2005, “Policy Focus: Egypt”:

During the Commission’s [2004] visit to Egypt, interlocutors cited an increased tendency by Muslim clerics to view Baha’is as a heretical sect of Islam rather than an independent religious movement. When asked why in practice the right to freedom of religion of the Baha’i community is not protected under the Egyptian Constitution, government officials said that Islam recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Nevertheless, Egyptian officials claimed that Baha’is are free to practice their religion in private. Various Egyptian religious leaders and government officials made spurious claims to the Commission, without any evidence, that Baha’is have engaged in political activity against the Egyptian government in the past and that the community practices immoral acts, such as “wife-swapping.” The absence of facts to support such authoritative denunciations apparently made no difference to the officials who made the slanderous statements...

The Egyptian government requirement to include religious affiliation on the national identity card particularly affects members of the Baha’i community and Muslim converts to Christianity. The Egyptian government has now made it illegal to be in public without an identity card. The identity card is also necessary to engage in many basic transactions such as opening a bank account, buying a car, or obtaining a driver’s license. Furthermore, identity cards are necessary to verify the religion of a student so that he or she may receive religious instruction in primary and secondary schools – as required by the Egyptian Constitution – according to his or her beliefs.

From the 2005 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir:

Finally, the Special Rapporteur noted that according to information received, Bahá’is were not allowed to indicate their religion on the birth certificates of their children. In one case, when filling out the birth registration form for their newborn, the

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During the year, Baha'is and other religious groups who did not choose to describe themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, were compelled either to misrepresent themselves as members of one of these three religions, or to go without valid identity documents, passports, birth and death certificates, and marriage licenses.

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parents reportedly left the space for religion blank, knowing that “Bahá'í” would not be accepted. A ruling dated 16 September 2003, issued by the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, allegedly asserts that it is not permissible to leave the space for religion blank on an official registration form, nor is it permissible to write (in that blank) any religion other than those recognized — Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Moreover, the ruling goes on to state that it is not permissible for the father of any child to follow the Christian faith and for the mother to be a Muslim, “as this violates the public order”, whereas in the present case the father was allegedly of Christian background and the mother of Muslim background. Moreover, a recent fatwa issued by the Al-Azhar Islamic Research Academy in Cairo allegedly declared the Bahá'ís apostates.

... she notes that the Government has not given its observations on...the question relating to the Bahá'ís. Recalling the most recent concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee (CCPR/CO/76/EGY), she encourages the Government to continue taking all necessary measures to ensure freedom of religion to all without discrimination

*From the 2004 United States State Department
Human Rights Report:*

Law 263 of 1960, which is still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities. During the Nasser era, the Government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries. The problems of Baha'is, who number fewer than 2,000 persons in the country, have been compounded since the MOI [Ministry of Interior] began to upgrade its automation of civil records, including national identity cards. The Government asserted that its new software requires all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews, although some Baha'is initially received identity cards which listed their religion as “other.” During the year, Baha'is and other religious groups who did not choose to describe themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, were compelled either to misrepresent themselves as members of one of these three religions, or to go without valid identity documents, passports, birth and death certificates, and marriage licenses. Most Baha'is have chosen the latter course. The Government's

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unwillingness to issue Baha'is identity cards and other necessary documents made it increasingly difficult for Baha'is to register their children in school, to open bank accounts, and to register businesses. At year's end, some Baha'is reported that government representatives had offered them passports, but no other documents. The Baha'i leadership noted that while this would enable them to leave the country, it would not facilitate their continued residence in the country.

From the 2004 United States Committee on International Religious Freedom Report:

The Constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religion, although the Government places restrictions on this right. According to the Constitution, Islam is the official state religion and Shari'a (Islamic law) is the primary source of legislation; religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of Shari'a are prohibited. However, since the Government does not consider the practice of Christianity or Judaism to conflict with Shari'a, for the most part members of the non-Muslim minority worship without harassment and may maintain links with coreligionists in other countries. Members of religions that are not recognized by the Government, such as the Baha'i Faith, may experience personal and collective hardship....

*From Human Rights Watch, 2004
"Overview of Human Rights Issues in Egypt":*

Although Egypt's constitution provides for equal rights without regard to religion, discrimination against Egyptian Christians and intolerance of Baha'is and minority or unorthodox Muslim sects remains a problem. Egyptian law recognizes conversions to Islam but not from Islam to other religions. There are credible reports that Muslims who convert to Christianity sometimes face harassment. Difficulties in getting new identity papers have resulted in the arrest of converts to Christianity for allegedly forging such documents. Baha'i institutions and community activities are prohibited by law. The authorities have detained and prosecuted individuals adhering to or promoting non-orthodox Islamic sects on grounds of insulting one of the "heavenly religions" — Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

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The Special Rapporteur, recalling the observations made in his previous report to the General Assembly (A/57/274) concerning action taken by the Egyptian authorities to contain and prevent displays of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, urges that this positive approach should not incidentally lead to discrimination against certain religious minorities.

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From the 2003 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Abdelfattah Amor:

On 11 April 2002, the Special Rapporteur sent the Egyptian Government a communication in connection with information according to which Salwa Iskandar Hanna has allegedly been denied her husband's pension since his death in February 2002, because the Government does not recognize Baha'i marriages.

The Special Rapporteur was also informed of the publication of an article in the daily *Al-Ahram* of 11 July 2002 in which the author allegedly said that anyone converting to the Baha'i religion should be considered apostate and executed if the apostasy persists.

The Special Rapporteur, recalling the observations made in his previous report to the General Assembly (A/57/274) concerning action taken by the Egyptian authorities to contain and prevent displays of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, urges that this positive approach should not incidentally lead to discrimination against certain religious minorities. Moreover, while recalling the need to respect freedom of the press, he wishes to draw the attention of the Egyptian authorities to the necessity of combating any call for religious hatred that incites discrimination, hostility or violence and which therefore must be prohibited by law.