

## **The Fifteenth Forum on National, Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities**

**Geneva – 01/12/2022 – 02/12/2022**

Thank you Mr President.

My name is **Mamdouh Nakhla**, and I am a lawyer and Director of the **WORD** Organization for Human Rights. I speak in my capacity as a representative of the Coptic minority in Egypt, which numbers approximately 17 million individuals at the last estimate. The Egyptian government persists in its claims that official statistics on the grounds of religion do not exist, as the census records have lacked such a field since 1986 in the first instance. This claim is contradicted by reality, as all identity documents in Egypt contain a field for religion, such as: the national ID card; birth, death, marriage, and divorce certificates; contracts for the sale and purchase of real estate; powers of attorney; as well as school, university, and higher education certificates.

The government is also making excuses when it denies applications for the construction of places of worship for one of the religious sects, by claiming that their numbers do not warrant a place of worship in the area.

Firstly: The WORD Organization endorses the decision by Egyptian President, **Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi**, to appoint a Coptic judge as the President of the highest constitutional court in the country. However, at the same time Copts continue to suffer discrimination in relation to occupying senior ranks in the judiciary, police, military, diplomatic and consular sector, educational institutions, as well as in the media, arts, and sports.

Secondly: The Al-Azhar Foundation (which is a religious Islamic foundation) receives funding from the state, which is paid for by taxpayers, whether from amongst the majority or from religious minorities. This funding amounts to approximately three and a half billion Egyptian pounds. However, the state refuses to allow non-Muslim students to attend its university, which include practical colleges, such as, medicine, engineering, agriculture, commerce, as well as languages and translation. Naturally, these are not religious colleges operating under the pretext that they are limited to graduating Muslim preachers alone!

Thirdly: Consecutive governments continue to pursue activists from religious minorities claiming that they disrespect the Islamic religion and pursuant to Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code. However, they also continue to deliberately ignore those that abuse members of other religions, not only in the private media, but also in the state affiliated official media.

Therefore, we advise that the Egyptian government should:

Firstly: Permit acceptance of non-Muslim students into non-religious colleges at the Al-Azhar University.

Secondly: Rescind Article 98(f) of the Penal Code. In the instance that the article is retained, it should be applied to all citizens, without exception, pursuant to the principles of equality and constitutional legitimacy.

Thirdly: Adhere to international human rights law by amending legislation to guarantee the freedom of religion and belief, to eradicate all forms of religious discrimination, and to guarantee the freedom to practice religious rites.

**We submit the following recommendations to the forum:**

Firstly: the establishment of a new authority within the framework of country specific procedures by appointing a special rapporteur concerned with human rights in Egypt.

Secondly: to invite the special rapporteur concerned with minority issues to visit Egypt and observe the situation of religious minorities (particularly the Coptic minority), which suffer from discrimination in relation to occupying senior positions in government and the media, as well as with regards to the building of places of worship.

Thanks to the President and attendees for listening.