

Egypt eases restrictions on repairing churches: Mubarak reforms 19th-century law

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Christian churches in Egypt, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, will be able to carry out long-delayed repairs thanks to a decree by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The decree was made in response to appeals from Egypt's community of 7 million to 10 million Christians, who say they are systematically discriminated against due to their status as a religious minority. International human rights groups have also pressured the Egyptian government to deal with all religions in an equal manner.

Mubarak decided to reform the Hamayouni Decree, an Ottoman law dating back to 1856, which required the president's personal approval for the simplest of church repairs. The Egyptian media announced the reform on December 8.

In accordance with the decree, the government now has 30 days during which to approve church requests for renovations. Governors—the officials entrusted with making church-related decisions—must justify a rejection.

The government has approved only 12 requests for church-related construction, the U.S. State Department said in its 2005 International Religious Freedom Report.

Jubilee Campaign, an interdenominational Christian human rights group based in England, said in a 2004 report that Egypt's Copts, who constitute about 90 percent of the country's Christians, have faced an uphill battle with regard to repairs and building rights.

As an example, the organization noted that "permission has been denied for the last four years to build a toilet for St. Mary's Church in El Kosai in Assiut Province."

Jubilee Campaign asserted that militant Muslims have been known to set up makeshift mosques near the site of planned churches or beside churches in need of

repair, thereby giving the government a legal pretext for preventing construction or repair.

Safwat El Baiady, president of the Protest Churches of Egypt, told Compass Direct, a Christian news agency, that the decree “will solve almost 80 percent of our problems, rebuilding old churches, but we have to be very frank: it doesn’t solve all our problems.” *-Religion News Service*