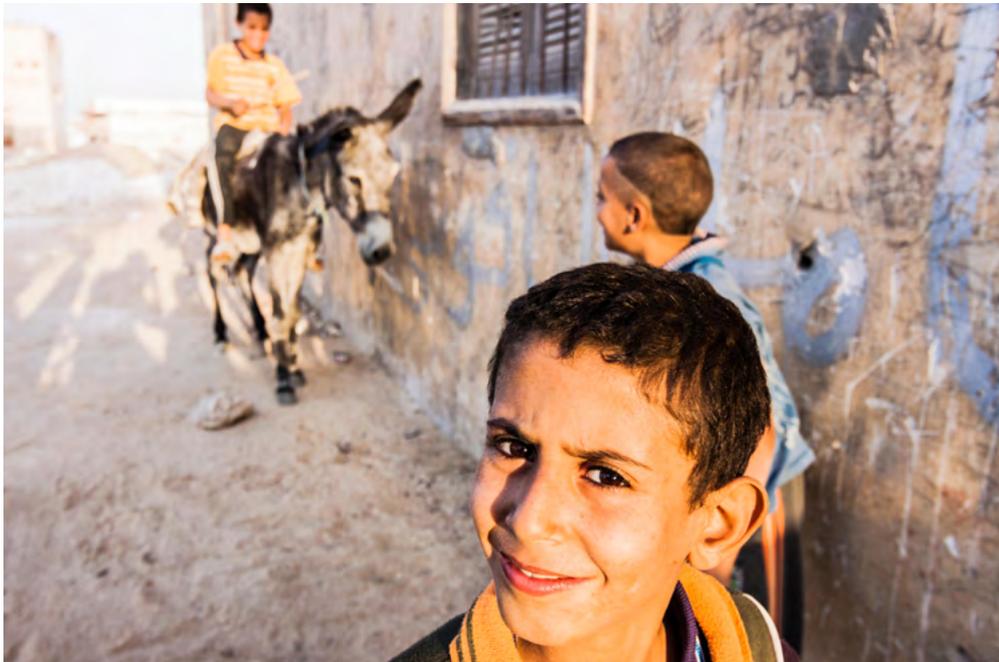# Egypt: Copts continue to suffer the effects of hate speech online

Coptic children in Minya, Egypt. *Credit: Luis Dafos / Alamy*

The proliferation of social media networks and the expansion of internet use has led to new challenges related to monitoring and preventing hate speech. Depending on the structure and nature of the platform used, social media can help to counter hate or allow its spread through more decentralized means.

And while international law calls for the prohibition of hate speech, the ways different governments respond to the threat it poses vary widely – and in some cases governments can actively contribute to its proliferation online.

In Egypt, hate speech persists for a variety of structural reasons. These include the inability of the state, through its justice and public educational institutions, to mediate differences between ethnic and religious groups, not to mention its failure to institutionalize minority rights, thus keeping communities in a perpetual state of low-level conflict. The lack of legislation defining hate speech, let alone prohibiting it, has meant it remains a grey area in Egyptian law, with no measures in place to monitor or prevent it.

This has left intercommunal relations vulnerable to manipulation, as is evident in mainstream media where, depending on the political context, different messages are communicated at different times, including hate speech. A case in point is the Al Youm Al Sabi online news site and newspaper, which in November 2019 featured a piece by the chief editor entitled 'Muslim Brotherhood, Jews and Shiites: The trinity of evil in the world', before widespread condemnation led to the piece being taken down from the site. However, on social media, the situation is more fluid as threads of hate speech can go unnoticed, despite the harm they cause.

The attacks against the Copts of Kom al-Raheb

Kom al-Raheb, a village in Samalut, Minya, is home to around 2,500 Copts. For years they have not been able to get a formal permit to build their church. Part of the reason is the resistance of some Muslims in the village on the basis that the presence of a church would be against their religious beliefs. With no other church nearby, however, the Copts eventually decided to use a house for prayer. On 10 December 2018, the first mass was held in the building, only to end with security forces demanding its immediate closure, deeming that it was illegal to pray in a building that had not been

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registered as a church. This was despite the fact that Law 80/2016 on church construction, passed two years before, does not view the holding of a mass in a house as illegal, and indeed bans the closure of any place which has religious rituals conducted in it.

The next day, Copts stood outside the building to protest its closure and to prevent the removal of the electricity and water meters by the local authority, which would have effectively rendered the building uninhabitable. These protests were followed by violent attacks by some Muslim residents on Coptic homes in the village. Importantly, some of the assailants were incited through Facebook to engage in these assaults, using a number of different narratives that sought to exploit communal tensions. First, they actively exploited religion to mobilize other Muslims, using verses from the Qur'an to justify their claims. They also identified themselves as representing the pure faith which, they argued, bans any temples or churches for non-Muslims. By contrast, other Muslims who felt that their Christian neighbours had a right to build their own place of worship were called 'traitors' and accused of accepting 'hush money' to allow the church to be built. The perpetrators on Facebook also argued that the Copts had brought 'strife' to the village by wishing to build a church, calling them 'dogs' who would have to pay 'a heavy price'.

While this undoubtedly constitutes the sort of 'incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence' that is explicitly prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), contributing directly to the attacks that ensued, in the absence of effective legislation incidents such as this can easily go unpunished. While the Egyptian Constitution was amended in 2019 specifically to criminalize incitement to hatred, there is no corresponding provision that punishes hate speech. Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, commonly known as the blasphemy law, punishes speech that constitutes 'contempt for one of the divine religions'. While this law is frequently used to target freedom of expression and any perceived criticism of the official interpretation of Islam, it fails to protect citizens belonging to other faiths as well as those such as agnostics and atheists who do not subscribe to any religion at all. While a number of laws were developed to deal with online crimes, including Law 175/2018 (the IT law) that came into effect in August 2018, just a few months before the attacks in Samalut, none of these laws have been invoked in the official response.

Following the attacks, police forces arrested individuals from both sides and then established a 'reconciliation

session' – an extra-legal proceeding commonly used in the wake of communal violence that typically 'mediates' an informal resolution between groups without distinguishing between the perpetrators of the violence (usually belonging to the majority) and its victims (overwhelmingly members of minorities). The session ruled that the church issue be completely left to the state authorities, despite their failure to allow its construction for the previous three decades, and that no party should intervene in the case again. Hence, the de facto decision was that the Copts would continue to be denied a place of worship for fear of provoking some of their Muslim neighbours – a situation that favoured the existing balance of power in the village rather than the rights of the minority.

Indeed, what is online is impacted by that which is offline and impacts it in return. On the one hand, as the Kom al-Raheb case shows, social media can be a catalyst for hate speech and violent attacks when left unchecked – hence the need for more effective monitoring and reporting of hate speech online. At the same time, beyond the internet, there is a wider failure to ensure that rights are guaranteed for all, including the rights of religious minorities to practise their religion.

Local authorities repeatedly favour decisions that maintain the existing status quo and often perpetuate discrimination against minorities. In some parts of the country, there is also a social acceptance of negative speech against non-Muslims that is not being adequately challenged by Egypt's educational institutions. This in turn is reflected in the absence of meaningful institutional mechanisms to identify and punish hate speech against minorities. While there are many important steps that can be taken to curb the prevalence of hate speech on social media, including systematic monitoring and reporting, there also needs to be a broader transformation of Egyptian politics and society in general.

With clear legal protections for all religions in place and a concrete commitment to minority rights, as well as a just and equitable system of governance that respects human rights, hate speech on Egyptian social media would likely be far less prevalent than it is today. In the meantime, the situation online will continue to replicate the same climate of hostility and discrimination for minorities that they experience in their daily lives.