



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Egypt: Coptic Christians

SPEECH

Monday, 21 June 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Georganas, Steve, MP

Source House
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Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (7.21 pm)—I rise in support of this motion on behalf of the Coptic congregation and community in and around my electorate of Hindmarsh and, of course, those further afield who are concerned by the persecution taking place in Egypt. Father Philopos Boghdady, of Adelaide's Saint Mary and Saint Bishoy Coptic Orthodox Church, and his congregation have welcomed me with open arms to many of their community events and services. I have learnt of the intimidation of Coptic Christians in Egypt and the dangers that threaten their lives. Of course, this is of most grave concern. I have been invited to share in the warmth and hospitality of the local Coptic Church congregation and I appreciate the good works of His Grace Bishop Suriel, the head of the Coptic Church in Australia and New Zealand, whom I have met on a number of occasions. But Coptic Christians have endured an unprecedented increase in blatant hostility in the country of their church's origin. As we heard earlier, we are talking about a Christian Church whose origins are very old. The Coptic Christians have been in Egypt since the early days of the Byzantine Empire. Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai dates back to the 6th century and has been in use as a centre of Christian teaching and learning since that time, not just for Egypt and Byzantium but for the entire Christian world.

Most regrettably, the threat that the church endured some 1,200 years ago is making itself very evident again today. The desire of some to destroy the Coptic religion is not a historic point of interest but a very real concern as we speak. On 21 June 2009, with the assistance of state security, a mob assaulted Coptic Christian households in Egypt destroying their homes, their crops, their livelihood and any meagre sense of security they may have had. This assault and destruction of people's lives was perpetrated on the basis that the state security forces and the mob suspected that the Coptic Christians in question were celebrating mass and practising their Coptic Christian religion—they were doing no more than that. The response of the state authorities to this violent outburst was the forced reconciliation of aggressors and victims, which consists of a compromise: the aggressors promise not to further assault and destroy the victim's person, family and belongings as long as the victim promises to give up the practice of their religion. This is modern Egypt, and this is considered fair and reasonable and currently passes for justice.

Following these attacks the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said, 'This latest incident is another example of the upsurge of violence against Coptic Christians we have seen in the past few years. The commission has long expressed concern that the Egyptian authorities do not do enough to protect Christians and their property in Egypt nor do the authorities adequately bring perpetrators of such violence to justice.'

The upsurge in violence against Coptic Christians continues and continued on 7 January this year. A congregation of Coptic Christians were celebrating Christmas in church. On leaving the church and entering the street they were sprayed with bullets and, as we heard, six were shot dead and 15 others injured. On 13 March a mob of some 1,000 besieged a Coptic church in Mersa Matrouh, hurling stones at the church and trapping 400 parishioners inside for some 14 hours. This is sectarian violence; it is rife. The free practice of religion, if it is Christianity, is blocked by the authorities. Church buildings are vandalised. It so happens that repairs, as we heard earlier, need a licence, a licence which too often takes a ridiculous amount of time to be issued and before works proceed buildings are demolished by state authorities.

Before new religious buildings works are approved, the building plans are declared contrary to law by virtue of the planned building having too close a proximity to newly established mosques. After their family is terrorised, possibly arrested and even tortured; after their home is destroyed with all private property; after their source of income is destroyed, their family uprooted and their home burnt to the ground, what can they do? Leave. The intended consequence of this sectarian violence and oppression is sectarian cleansing. I ask members to support the motion before us. (*Time expired*)