

Islamists to Egyptian Christians: 'Convert, Go Broke or Die'

Egypt is still upside-down and sideways.

Nearly a month after a state of emergency was declared, the interim government has extended the order by two months.

This action gives security forces greater powers of arrest. In mid-August, authorities and protestors clashed violently over the ouster of President Mohammed Morsi. That led to a backlash of violence that claimed nearly 1,000 lives in the days that followed, with Christians targeted as the scapegoat.

Open Doors CEO David Curry says, "Some of these extremist groups think that Christianity itself—the very existence of it—is problematic, so they're trying to snuff it out. So there's a confluence of events, which is making it very, very dangerous to be a follower of Jesus in Egypt."

Ever since the state of emergency was declared, a nighttime curfew has also been in effect in much of the country. With that in place, how did Islamists manage the takeover of a Christian village in the south? Police can't be everywhere and can't protect everyone, Curry says. The lack of protection is especially dangerous for the residents in Dalga, which was taken over by hardliners a couple of weeks ago.

"There are about 20,000 believers that have an enclave there [in Dalga], and they gather together and they go to church. They want to worship in freedom," Curry says.

What's more, since the siege began, word has leaked that the **Muslim Brotherhood** has demanded the Christians recant, pay a "jizya" or suffer the consequences.

“They’re literally being taxed until and unless they convert to Islam,” Curry says. “So there’s a tax levied. If you don’t pay the tax, you’re going to be attacked, you’re going to be punished, and your property is going to be attacked.”

The “jizya” is a kind of tax that Islamic law requires religious minorities to pay Muslims. The amounts demanded are ruinous.

“We’re talking about real money in terms of the Egyptian lifestyle,” Curry says. “It may be that a person is made to choose between holding on to their faith and being martyred for their faith.”

Already, Muslims in southern Egypt have killed two Christian men for failing to pay the tax. Voice of the Martyrs reports that a Muslim man demanded a Christian in a village in Assiut pay him nearly \$1,500. Muslims have also forced at least 140 Coptic Christians to pay 200 Egyptian pounds daily (US \$30). When you consider that roughly 40 percent of Egyptians live on less than \$2 a day, there aren’t many who can remain in their hometowns safely. Forty Coptic Christian families have left as a result of the tax.

Still, Curry says there have been reports of people coming to Christ.

“The Christian faith is vibrant, and it’s going to find its fruition because people are seeking answers, and they’re not looking for political answers,” he says.

Additionally, followers of Christ have something that piques curiosity in times like these.

“When people are introduced to Jesus, there’s peace,” Curry says. “There’s life there. That’s what we want for them. Certainly, there are still great things happening even in the midst of this difficulty and in this persecution.”

Open Doors' partners are careful when they respond to needs in the area.

"Open Doors is asking everybody to **pray for Egypt**, to support the believers there. We're on the ground trying to help these churches. We're rebuilding churches. We're trying to help pastors," Curry says.

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