



# Why Egypt's Bid to Lead UNESCO Raises Red Flags

*By Coptic Solidarity (\*)*

Egypt has a candidate for the position of Director-General of UNESCO for the 2025-2029 term, with the election scheduled for October 2025 in Paris.

The recent, and explosive, crisis related to St. Catherine's Monastery, which revealed the country's persistent efforts to alter the centuries-old Status Quo of this UNESCO World Heritage site, necessitates a broader examination of the country's record as well as that of its candidate.

This report assesses the candidate's past ministerial roles and then offers a broader, and necessary, evaluation of his native country in areas central to UNESCO's core mission. This includes a deep dive into **heritage management and cultural policies**, specifically examining controversial projects and actions that impact established sites and practices. It also explores matters concerning **cultural identity and minority rights**. Furthermore, the report scrutinizes the **educational system and recent policy shifts** that raise concerns about discrimination and sectarianism. Finally, it addresses critical issues of **press freedom and media control**, as well as the broader context of **transparency and governance** within Egypt.

This comprehensive evaluation aims to provide essential context for assessing Egypt's suitability to nominate a leader for an organization dedicated to promoting global peace and universal values through education, science, culture, communication, and information.

## **I. HERITAGE AND CULTURE: CHALLENGES AND CONTROVERSIES**

### **A. The St. Catherine Monastery Crisis: Challenging a World Heritage Status Quo**

A court ruling on May 27, 2025, regarding St. Catherine's Monastery, a prominent World Heritage Site, effectively altered its Status Quo Ante by declaring the Monastery "property of the State." This decision provoked furious reactions from numerous governments, organizations, and prominent figures. Subsequent assurances from President El-Sisi and his government focused on the monks' rights to access and use the Monastery complex, notably omitting ownership or the historic Status Quo, fueling skepticism about Egypt's true intentions.

- 1. The State as Plaintiff, Not Just Participant:** The court cases concerning St. Catherine's Monastery were not merely "ongoing disputes." They represent a direct challenge initiated by governmental authorities against the Monastery's historic ownership and long-established "Status Quo." Specifically, lawsuit Case No. 24 of 2015 was explicitly filed by Major General Khaled Fouda, then-Governor of South Sinai, on behalf of the local government. Its clear objective was to claim state ownership of the Monastery's lands, demand compensation for "historical exploitation," and ultimately seek the monks' eviction and handover of the property to the state. As the case progressed, the lawsuit expanded to include the Minister of Antiquities (a position held by Dr. Khaled El-Enany from 2016 to 2022) and the head of the Environmental Affairs Agency as parties. This indicates that the Ministry of Antiquities was not a passive observer; it was formally drawn into legal action asserting direct state control over significant historical lands, including those crucial to the Monastery's function and registered as archaeological sites.
- 2. Ministerial Responsibility and Status Quo Integrity:** During Dr. El-Enany's tenure as Minister of Antiquities, his ministry was the primary governmental body responsible for protecting and managing Egypt's archaeological heritage. St. Catherine's Monastery, as a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the world's oldest continuously operating monasteries, falls squarely under this mandate. The Ministry of Antiquities' inclusion as a party in a lawsuit seeking to alter the centuries-old "Status Quo" of such a globally significant site raises serious questions about the ministry's—and by extension, the minister's—stance. While the South Sinai Governorate initiated the suit, the Ministry's inclusion implies at least a recognition of its jurisdiction and potentially a tacit or active alignment with the state's broader claim. The Monastery's lawyer explicitly argued the Governor lacked standing because the lands fell under the Ministry of Antiquities or Environment, further underscoring El-Enany's ministry's direct relevance to the state's challenge.
- 3. Contradiction with UNESCO Nomination File:** The Egyptian government formally acknowledged the ownership of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Sinai over St. Catherine's Monastery, its chapels, gardens, and all facilities, in **the official nomination file submitted to UNESCO in the early 2000s** to include the Saint Catherine area on the World Heritage List. This file, approved by the Bishop of Saint Catherine, explicitly recognized ecclesiastical ownership and cited the bishop's authority as justification for the site's "outstanding universal value." Despite this, the 2025 court ruling claiming state property contradicts prior international commitments and raises alarm regarding Egypt's credibility in safeguarding heritage.
- 4. Context: The "Greatest Manifestation" Development Project:** These land claims occurred within the broader context of the "Greatest Manifestation" project, a massive government-led tourism development plan around the Monastery. This project, aiming to attract millions of tourists and build significant infrastructure, inevitably intersects with historical land use and ownership. The legal claims can thus be seen as part of a larger strategy to consolidate state control over the region to facilitate grand development plans. During its **2023 session**, the UNESCO World

Heritage Committee formally requested Egypt to: **immediately halt the implementation of any further development projects** in St. Catherine; **conduct a full impact evaluation**, and **prepare a conservation plan** for the affected area. This request was made due to concerns about the project's potential impact on the St. Catherine World Heritage Site. There is no record of Egypt acting upon that request.

**5. Implications for UNESCO Candidacy:** For a candidate seeking to lead UNESCO, an organization dedicated to world heritage preservation and cultural diversity, direct or indirect involvement in state-initiated lawsuits against a UNESCO World Heritage site's "Status Quo" presents a significant challenge. His campaign's emphasis on "depoliticizing UNESCO" appears ironic when his former ministry was part of a government initiative engaged in a highly sensitive legal battle over a sacred, ancient, and internationally recognized heritage site. Perceived alignment with policies prioritizing projects potentially at the expense of established heritage arrangements will inevitably invite scrutiny from UNESCO member states. The **St. Catherine's Monastery crisis** is not merely a background event; it represents a **direct governmental challenge to a deeply rooted historical "Status Quo" of a UNESCO World Heritage site**, and Dr. Khaled El-Enany's ministry was undeniably a party in the legal proceedings during his tenure. This context is critical for a serious evaluation of his candidacy.

### **B. Controversial Projects During the Candidate's Ministerial Tenure**

Dr. Khaled El-Enany, Egypt's UNESCO candidate, possesses a strong academic background in Egyptology and significant public service experience in antiquities and tourism (Minister of Antiquities from March 2016 to August 2022, a portfolio that included tourism as of December 2019.) His campaign slogan is "UNESCO for the People." Despite his resumé, his candidacy should face scrutiny of the broader context of governance and development in Egypt.

**1. Demolitions in Historic Cairo (City of the Dead):** A significant controversy during his tenure involved large-scale demolitions of historic mausoleums and graves in Cairo's "City of the Dead." Critics, including experts, argue these demolitions, conducted for new highways connecting Cairo to the new administrative capital, irreversibly damaged significant Islamic and modern heritage. Concerns were also raised by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee. While his direct responsibility for urban planning might be debated, as Minister of Antiquities/Tourism, he was a key figure responsible for heritage preservation. Some argue his candidacy is incongruous with these actions.

**2. Controversial Restoration Projects:** Some restoration projects under his watch, such as the Baron Empain Palace in Heliopolis, drew criticism for allegedly altering the original character of historical buildings. El-Enany dismissed such criticism as "fake news."

**3. Restrictions on Photography/Filming:** During his ministerial role, restrictions on photography and filming in public spaces, particularly of "unsightly locations" or government buildings, drew criticism. While he later oversaw amendments, the

initial stance on controlling public visual narratives could contrast with UNESCO's values of open knowledge and cultural exchange.

- 4. Perceived Alignment with State Policies:** Given his high-level ministerial positions, some observers view his candidacy as closely aligned with the Egyptian state's broader political and developmental agenda, rather than an independent vision for UNESCO. His role in initiatives that faced local criticism could be a point of discussion for member states.

## II. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MINORITY RIGHTS: THE COPTIC COMMUNITY

The Copts, Egypt's indigenous population, constitute approximately **12-15% of the total population**. Their historical trajectory shifted significantly with the 7th-century Arab-Muslim conquest. Under successive Islamic rulers, Copts frequently encountered discrimination, including punitive taxation (*jizya*), coercive conversions, church destruction, and social exclusion. This enduring history of subjugation provides essential context for their contemporary challenges.

### **A. Copts and State-Sponsored Discrimination**

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of belief, Copts face **systematic institutional discrimination** in practice.

- 1. Educational Marginalization:** The national education system sidelines Christian history, culture, and identity in its general curricula.
- 2. Church Construction Restrictions:** Building or renovating churches faces disproportionately burdensome bureaucratic obstacles compared to mosques. The 2016 Church Law, intended to ease restrictions, initiated a laborious "legalization" process for thousands of existing unlicensed churches. As of late 2024, out of over **3,700 applications for legalization**, only a fraction have been fully approved, with many still pending or rejected.
- 3. Limited Access to State Posts:** Coptic representation in crucial state sectors (military, police, judiciary, diplomatic corps) is widely believed to be capped at **around 2%**, and they are effectively **barred from all "sensitive" or sovereign agencies**. Official statistics are scarce, but ample evidence supports this.
- 4. Security and Justice Failures:** Security forces frequently fail to protect Copts from sectarian mob attacks. Sectarian violence is often resolved through informal "customary reconciliation," allowing perpetrators to evade prosecution and reinforcing impunity.
- 5. Denial of Minority Rights:** The Egyptian state refuses to acknowledge Copts as an ethnic or indigenous minority, categorizing them strictly as a religious group. This denial excludes them from international minority protections. The dominant state narrative promotes a homogenized national identity that frequently **eradicates Coptic heritage and actively discourages open expression of ethnic or religious distinctiveness**.

## **B. Persisting Trends and Challenges**

1. **Cultural Erosion:** The Coptic language (an ancient descendant of ancient Egyptian) and traditions face significant decline due to a **lack of institutional support** within the national framework. Critics argue this systemic exclusion contributes to cultural erosion.
2. **State Manipulation and Co-optation:** The regime often leverages the Church leadership for international public relations, projecting tolerance. However, this often comes at the cost of **silencing independent Coptic voices outside the official church hierarchy**. The Church itself often practices self-censorship to preserve its institutional survival.
3. **Militarization of Religious Identity:** The state increasingly uses religion to define “true citizenship.” Individuals aligned with Sunni Islam and the regime are presented as “true Egyptians,” while others, including Coptic Christians and reformist Muslims, may be cast as conditional citizens or viewed with suspicion.
4. **Lack of Political Representation:** Despite token appointments, Copts remain **vastly underrepresented** in parliament, judiciary, military, and senior state institutions.
5. **Forced Displacement and Emigration:** Increasing numbers of Copts are emigrating due to insecurity, economic hardship, and lack of opportunity. In some regions, sectarian attacks combined with perceived state inaction have led to **de facto population transfers**, reducing Christian presence.

## **C. Conclusion on Coptic Identity Preservation**

The Coptic community faces a **form of cultural extinction primarily through administrative and systemic means**. This violates human rights and represents a profound loss to Egypt's pluralistic heritage.

## **III. EDUCATION SYSTEM AND POLICIES**

### **A. Quality of Education Overview**

Egypt's education quality shows mixed results. The UN Development Programme's **Global Knowledge Index (GKI) ranked Egypt 79th globally in 2023 for pre-university education**. However, UNICEF reports **over half of Egyptian students fail to meet low benchmarks** in international assessments, placing them near the bottom. Challenges include rigid teaching, poor infrastructure, learning poverty, and high university failure rates.

### **B. The Al-Azhar Parallel Education System**

Egypt operates a distinct “**dual system of education**,” with a parallel, **Muslims-only religious education system run by Al-Azhar** alongside the national system, catering to millions. Al-Azhar, founded in 970 CE, was historically a mosque-university. The **rapid expansion of its formal pre-university schooling network** began significantly after 1952, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Law No. 103 of 1961), accelerating through

the 1960s-1970s. This growth has continued, with **renewed emphasis and investment under President Sisi** in the past decade. The Al-Azhar system currently educates nearly **2.7 million students: 2.3 million** in pre-university and **340,000** at Al-Azhar University (which comprises 81 faculties, distributed over 13 campuses.)

### **C. The New Push for “Quranic Schools” (*Kuttab*)**

The **expansion of traditional “Quranic Schools” (*Kuttab*)** represents a distinct, yet complementary, initiative, under President Sisi. *Kuttab* are older, more informal schools primarily focused on Quranic memorization and basic Arabic literacy, historically operating at a grassroots level. President Sisi has explicitly called for the **revival and expansion of these *Kuttab***, with the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) tasked with formalizing and overseeing this push. The goal is to **instill “sound religious awareness”** and shape religious discourse from a young age, reinforcing the state’s vision of Islam.

### **D. Controversial New Policy: Religion Grades Count Towards Overall Average**

In January 2025, Egypt's Minister of Education announced a major shift: **grades for religious education (Islamic and Christian) will now be factored into students’ overall academic averages**, starting September 2025, with presidential backing. The Ministry justifies this as vital for shaping student personalities, strengthening values, and preserving identity. Separate curricula will continue, coordinated with Al-Azhar and the Church.

Despite official goals, this policy faces strong opposition from experts due to **discrimination, fairness, and practical implementation issues**.

1. **Discrimination Against Non-Muslim Students:** There's a **severe lack of qualified teachers for Christian religious education** in public schools. Apart from Judaism (a recognized faith, but practically non-existent), this problem is **entirely unaddressed for unrecognized or non-affiliated students**, who often lack any designated religious education option. Critics argue the **quality and depth of Christian religious curricula often don’t match Islamic education**, creating inherent disadvantages. Students take different exams, raising a **significant risk of bias in grading standards or curriculum difficulty** across religious streams, leading to an uneven playing field.
2. **Reinforcing Sectarianism:** Mandatory, high-stakes separate religious instruction from early ages risks **reinforcing religious segregation and “othering,”** emphasizing differences rather than promoting national unity. Concerns about problematic content in some Islamic textbooks are also amplified.
3. **Practical Challenges:** Ensuring fair and equitable provision of **qualified teachers and comparable assessment standards** across diverse religious curricula is a monumental task.

### **E. Broader Context of Educational Policies**

This policy, along with the expanded Al-Azhar system and the push for *Kuttab*, aligns with the Egyptian state’s ongoing efforts under President El-Sisi to **promote a specific**

**religious framework and assert greater control over religious discourse** from a young age. While officially framed as strengthening values, critics view such moves as an attempt to instill a state-approved ideology and enforce social cohesion, potentially **at the expense of genuine religious freedom and pluralism**. Analysts widely see the expansion and tighter oversight of the Al-Azhar system and *Kuttab* as **key components of the Egyptian state's strategy to centralize power and suppress independent voices**, including religious ones. This is considered a form of **ideological control**, aiming to shape young minds for obedience and nationalism, limiting genuine intellectual pluralism. In conclusion, while the Ministry of Education presents this policy as reinforcing values, it generates serious concerns about **discrimination, fairness, and deepening sectarian divides** within Egypt's educational system.

#### IV. OTHER RELEVANT GOVERNANCE ISSUES

These issues highlight the environment in which Egypt's candidate to lead UNESCO has operated.

##### **A. Press Freedom**

Egypt consistently ranks very low in global press freedom indices, indicating a severely restricted environment for journalists and media.

1. **Reporters Without Borders (RSF):** In its 2024 World Press Freedom Index, RSF ranked Egypt **170th out of 180 countries**. This places Egypt among the lowest-ranked nations, often alongside highly authoritarian regimes. RSF notes the Egyptian government "controls the entire media landscape and has imposed a complete clampdown on free speech."
2. **Freedom House:** Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2024" report designates Egypt as "**Not Free**," with a low score for Civil Liberties (12/60), which includes press freedom.
3. **Media Ownership and Control:** The media landscape in Egypt is largely controlled by the state. Most of the written press is owned by a public (state-owned) organism. Audiovisual media entities are either directly state-owned and run, or for most of the "private" entities, they are owned by The United Media Services, which is in turn owned by the Intelligence (Mukhabarat) Organism.
4. **Imprisoned Journalists:** Egypt has consistently been identified as one of the **world's worst jailers of journalists**. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) consistently places Egypt among the top countries for imprisoning journalists. While numbers fluctuate, significant numbers of journalists are behind bars. As of 2019, CPJ ranked Egypt **third worst jailer worldwide**, tied with Saudi Arabia, with at least 26 journalists imprisoned. More recent 2024 reports indicate "ongoing authoritarian repression" is a primary driver, with over 60% of jailed journalists worldwide facing "anti-state laws" often accusing them of terrorism or extremism. The Egyptian Observatory for Journalism and Media reported **112 cases of arbitrary arrests** of journalists between 2019 and 2024.

## **B. Transparency (Corruption Perception)**

Egypt's ranking in transparency, particularly concerning public sector corruption, remains low according to international benchmarks.

1. **Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI):** In the 2024 CPI, Egypt scored **30 out of 100**, placing it **130th out of 180 countries**. This score is below the average for the Middle East and North Africa region (39) and the global average (43).
2. **Related Issues:** Transparency International highlights “**corruption linked to authoritarianism**” and “stagnation stemming mostly from near-absolute control by political leaders” as key factors. They note a “largely reactive approach to fighting corruption” impairs good governance. Critiques frequently point to weak, ineffective official mechanisms for investigating corruption and a lack of credibility in bodies like the president-controlled Administrative Control Authority.

## **V. OVERALL CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR UNESCO LEADERSHIP**

The candidacy of Dr. Khaled El-Enany to lead UNESCO for the 2025–2029 term **cannot be divorced from the domestic record** of the state he served and the policies he implemented or enabled. His record must be assessed against the standards and values that UNESCO upholds. As a senior minister in a government whose track record on cultural preservation, religious inclusion, and educational reform has been seriously questioned, El-Enany brings significant political and ethical baggage.

During his role as Minister of Antiquities and later Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt undertook major cultural initiatives. However, these **initiatives were controversial**, including the **destruction of historic Islamic cemeteries** in Cairo, **state-driven legal challenges to the centuries-old ownership of Saint Catherine's Monastery**, and repeated patterns of manipulating cultural heritage for state-led development agendas. His ministry was named in lawsuits seeking to dispossess a UNESCO World Heritage Site of its rightful custodianship—despite Egypt's formal recognition of the Greek Orthodox Diocese's ownership in UNESCO's own nomination file.

It is also crucial to examine **systemic issues within Egypt's governance** framework relevant to UNESCO's mission: **cultural inclusion, minority rights, education policy, press freedom, and transparency**. El-Enany served in a government that has systematically discriminated against the Coptic community, restricted freedom of expression, suppressed independent media, and introduced religiously sectarian policies in education. His vision for UNESCO, while expansive, often echoes the organization's existing commitments without offering clear mechanisms or priorities for implementation. His **candidacy's slogan**, ‘UNESCO for the People,’ **contrasts starkly with a reality** of state censorship, exclusion, and ideological control under the government he represented.

UNESCO's **leadership** demands more than polished speeches and ceremonial pledges. It **requires moral clarity, consistency in upholding international values, and a track**

**record** that demonstrates a commitment to cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and inclusive education.

Egypt's recent actions and El-Enany's complicity in them **cast serious doubt** on both the country's suitability to nominate a leader for UNESCO and the candidate's credibility to uphold its mission. Entrusting UNESCO to such a candidate risks legitimizing heritage erasure, politicization of culture, and institutional whitewashing. At a time when UNESCO must rise to protect threatened cultures, vulnerable minorities, and independent thought, it cannot afford leadership rooted in the very practices it was founded to challenge.

This candidacy raises important **questions about consistency between declared principles and applied governance**. Member states of UNESCO are encouraged to reflect not only on professional credentials but also on the alignment between candidates' records and the spirit of UNESCO's global mandate: protecting heritage, promoting diversity, advancing free expression, and supporting education for all.

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*(\*) Coptic Solidarity is an advocacy organization seeking to help minorities, particularly the Copts, of Egypt. We support those in Egypt working for freedom, and the protection of the fundamental rights of all Egyptian citizens, and advocate in cooperation with the affiliated organizations in Canada and in Europe (Solidarité Copte).*

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