



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Egypt: Coptic Christians, Iran: Baha'i Faith

SPEECH

Wednesday, 2 November 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 2 November 2011 Page 105 Questioner Speaker Mr ROBERT</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (19:29): I rise to condemn in the strongest possible terms the attack by the Egyptian military forces on unarmed Coptic Christians. We have known that Coptic Christians, essentially Orthodox Christians, within Egypt have been facing persecution throughout history. Human Rights Watch has noted growing religious intolerance and sectarian violence against Coptic Christians in recent years. In May 2010 the *Wall Street Journal* wrote of waves of mob assaults by Muslims against Coptic Christians, forcing Coptic Christians to flee their homes. We heard the most disturbing news on 9 October. When Coptic Christians in Cairo were protesting the burning of a church at Marinab and were heading towards Maspero, they were met by armoured personnel carriers and hundreds of riot police and special forces. It is alleged that armoured vehicles charged at protesters, and there are reports of at least six protesters being crushed under armoured personnel carriers. It has also emerged—and witnesses have confirmed—that military personnel were seen firing live ammunition into the protesters. That type of behaviour by the state, using its most potent force, its military, against unarmed civilians is completely and utterly unacceptable.

I note that Craig Kelly is in the chamber today. I thank him for his motion on 13 October, which the entire House supported—to its enduring credit. It recognised that Coptic Christians in Egypt are suffering ongoing and increasing persecution. The motion condemned the recent attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt; expressed sympathy for Coptic Christians who have been victims of recent attacks in Europe; and made a range of calls on the government to issue public statements to seek representation within the United Nations and to strongly urge the Egyptian government to provide equal rights and protection for all Egyptian citizens, regardless of race or religion.

The member for Hughes, Craig Kelly, in this motion I think spoke for all parliamentarians and all Australians in saying that this type of violence is unacceptable. I stand shoulder to shoulder with my own Coptic Christian community on the Gold Coast in saying that we will not stand by and say nothing while this persecution continues. As Australians we find it unacceptable, and I have indicated that in the strongest possible terms to Egypt's Ambassador to Australia.

I also condemn in the strongest possible terms the persecution of those of the Baha'i faith in Iran. Iran, incidentally, is where the Baha'i faith originated, and it is the location of one of the largest Baha'i populations in the world. It is argued by those in Iran that Baha'i teaching is inconsistent with traditional Islamic beliefs taught in Iran. Baha'i as a community, as well as the United Nations, Amnesty, the European Union, the United States and publishers of a range of literature, have stated categorically that members of the Baha'i community in Iran have been, and are currently, subjected to unwarranted arrests, false imprisonment, beatings, torture, unjustified executions, and confiscation and destruction of property owned by individuals as well as by the community. They have been denied employment, they have been denied benefits, they have been denied civil rights and liberties and they have even been denied access to higher education.

A number of those in the Baha'i community, especially those involved in the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, have been charged and found guilty in Iranian courts—of that dreadful charge of daring to teach openly and in religious circles about their views on life. Again, I think all members of the parliament will join with me in saying it is unacceptable for a nation to persecute its people based simply on their faith.

I note with interest that the Iranian Constitution, drafted in 1906, does not specifically guarantee freedom of religion—and, of course, gives unprecedented power to the clerical establishment. I also note that on 20 October Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, made the point that Iran's persecution of Baha'i is among the most extreme manifestations of religious intolerance and persecution in the world today. I condemn it, and I stand shoulder to shoulder with the Baha'i community on the Gold Coast. I have a keen belief that the Baha'i community should enjoy absolute and utter tolerance and respect for their religious views wherever they are in the world.