

Egypt's Copts under Islamist Rule

Joyce van de Bildt

On October 10, the Coptic community in Egypt, which numbers anywhere between 6-12 percent of Egypt's 80 million people,¹ commemorated one year since the "Maspero killings." A year earlier, on October 9, 2011, about ten thousand members of the community had demonstrated in front of Cairo's Maspero Building, the headquarters of Egyptian State Television, protesting the destruction of a Coptic Church in the upper Egyptian village of Merinab and demanding that the perpetrators be tried in court. The demonstration was violently quelled by Egyptian security forces, resulting in the deaths of over 25 people. Videos and eyewitness accounts confirmed that army vehicles had run over demonstrators and that soldiers were shooting indiscriminately into the crowd. Only in September 2012 were three soldiers convicted of "involuntary manslaughter," but they were sentenced to less than three years in jail. One year after "Bloody Sunday," and 100 days after President Mohammed Mursi took office, the Copts of Egypt continue to demand that the authorities address the chronic lack of safety and continued perpetrations of injustice following sectarian clashes.

Muslim-Christian tensions increased during the final years of Mubarak's rule, but they have significantly intensified over the course of the last 18 months. To mention

¹ While usually estimated at 10 percent of the total Egyptian population of 80 million, Copts number only about five million according to the most recent census (i.e., six percent of the population). "Awal 'ihsa-i rasmi: Aqbaṭ misr 5 malaayin," *Al-Arabiya*, 25 September 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/25/240149.html>

only a few instances of violence: on January 28, 2011, in the midst of the uprising against the Mubarak regime, the Church of the Holy Family and Saint George in the town of Rafah, bordering the Gaza Strip, was set on fire. In March 2011, the *Shahedayin* (Two Martyrs) Church in the village of Sol in Atfeeh, south of Cairo, was demolished, reportedly as a result of arguments between families over a love affair between a Muslim woman and a Coptic man. Ongoing sectarian clashes in Dahshur, 40 kilometers south of Cairo, continued into the summer of 2012. In one of the more recent incidents, Coptic families reportedly fled from Rafah after receiving death threats and having their shops attacked.² In response to such incidents, Egyptian authorities have in the past organized reconciliation sessions intended to ease tensions between Muslim and Coptic communities. However, the results of these meetings frequently amounted to nothing. Over the last year, Copts have stepped up their demands for more genuine and effective protection from the government and security forces.

Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, Copts in particular have suffered from the increasing lack of safety and law enforcement in parts of the country. Incidents in the Sinai, in particular, could be related to a more general failure of Mursi's government to keep Islamist militants in check; the increasing violence against Copts is not perceived as an anti-Copt policy of the new Egyptian government as such. Rather, Copts mainly complain of the Egyptian government's failure to ensure safety and to prosecute those involved in anti-Copt incidents.

Nevertheless, in an op-ed in *Al-Masry al-Youm*, the renowned sociologist Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim warned that although the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mursi cannot be blamed for the attacks, it seems as if their rise to power is accompanied by a general atmosphere in which Muslims legitimize any action "in the name of Islam."³ Indeed, the growing expression of overt Islamic sentiment in society is perceived by the Copts as threatening.

² Dina Ezzat, "Coptic ordeal ends," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 4-10 October 2012, Issue No. 1117, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2012/1117/eg4.htm>

³ Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim, "Min Dahshur .. ila Nile City... ila Sinai: Hal hunaka mukhtaṭ?" *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 10 August 2012, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1042111>

The relation between state and religion is of crucial importance for the status of the Coptic community. In the 1970s and '80s, as Anwar al-Sadat increased the Egyptian state's identification with Islam, the Copts were inevitably pushed to the margins of the polity and their participation in political life was reduced.⁴ Not surprisingly, the Coptic community now fears a further major diminishing of their status under a Muslim Brotherhood government, especially with regard to religious freedom and political equality.

For instance, *salafis* have pushed for a more radical interpretation of Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution (originally introduced by Sadat), which stipulates that Islam is the state's official religion and that the *mabādi'* (principles) of *shari`a* law constitute the main source of legislation in Egypt. The *salafi* Al-Nour party seeks to give new teeth to Article 2 and substitute the more widely interpretable word 'principles' with the word *ahkām* (provisions), in order to impose a strict interpretation of *shari`a* law and obliterate the current civil aspect of Egyptian law. The Copts, whose wellbeing is tied up with the maintenance of a civil, secular society, see the *salafis'* efforts as further confirmation of their fear that Egypt is becoming an Islamist state.

Among other things, Copts have complained that the Islamists are using existing legislation against blasphemy to present themselves as defenders of Islam. In Egypt, blasphemy convictions can result in anywhere from six months to five years in prison. The outcry across the Muslim world surrounding the anti-Islam film, "Innocence of Muslims," caused the Copts collateral damage in this regard. The fact that some of the filmmakers were Copts living in the United States made the film another pretext for attacking Copts in Egypt. They became easy targets in a situation in which sectarian clashes were already becoming routine occurrences. In the wake of the fury caused by the film, at least 17 charges of blasphemy were issued against Copts. For instance, a Copt was arrested at his home in Cairo on September 13 after neighbors alerted authorities that he had posted clips from "Innocence of Muslims"

⁴ For a useful overview of the legal, socio-economic and political status of Copts in Egypt since the 1919 Revolution, see Thomas Phillip, "Copts and Other Minorities in the Development of the Egyptian Nation-State," in *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic: A reassessment of revolution and change*, ed. Shimon Shamir (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 131-50 .

on social networking sites. Also in September, two children, aged nine and ten, were accused of tearing up a Qur'an.

President Mursi has pledged on several occasions to protect the Copts and to include them in his government, but has so far failed on both accounts. The Copts have little faith in Egyptian democracy under the Muslim Brotherhood. Mursi's cabinet includes just one Copt who is one of two female ministers, both in low-profile posts. Many Copts consider this a continuation of a long-standing Egyptian government policy of singling out the Copts as a separate community and leaving them marginalized in Egyptian politics and the military. In addition, Mursi has exerted his power to rehabilitate Islamists who were suppressed under the former regime. A Coptic spokesman in Europe pointed out that while dozens of convicted Islamists have been released from prison since last year, no Christian detainees imprisoned for seditious incidents have received such pardons.⁵

That the Copts feel increasingly threatened is evidenced by a growing emigration trend. In September 2012 it was reported that more than 100,000 Copts had applied for emigration visas.⁶ This trend is especially alarming, considering that the Copts have often been referred to as an integral part of the Egyptian nation. Historically, Copts have enjoyed a relatively elevated status compared to other minority groups in Egypt. They are considered "indigenous" Egyptians, whose presence in the country goes back to ancient times, as opposed to the "foreigners," such as the Greeks, the Jews, and the Armenians, who are referred to as the *mutamassirun* (literally, the Egyptianized).⁷ The Copts are more integrated into Egyptian society and culture than any other minority group, and would be considered virtually indistinguishable from the Muslim Egyptian population were it not for their religion.⁸ However, if religion becomes the main identity marker for the Egyptian government, this will inevitably come at the expense of national unity and will greatly diminish the relatively 'equal' status of the Copts.

⁵ Walid 'Abd-al Rahman, "Ramzi: 'Akthar min 100.000 qubṭi misri taqaddamu bi-ṭalabat hijra," *Al-Arabiya*, 10 September 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/10/237094.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt: Contesting the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2003), 174-195.

⁸ Thomas Phillip, "Copts and Other Minorities," 133.

Concurrently, the Coptic Church is experiencing a transitional period involving the transfer of papal leadership after the passing away on March 17, 2012 of the towering figure of Pope Shenouda III. Over the last decade of his tenure, Shenouda had been facing increasing criticism for not standing up to Mubarak in the face of discrimination against Copts, and for his good relations with the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), while the discontent of Mubarak's rule was growing among the Coptic public. In addition, segments of the Coptic youth increasingly disagree with the Church's monopoly of power and seek to challenge the status quo. Relations with the State, and dissent within the community will undoubtedly pose a challenge to Shenouda's papal successor, Pope Tawadros II, who was elected on November 4 after an extensive selection process and will be inaugurated on November 18 as the 118th pope of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church.⁹ He will serve as the community's main contact with the Islamist-dominated government, and faces the difficult task of reassuring the Coptic community that its security and well-being are not being fundamentally undermined.

In the aftermath of the January 25 Revolution, the Copts feel particularly vulnerable, this despite the historical incontestability of their "Egyptian-ness." A battle is raging over the identity of Egypt and the role of Islam in society and politics. At the moment, the Copts are mainly suffering from the weak security apparatus and the impunity enjoyed by assailants implicated in sectarian clashes and attacks. As long as the authorities turn a blind eye to anti-Copt incidents, the growing strength of Islamist religiosity in Egypt could cause the situation of the Copts to become increasingly dire. Even if Mursi succeeds in mastering the security situation, it will be of crucial importance for the Copts to see how the relation between the state and religion will be fashioned in light of Islamist domination of political life.

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⁹ Basil El-Dabh, "Pope elect concerned over application of Shari'a," *Daily News Egypt*, 10 November 2012, <http://dailynewsegypt.com/2012/11/10/pope-elect-concerned-over-application-of-sharia/>

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