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The Copts and Their Political Implications in Egypt

Khairi Abaza and *Mark Nakhla*

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In the third week of October, Egypt saw some of its most significant sectarian clashes in the last five years. Violence broke out as police forces protected a church in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria against Muslims protesting a play that was staged inside the church and that they considered offensive to Islam. Sporadic tensions are an expression of Egypt's general political malaise.

In this climate, the second annual Conference of Coptic Emigrants (Aqbat al-Mahgar) will take place November 16-18 in Washington. The conference comes amid extensive and controversial media coverage in Egypt, where local voices accuse the conference organizers of being supported by foreign powers seeking to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs and tarnish its reputation. The conference organizers maintain that it is a conference for all Egyptians active in demands for more civil liberties and equality for all citizens.

Christians in Egypt are a main component in the social fabric of the country, and the role they play in politics has considerable implications for the country.

Background

Christians make up 10-20 percent of Egypt's population of seventy-seven million, though precise estimates of the number of Copts vary widely. By any account, they represent by far the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

Around 90 percent of Christians in Egypt belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; other Egyptian Christians are affiliated with Roman Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and other, smaller denominations. There are an additional 1.5 million Coptic emigrants and expatriates in North America, Australia, Europe, and the Arab world, as well as a longstanding Coptic community in Sudan and throughout Africa.

The name Coptic, derived from the Greek word Aigyptos, for Egyptian, emphasizes the national character of the Coptic Church. Its roots date to the origin of Christianity; Copts hold that their church was founded in Alexandria by the apostle Mark in AD 57, making it one of the oldest churches in the world.

The Copts have maintained a strong religious identity throughout Egyptian history, and pride themselves for their contributions to the Egyptian nation and the Arab world. Indeed, they had important contributions in all aspects of Egyptian life -- political, cultural, social,

and economic. Since the early nineteenth century, Christians worked side by side with Muslims in the creation of modern Egypt. In the 1919 uprising against British occupation, Coptic priests were preaching in mosques -- including Cairo's prestigious al-Azhar Mosque -- and imams were preaching in churches as a symbol of national unity. The trend continued until the 1950s, when authoritarianism marginalized some segments of Egyptian society.

Today, Copts are still considered critical players in Egyptian society. There are no ethnic or linguistic differences between Egyptian Copts and Muslims; both communities are found in all social classes and in all of Egypt's provinces. There is no Coptic province per se, but there are provinces with a larger or smaller Coptic population.

The Turning Point for Coptic Participation

Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 coup was a turning point for the Copts. Prior to 1952, there had been two Christian prime ministers, several ministers of foreign affairs, and others in key positions of the Egyptian state. Egypt's post-coup military leaders marginalized the Coptic presence in the political and administrative systems. No Copt was a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, the body that ruled Egypt from 1952 to 1956. Since then, no Christian has held the key cabinet portfolios of interior, defense, or foreign affairs, let alone the offices of prime minister or speaker of the Legislative Assembly. In addition, Copts are underrepresented in parliament, and there exist no Coptic provincial governors (governors are appointed, not elected). In academia, there are almost no Coptic deans in the major state universities, despite the fact that many Copts are highly respected scholars.

As a result, Coptic activists started to articulate demands in order to enhance their situation. Some of their demands include:

- More representation in the political system
- More equality in promotions in academia, the public sector, and the state bureaucracy, including the police and the military
- Removal of religious identification from government issued documents where religion is not relevant
- More straightforward licensing procedures for church construction and equal treatment with the construction of mosques
- More rigorous enforcement of the constitution's guarantee of equality to all Egyptian citizens in rights and duties
- Greater emphasis on the Coptic heritage and history in school curricula, as well as teaching the values of tolerance and pluralism
- Less interference of the state security apparatus in issues related to the Christian faith

The Egyptian government maintains that there is no targeted persecution against Copts; there are always Christian members of parliament, cabinet ministers, and ambassadors. The state also claims that it does not differentiate between Egyptian citizens on the basis of faith and that there are no laws discriminating against Christians.

Copts Become Active in Current Politics

Christians are not immune to the general Egyptian apathy to politics. The lack of

democracy in the last fifty years has not allowed for proper channels of political expression and demands. In the late 1970s the situation worsened when relations deteriorated between Pope Shenouda III, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and President Anwar Sadat. Then, community leaders did not encourage the Copts to take an active role in politics or to join the then-nascent overt movement for political liberties.

Some Coptic leaders encouraged their community to endorse Hosni Mubarak over the last two decades as a way of countering Islamic extremism. They thought the Mubarak regime would protect them from an eventual takeover by Islamists. This culminated with Pope Shenouda's formal support for Mubarak in September's presidential election.

Despite the fact that Copts and other Egyptian Christians have a great respect for Pope Shenouda as a spiritual leader, they do not necessarily adhere to his political vision. Indeed, as Muslim Egyptians did, Copts did not participate in the presidential election in large numbers. Countrywide, only 23 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the September poll. Further, Copts occupy important positions in various opposition political groups. George Isaac, the most prominent leader of the Kefaya (Enough) movement, is a Copt; as are Mounir Abdel-Nour, vice president of the liberal Wafd Party; and Rafik Habib, a founder, alongside several former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, of the al-Wasat Party. (The al-Wasat Party was for many years banned due to the involvement of former Muslim Brotherhood members in its founding.) The long list of Copts who are active in opposition groups covers the full spectrum of the Egyptian opposition.

Conclusion

If they decide to participate more actively in politics, Egyptian Christians could make a positive contribution to the democratic process. Their large number is an important force in countering any threat of an extremist Islamist takeover by democratic means.

At the same time, the leaders of the Christian community in Egypt, including the Coptic pope, should keep themselves above party politics so as not to embarrass devout Copts who decide to follow a different political path. Yet Christians will only achieve their demands for total equality through participation in a democratic system. Copts, like Egyptian Muslims, can only gain their full rights with the establishment of a truly democratic system.

Khairi Abaza is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. Mark Nakhla is a research assistant with the Institute.

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