

# Death of a Pope: The Worsening Position of Egypt's Copts

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Brief Analysis

**T**he death of Pope Shenouda III on March 18 leaves Egypt's Coptic Christian community in a politically uncertain position at a seminal moment. His passing, though long anticipated, could scarcely have come at a worse moment. As Egypt's largely Islamist constitutional assembly meets to draft the state's post-Mubarak charter, the Coptic community -- comprising approximately 10 percent of Egypt's population -- is leaderless. While his performance garnered mixed reviews, particularly on issues of church doctrine, Pope Shenouda was an experienced negotiator with the Egyptian state on behalf of the Coptic community, pushing relentlessly for the right to build churches and for state protection of Egypt's beleaguered Christians. If Shenouda is not replaced quickly with a strong leader, the new constitution -- whose hundred drafters include just six Copts -- will be even less likely to take into account the concerns of the Coptic community.

## Background

**P**ope Shenouda III, born Nazir Gayed, became the 117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa in 1971, shortly after Anwar Sadat's election to the Egyptian presidency. Shenouda's predecessor, Pope Kyrillos VI, had a relationship with President Gamal Abdul Nasser that benefited both the regime and Egypt's Copts. Nasser authorized and helped to fund the building of Cairo's St. Mark's Cathedral, and Kyrillos delivered Coptic political support for the Arab nationalist president.

Shenouda's relationship with President Sadat was somewhat more contentious. In 1981, following months of sectarian conflict and Shenouda's refusal to accede to Sadat's demand that he dispatch a group of Coptic priests on a peacebuilding pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Sadat revoked the decree confirming Shenouda's appointment as pope, confined him to the monastery at Wadi Natrun, and instated a triumvirate of bishops to manage the Coptic community. For his intransigence, Shenouda was relegated to the monastery for four years. When he was released in 1985, President Hosni Mubarak reinstated him as pope, at which point Shenouda adopted a more conciliatory stance toward the regime.

His political quiescence, however, did not extend to the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Only days after his consecration as pope, for example, Shenouda issued a decree banning divorce in all cases but adultery. Although this decree did not go into effect, Shenouda made personal status reform one of his top priorities, and in 2008 he succeeded in further restricting the conditions under which divorce could be granted, from the nine outlined in the official 1938 Coptic personal status law, to three. His decision left thousands of Copts in a legal limbo whereby the state issued them a civil divorce, but the church refused to grant a religious divorce, a necessary prerequisite for remarriage.

It was an unpopular edict. And although a lawsuit was subsequently filed against the pope, which the plaintiffs won, the judgment was never enforced because the pope, who is not a civil servant, is not subject to state mandates.

Many of the reformists also criticized Shenouda's efforts to centralize power within the Coptic community. Not only did he eviscerate the authority of a lay council specifically created to balance his power, Shenouda brought the

church's clerical and financial administration to heel by ensuring the selection of loyal officials. Additionally, he continued the practice of promising political support to the Mubarak regime by the Coptic community in return for permits to build churches and other concessions from the state. As such, he came to be seen as the only legitimate voice of the community and its representative in all its dealings with the state, further alienating Coptic liberals and reformers, who accuse the church of corruption, atavism, and failure to protect the Coptic community from sectarian attacks. Notwithstanding Shenouda's centralizing measures, the Coptic community today is more fragmented than it has been since the early 1960s.

## Going Forward

**D**espite this controversy, Pope Shenouda remained popular. He spent his last decade pushing for reform in a number of contentious areas, such as allowing the patriarchate to build churches without special permission from the state, removing Copts from the jurisdiction of sharia inheritance law, and adopting a unified legal code for all Christians in Egypt. All of these reforms were in process when Mubarak was overthrown last February, but their current status is unclear.

For Egypt's Coptic Christians, the drafting of a new constitution represents an opportunity to confront some of these issues, or at least to create a framework in which the state addresses their demands. That said, the 100-person constitutional assembly includes very few delegates likely to be sympathetic to Coptic demands. Indeed, only six of them are Christian -- two of whom are members of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. On his deathbed, the pope had attempted to use his remaining political clout to secure more seats for Copts in the assembly, but fell short.

Given its underrepresentation in the assembly, the Coptic community's best chance of achieving desired reforms may be to strike some kind of bargain with members of the current assembly. But this can happen only if the community agrees on priorities. At a recent conference on the new constitution, Coptic leftists saw individual citizenship rights and equality before the law regardless of religion as the most important issue, whereas Orthodox priests spoke of resolving problems with inheritance law and divorce. Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence suggests that obtaining the right to build churches without state permission is important to nearly all Egyptian Copts. To secure the reforms they are pushing for, however, secularists and traditionalists will need to work together because although church leaders have more clout within the Coptic community, Coptic leftists are often better at connecting with Egyptian society writ large. Particularly since more than twenty Christians, leftists, and reformers walked out of the constitutional assembly on the basis that it is insufficiently representative, the Coptic community may find that negotiation and external pressure are the only levers left to them, unless the current assembly is disbanded and a new one selected.

## The Next Pope?

**I**deally, the Coptic community would choose a strong, politically adept leader as the 118th Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church to shepherd the church and community through the turbulent period of political transition that lies ahead. Established procedure, however, may not permit the church to do so. Traditionally, the election is a lengthy multiple-round affair involving balloting by the church's Holy Synod and the General Lay Council. These elections narrow the field to three candidates, and the winner is selected randomly by a blindfolded child. While allegations of election fixing even in the final stage are common, it is far from assured that the most popular candidate will prevail.

Although the Holy Synod has appointed Bishop Bakhomious temporary leader of the church, he lacks the authority of a pope. The Coptic community will therefore face the opening weeks of the constitutional drafting process -- when the broad outlines of the document are agreed on -- without an authoritative leader who could lodge official

complaints with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or bargain effectively of behalf of his community. At less than 10 percent of the population, the Copts are hardly a counterweight to the Islamist Muslim Brothers and Salafists who control nearly 75 percent of the parliament and who appointed the constitutional assembly. Yet the lack of an effective Coptic minority voice at the table will only further diminish the chance that Egypt's constitution will represent and protect all Egyptians. Not only will the absence of these critical de jure and de facto legal protections hurt Copts at home, should the new constitution not adequately protect Egypt's Christians, it will prove an additional irritant to already difficult U.S.-Egyptian relations in the post-Mubarak era.

*Emma Hayward is a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania who recently returned from Cairo, where she was researching Coptic legal reforms.* ❖

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