

Renewed Violence against Egypt's Coptic Christians

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On January 6 -- Christmas Eve according to the Eastern Orthodox calendar -- six Coptic Christians and a policeman were killed in a drive-by shooting while exiting church in Naga Hammadi, Upper Egypt. The attack, which came in retaliation to an alleged rape of a twelve-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian man, was the largest assault on Copts in Egypt since a January 2000 massacre left twenty dead in Sohag. The days since the shooting have been marked by violent clashes and the burning of Christian and Muslim property. These developments have unfolded against the background of increased political pressure on Islamists -- evoking the 1990s, when the killing of Copts by Islamist militants was a routine occurrence and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was banned from political participation. Thus, while Naga Hammadi might be an isolated incident, it could also presage the return of Egypt's Islamists to the bloody sectarian attacks of the 1990s.

Background

Coptic Christians constitute nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population at 8 million strong. Long integrated into Egyptian society, the community was politically marginalized after Gamal Abdul Nasser's 1952 coup. Although Copts have since served in prominent positions such as minister of finance and foreign affairs, they have not held the premiership -- which they did twice prior to 1952 -- or served as minister of defense or interior. And with only six members in the 444-seat parliament (only one of whom was actually elected), they are vastly underrepresented on legislative matters.

Many Copts have accused Cairo of persecuting, or at least not protecting, Egypt's dwindling Christian population, a claim fueled by the absence of any timely and effective official response to the Islamist violence against the community in the 1990s. Dozens of Copts were killed every year throughout the decade, peaking at more than sixty deaths in 1997. These murders, perpetrated by al-Gamaa al-Islamiya (Egyptian Islamic Group), were accompanied by a spike in attacks on Egyptian policemen and foreign tourists, a trend that culminated in the November 1997 massacre of sixty-three tourists in Luxor. That notorious attack proved to be the group's last flourish, however. Decimated by government security measures, al-Gamaa's imprisoned leadership renounced violence that same year. By 1998, the situation had improved so much for the Copts that Pope Shenouda III -- who had called out the regime in 1994 -- declared that the community was no longer subject to persecution. Indeed, despite some notable incidents (e.g., a 2008 mob attack on a Coptic Church in Cairo; anti-Christian riots in Alexandria in 2005), the past decade has seen diminished sectarian violence in Egypt.

Crisis (Mis)management

News of the killings in Naga Hammadi came as a shock, though the church in question had reportedly been placed under police protection before the shooting because of threats related to the alleged rape. The day after the attack, thousands of Copts gathered at the morgue to protest the lack of effective protection and to collect the bodies. There, they clashed with security forces, and six more Copts were killed in the resulting melee. On January 8, police announced that three suspects had been apprehended, but the news did little to calm the situation. The next day, several Christian homes in nearby villages were torched, prompting retaliation against Muslim dwellings.

Meanwhile, back in Cairo, parliament has been consumed by the incident, with Qena provincial governor Magdy Ayoub providing controversial testimony before a joint meeting of the Defense and National Security and Religious Affairs committees. According to Ayoub, the Naga Hammadi killers were "not religiously inspired," as the Copts and most other observers have argued. Rather, they were motivated by the rape and by anger over reports of Christians downloading pornographic pictures of Muslim women on their cellphones. For his part, perennial speaker of parliament Fathi Srour offered a more traditional official explanation of the killings, pointing to "the presence of foreign hands...looking for an opportunity to shake Egyptian security."

Predictably, none of these explanations satisfied the Coptic parliamentary delegation -- at one point during the heated session, a representative from Qena called Ayoub "a liar." And in Naga Hammadi, the Copts are calling for Ayoub (a Mubarak appointee) to resign.

Signs of Renewed Militancy?

This latest incident comes in the aftermath of some dramatic government steps to curtail Islamist political participation. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood won eighty-eight seats, or 20 percent of the legislature. In 2007, in an effort to forestall similar gains in this year's elections, the Mubarak regime engineered constitutional amendments and a restrictive new electoral law that makes it nearly impossible for the group to participate. In addition, the government has arrested hundreds of MB members over the past two years, including the group's leading local financier.

The regime's campaign appears to be influencing the MB's orientation. In 2008, in a direct challenge to government policy, the group issued several

unprecedented statements in support of Hamas and Hizballah. More recently, during December 2009 internal balloting to select its 16-member executive committee and replace Supreme Guide Muhammad Mehdi Akef, the MB bypassed several moderate incumbents -- including Akef's deputy, Muhammad Habib -- and installed a more conservative leadership instead. Yesterday, the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat reported that the new Supreme Guide will be Muhammad Badia, who received 66 of 100 votes from the organization's Shura Council. According to the newspaper, Badia is "among the most hardline leaders, devoted to the tactics of Sayyed Qutb," a founder and leading MB theoretician who advocated violence to establish an Islamic state in Egypt prior to his 1966 execution. Indeed, Badia himself was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment in 1965 by the same military tribunal that condemned Qutb.

The MB's shift toward a more conservative leadership does not suggest that Egypt's Islamists have decided to return to violence -- in fact, the MB condemned the Naga Hammadi attack on its website. Rather, the vote reflects the outcome of an internal debate regarding the utility of participating in the sclerotic and repressive Egyptian political system. Moderate Islamists -- who sought further influence in national politics while playing by the rules -- clearly lost out. The full consequences of the conservative victory and the MB's seeming consent to a withdrawal from politics remain to be seen.

Implications

Last year saw an uptick in violent Islamist activities in Egypt. In February, Cairo's Khan al-Khalili bazaar was bombed, killing one tourist and wounding several others. In May, the government announced the arrest of forty-nine Hizballah cell members. And in September, twenty-six al-Qaeda militants were apprehended operating on Egyptian territory. Although these terrorist operatives hailed from abroad, they likely received at least some assistance from sympathetic locals. As Egypt enters its first period of political transition in twenty-eight years -- and as domestic Islamists face increasing pressure and political marginalization -- sympathy for the violent tactics espoused by foreign groups may also increase.

If history is any indication, Egypt's Copts would likely be among the first victims should this kind of radicalization occur. In addition to religious motivations, the targeting of Christians would also have a political dimension related to the presumed transfer of power from President Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal. Whereas former MB Supreme Guide Akef has stated that his organization "will never agree to a man like [Gamal] as Egypt's president," Coptic Pope Shenouda III has seemingly endorsed his candidacy, declaring at one point that "most Egyptians love Gamal Mubarak and they will vote for him ahead of any other candidate."

The outrage in Naga Hammadi may turn out to be an isolated incident. Even so, developments within the MB suggest that frustrations among Egypt's Islamists are on the rise. Although the government will likely take steps to keep these frustrations in check -- especially through this year's parliamentary voting and the 2011 presidential election resumed targeting of the Coptic community may prove a leading indicator of future, broader violence: Christians today, regime authorities and foreign tourists tomorrow.

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