

The Copts of Egypt: Specific Problems and General Tension

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Muslim-Christian relations are beset by escalating tensions comprising new dimensions that threaten the Egyptian model of coexistence and unity. There are many reasons for this deteriorating situation that has become the obsession of intellectuals and various interested parties. One of them is the poor performance of the national government and its inability to act as a vehicle encompassing diversity, participation, and equality among all Egyptian citizens, regardless of colour, religion, or social status. Recent events, starting in July 2010, have shown a retreat in the mainstays of social relations. Indeed, various discourses have pushed people towards seditious positions to such a point that many have started believing that various parties are working together to propel society towards sectarianism. The question that poses itself here is how to unravel this complex situation in as neutral a manner as possible and, at the same time, propose new bases for a novel political configuration that breathes life into a citizenship-based relationship between Copts and Muslims, within the framework of a democratic national state.

Last July, Copts demonstrated for five consecutive days in a cathedral courtyard calling for the return of Mrs. Camelia Shehata, wife of Deir Mowas' pastor in the Sa'eed, claiming she had been abducted. When the security forces found the missing wife, it was reported that she had sought sanctuary with a relative after a domestic dispute. Many days passed, however, without her returning to her home and family, or even appearing in public,

giving rise to rumours among Muslims of a possible conversion to Islam that was thwarted by security forces who instead arrested and handed her over to the Church.

In reaction to the news, demonstrations were held in different mosques, reaching as far as the Qaed Ibrahim Mosque in Alexandria. The demonstrators, dressed mostly in fundamentalist Salafist garb, carried slogans

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calling for the return of Camelia Shehata whom they claimed was being “held prisoner” by the Copts.

In fact, the almost identical stories of Camelia Shehata and Wafa’ Constantine in 2004 are nothing but the outward manifestation of latent sectarian tensions. In this context, claims were made to the effect that the Muslims were guests of the Copts and that some of the Quran’s verses were in need of review, countered by Muslim claims describing the Coptic Church as a state within a state that promotes sedition and keeps stores of weapons. These accusations were accompanied by a provocative statement by the Al-Azhar Centre of Islamic Studies, by internet campaigns calling for a boycott of Coptic owned companies, and by disgruntlement among ordinary citizens. We will try in this paper to put our finger on the Coptic problem, and on inter-communal tensions between Christians and Muslims.

The Copts’ Concerns

A review of the Copts’ present situation in particular and Muslim-Christian relations in general reveals a number of problems that together reflect the actual condition of the sectarian group.

At least four major problems beset the Copts in Egypt today, related to their political situation, social condition, self image, and the way they view their relationship with the Muslim community within the context of a shared citizenship.

1. **The ongoing problems the Coptic community has been grappling with for over a century**, the most important among which are the issues of building and up-keeping their churches; holding leadership positions in the state administration; adequate political representation in elected bodies,

including parliamentary, local, union, and civil organisations; and the issues that surface every now and then detracting from the right to equal citizenship. These problems are seen as signs of incomplete modern statehood, or an incomplete public understanding of what true citizenship involves, though they were never a reflection of disagreements between Muslim and Christian citizens. From the mid-1970s to the early twenty-first century, i.e. for a quarter of a century, both Christian and Muslim authors wrote about the issue, and were in agreement that the Copts’ problems emanated from the fact of their being Copts. These problems were highlighted and analysed, and for the most part were clear enough. They were addressed from a legal angle and were researched and studied with serious intent and respect, taking care to preserve inter-communal solidarity. Several groups tried their hand at solving them, including politicians, Coptic technocrats, teams of researchers and, finally, the Church itself which, in the past four decades, has become the community’s mouthpiece as far as problems are concerned, and the main party in the negotiations. These problems, however, have not been the main issue for quite a number of years now, and the above-mentioned groups no longer represent the community’s interests; a new set of problems has instead surfaced, bringing with it its own spokespersons. Among these new problems that involve the public at large, in itself a serious development as far as Muslim-Christian relations are concerned, are the socio-economic disagreements that degenerate into sectarian disputes, romantic relationships between individuals from different religious communities, and

stories about conversions to Islam and/or Christianity that give a local twist to a global issue like, calling for an economic boycott of the Copts following confrontations between Islam and the West and raising doubts regarding Christian beliefs. These kinds of problems leave more room for personal interpretation, and are not usually addressed using restrained legal language, a mature political dialogue, or are addressed from a historical perspective; instead, they are dominated by a language that reflects inter-communal disagreements, political rivalry, and pent-up excess communal violence. They also have their own spokespersons, individuals who are competitive in nature, engage in aggressive publicity stunts, and drown the scene in a host of details at the expense of a more comprehensive view of the issues at hand.

2. In the past few decades, **the Copts have turned into a “millet”** (a self-administering minority group), in other words, a closed group whose members rally round their religious identity as the main factor of identification, and the source of their cohesiveness, social image, political status and, often, reason for discrimination against them. This *millet* is under the care of the Church, which today is an umbrella for the entire Coptic community, both representing it socially and negotiating politically on its behalf. The implications of this are obvious and significant. “Coptic diversity” has been reduced to a unilateral view of the community, a community whose diversity varies according to people’s material situation, social status, and political position. In addition, in the eyes of the state, the Copts have turned into a community

seemingly lacking in full citizenship rights and, at the same time, into “subjects” plagued by problems resulting from the Church’s representation of the community. This fact was brought to light by various arguments related to “civil status” issues: the courts apply a set of rules that the Church does not recognise, and the Coptic community is in limbo between the laws of the state and those of their religious institution.

3. **A strong sectarian mindset prevails among the Copts.** They feel discriminated against on account of the unresolved chronic problems besetting their community, which the above-mentioned new problems only exacerbate. The presence of problems specific to the Coptic community is the main structural building block – so to speak – of the Coptic mindset, whereby they see themselves as rejected by society and, therefore, needing to be constantly ready to defend themselves and their community, beliefs and practices, symbol and image, etc. Added to that is their traditional “isolation” within the confines of their religious institution where they go about their daily activities in quasi separation from the rest of society. Isolation naturally breeds obsessions and misguided visions of oneself and the other, whereby personal problems assume disproportionate dimensions at the expense of a more open perspective of problems in general. It is noticeable that in recent years the Copts have become more sensitive towards their social image, as evidenced by the knee-jerk reaction to artistic and literary works that depict a different image to the one they have of themselves, or would like society to have of them.

This, in my opinion, is an outcome of the fundamentalist culture that prevails in Egyptian society today, and a carbon copy of the way the Islamist movement behaves under similar circumstances, when confronted with artwork or literature not to its liking.

4. **Casting doubt on Coptic religious beliefs** in various forums, whereby hardly a year passes without a controversy surrounding a book, a study, an article, and the like. Some also cast doubt on Islamic religious tenets, even if these are smaller in numbers and are less effective, given that Egypt is a Muslim-dominated society. Moreover, at a time when the “global communication revolution” has created more awareness, transparency, and democratic debate, we find some in our society who use the means made available by this revolution to spread a spirit of odious competition, hatred, and rejection of the other. It is noteworthy that those who spend time defaming the beliefs of others do not spend half as much time pondering the obviously deteriorating social conditions, including the increase in social problems, widespread behavioural and verbal violence, lack in social services, and exponential spread of poverty. This clearly does not occupy any of their time, for not a single one of them is known to have addressed any one of these issues, despite the fact that efforts to raise social standards and improve the quality of life is every believer’s duty, regardless of his or her religious affiliation.

Background to the Tensions

Muslim-Christians relations are plagued by several problems that feed on one another and constantly reinvent themselves:

1. **Relations between Muslims and Christians have turned into an issue of ongoing, lengthy debate** that only adds to the long list of contentious political, economic, and social crises. Approximately two decades ago, this relationship was the “holy of holies” of Egyptian social solidarity, an issue that one approached with great care. Alas, the situation is entirely, and dramatically, different today. What not so long ago was considered a highly sensitive issue that could negatively impact social cohesiveness has become a recurrent, common, and burning public issue, no less exciting than a football match with its running pitched battles, or an article on the pages of “yellow journalism” more attuned to sexual scandal. Those who read the morning papers, flip between satellite channels, or surf the internet will find an uninterrupted flow of news concerning relations between Muslims and Christians, and while many of these are funny, a few are serious. No longer do we sense the usual awe and respect with which religious issues were once addressed; today, such issues are akin to a football match which is either a game with a winner and a loser, or a draw - the worst possible outcome. Thus, relations between Muslims and Christians have turned into a competition of sorts, with one side elbowing the other out of the scene and feeling, on occasion, the bitterness of defeat and, on another, the desire to seek revenge, ending up with a crisis which is itself a prelude to another. It is a ceaseless whirlwind and a vicious circle with no one to break it.
2. **Seriousness has its adepts and sensationalism has its creators.** The saying “bad money drives out good”

explains how the new competitors entered the realm of Muslim-Christian relations, who compete about ideology and boast about stories of conversion. There was a time when Coptic issues were cast from a legalistic perspective and infused with a nationalistic spirit that made educated Muslim Egyptians aware of the need to grant Copts full citizenship rights, more so than any other group. Each had his own way of doing things and his own reason for doing them, but what united everyone was a common desire to forge a single nation founded on justice and equality. At present, serious voices are fearful of sensationalism and have left the scene entirely in the newcomers' hands. The latter have no historical awareness and have been impacted by the retreat of political ideologies in whose shadow they spent a good part of their lives, seeking instead religious sensationalism in an effort to preserve a foothold in the public arena. It is an arena dominated by foul language and injurious rhetoric. What we have here is a new current with no mainstays or reference points, a random public that expresses decades of pent up fanaticism and amuses itself by throwing verbal bombshells at one another via the internet, on satellite stations, and the pages of yellow journalism. Which intellectual background do these people come from? They are no doubt the direct product of falling education standards, retreating cultural levels, absent democratic political upbringing, and exponential growth of religious entities, be they institutional or not.

3. **The widespread atmosphere of distrust.** There is a growing sense of mutual distrust as both Christians and Muslims have their own personal

obsessions. It seems that each side belittles, rejects, or ignores what the other side has to say, and no serious discussion has ever taken place between the parties. Human experience teaches us to always respect other people's positions and try to engage them in a serious conversation on the issues, rather than look down on them or ignore them since, with time, they will become inherited "collective beliefs" that disappear temporarily only to reappear when certain events cause them to resurface. It is in this context that stories about conversions to Islam and Christianity abound, with demonstrations, skirmishes, and heated debates soon following. At the same time, the concomitant absence of transparency, serious debate, and respect for human rights only inflames the feelings of average citizens who then call for the return of an "abducted" woman, or held prisoner by the other party. People would be better advised to revert to the most basic of human rights principles: "freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief." Society guarantees the freedom of opinion and belief, freedoms considered every individual's right, a personal choice that no one should restrict or deter as long as the individual is legally eligible. The fact that there is no authority over an adult individual of sound mind, save the law, is a principle that no state that respects the rule of law can do without.

4. **The use of divisive language** to express Muslim-Christian relations. Those who reflect on the ongoing sectarian confrontations will no doubt find new terminology never used before. There was a time when people spoke about "national unity" or "sectarian issues" and couched their demands in legal and

political language. Today, those who read the newspapers' headlines, surf the internet, and follow readers' comments cannot but stumble on various slogans raised by demonstrators in the courtyards of churches and mosques. These use a new language that has recently entered the Muslim-Christian lexicon, a language known in political sociology as Mafia-style language, which includes terms like "kidnapping," "coercion," "detention," "prisoners," "gang," etc. Terms like these reflect a very angry mindset, a disturbed mentality, and perhaps even hatred of Muslim-Christian relations on the part of those who use them. There is a marked lack of ability to express one's opinion in a restrained language, a problem not only confined to those involved in this polemic. There is an excess of violent language in other domains as well, as part of the growing trend towards violence among the Muslims and Christians themselves.

5. **The religious field in Egypt lacks a champion;** this means that everyone can have a go at it and sees it as an open arena for confrontations and rumours, with no one to hold it in check, and no authority able and willing to correct misconceptions and dispel fears. Because of the ongoing feelings of suspicion and anger on both sides, any small problem turns into a sectarian issue and remains thus for weeks on end, forcing us to talk over and over again about fanaticism and the need for tolerance, until a new issue steals the show. We need to repair our collective memory and restore awareness to Muslim-Christian relations, and to its depth and history. We need to spark a serious debate in society in which both parties display courage in the way they

confront one another, and demonstrate a desire to purify the collective memory from its sectarian impurities, and the fanaticism and misunderstandings that have soiled it. I do not know for sure who could oversee such a debate; all I know is that no one is currently in charge even if some have momentarily expressed the desire to do so for personal reasons. This present generation will no doubt pay the ultimate "sectarian price," and the next generation's delayed expectations will be heavier than we can imagine.

The Political Situation

The Coptic question in its essence is a political one, which requires us to examine the behavior of the government as well as diverse political forces.

1. **The behavior of the government with regards to the Copts is multifaceted.** On one hand, the president of the republic insists on the values of citizenship and considers national unity a red line that no one may cross or defile. This position has been reaffirmed in his speeches, most recently during the commemoration of Egypt's victory on October 6th, 2010. Yet if this is the confirmed position of the government, it also considers the Coptic dossier a matter of security, placing it under the responsibility of the interior ministry. Indeed, the Coptic question does not enter into the sphere of any other political entity, be it the parliament or other ministries. This directive indicates an attempt to "pacify" the issue and to establish order without going farther in the proposal of political, social, economic solutions. Despite the effort made by the minister of the interior, particularly during

moments of tension or crisis, the fact that he is alone on this dossier translates to a situation where it does not receive the attention it deserves. Decades have gone by since the Copts have publicly raised their issues, such as the construction of places of worship, political representation, and access to bureaucratic posts. These demands have not been adequately treated for the simple reason that there is no political authority with the means to correctly address them.

2. **The position of different political forces seems ambiguous.** The Islamist movements are contradictory and see the Copts as a tool in their long struggle against the state. In general, both the moderate Islamists and Salafists evoke as a possibility the reinstatement of a specific status for the minority (*dhimma*), yet this would be a regression with respect to traditional Egyptian religious jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which is very open, as for example can be seen in the position of Sheikh Shaltout or Dr. Saidi, amongst others. Meanwhile, the secular parties announce their attachment to national unity but suffer from their insufficient development and weak links to society. Many see addressing the Coptic issue as a question of duty rather than conviction. Moreover, they are suspicious of the Copts' political choices, in particular the fact that the Copts support the national party in power both because they see the president as open and indulgent but also because they believe other parties have no chance to arrive at power.

Rebuilding the “Citizens’ Partnership

The above reveals grave deficiencies in Muslim-Christian relations requiring us to consider renewing the foundations on which the

citizens’ partnership is built, by reviewing the old principles on which these relations were based, and instituting new ones in line with new circumstances and developments on the ground.

These principles include:

1. **The Muslim majority’s right to express its culture and the right of the Christian minority to safeguard its own particular character.** In this context, a debate takes place from time to time on the place of Islamic Shari’a in the constitution, a debate born out of the moment’s requirements rather than as a result of diligent comprehensive considerations. Since a number of researchers and other parties are interested in delineating the place of religion in the constitution, the issue has to be raised in a manner that does not encroach on the majority’s creed, but rather instils equality and prevents the random insertion of religion in public life. I do not believe that the majority of Muslims, mainly the intellectuals, do not want a debate on that level. The numeric majority has the right to express its belief and the minority has the right to express its particularity, and be reassured that no discriminatory and non-egalitarian laws will be adopted. The factor that ensures that the debate on religion and the constitution is proceeding as it should, and taking into account both parties’ desire to draw maximum advantage of this opportunity, is the discussion that took place a few months ago regarding the personal status of non-Muslims. The discussion that raged followed in the

wake of a legal ruling by the Council of State – later annulled by the Supreme Court – obligating the Church to marry individuals having obtained a divorce in the courts, something the Church refuses to do, claiming that it violates Christian tenets. What is noteworthy is that certain Copts, who speak so often about civil law and call for a review of Article 2 of the constitution, relied in their defence of the Church's right to maintain its own civil status laws on the Shari'a-based right granting the "people of the book" the right to manage their own affairs according to their religious beliefs. On the other hand, one of the obvious "contradictions" and signs of "fluidity" in dealing with religion is the Islamists' displeasure at seeing the Copts rely on Islamic Shari'a to justify their right to manage their personal affairs. Despite their support of Islamic law, the Islamists chose to launch an attack on the Church, accusing it of disrespecting the courts' decisions.

2. **The rule of law;** meaning the application of the law without exception or delay on those who defame the religion of others and cause harm to those who belong to other creeds, whether in word or deed. Decades of implementation on the ground tell us that the religious domain is not directly linked to the law; purely religious matters are usually dealt with via special conventional and conciliatory mechanisms, rather than according to the strict letter of the law. Some believe that conventional conciliation methods, in the wake of public disturbances or

sectarian confrontations, are not only more practical than laws that name a winner and a loser and drag issue far too long, they could ultimately help bring a quick end to the deteriorating Muslim-Christian relations. Although this opinion is entirely valid, putting the law aside in cases involving religion could downgrade the importance of religious violence and encourage certain individuals to turn economic and social conflicts into sectarian issues, since these are not subject to the strict letter of the law. Regardless, access of citizens to rights and equality is a legal question and should not be just made implicit. Only the rule of law can raise the level of aspirations of individuals in society, who would then be able to profit from rights and laws and not just from the indulgence of a numerical majority with respect to a minority.

3. **Relying on basic notions on which the national group is founded, namely equal citizenship, democracy, freedom of opinion and belief, and development.** These notions guarantee a prosperous future for Egyptian society and should embrace all citizens, be they Muslim or Christian. The present polarisation, i.e., the fact that there is a Coptic issue at all and that the Copts are talking about themselves, and sometimes to themselves, at a time when there are almost no Copts on the political scene except for a few well-known figures, has dominated for quite a number of years. This state of affairs only deepens the schism between the Muslims and Copts, because mutual

cooperation to ensure a better future for Egyptian society represents, in itself, a solid basis for a national interaction that involves all society's components, intellectual and political currents, classes, and religious affiliations.

4. **Distinguishing between citizens based on their political affiliations, economic condition and social status, and discarding one's religious identity as a factor of classification in public life.** Traditional societies differentiate based on primordial factors like the nuclear family, extended family, tribe, religious group, etc., while in modern societies classification relies on political affiliation, economic condition, and social status. Egyptian society seems modern on the outside, given all the buildings and institutions, while on the inside social relations are mostly tribal in nature, and society still views others based on their religion, region, or family.
5. **Redefining the public sphere as an open forum for debate among all citizens,** a space where they can talk about different public issues, rather than a place for ideological rivalry or spreading hatred and fanaticism. This is why it is important for people to know that the public space is a neutral arena where everyone has an equal

opportunity to express his opinion, position, and difference, without oversight or sanctioning either by the state or any other political group. The Copts should become more active in society, and interact more with political events as they occur.

6. **Removing the issue of Muslim-Christian relations out of the political arena.** The issue's politicisation has turned the Copts into a catching area between the state and the opposition, including the Islamists. Everyone wants them in their camp, wants to win their support, sometimes by claiming that the state is a less cumbersome option than the Islamists, and at others that the Copts should stand in opposition to the government. Both these options should be re-examined, particularly since experience shows that the Copts were first to be left out of any final political settlement between rival government and opposition groups. The irrefutable fact is that the Copts are citizens as well and, as such, should not get involved in political settlements as a religious group, but as full citizens that have their own particular political, economic, and social character, just like everyone else.