

## Copts between the rock of Islamism and a hard place

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Saturday, 14 November 2009

The Times, London  
13 November 2009

The oldest Christian community faces harsh new pressures

Pope Shenouda III celebrating Mass

The first two months of the Coptic new year have been a sombre time for Egypt's ancient Christian community. The new year fell on the inauspicious date of September 11. And a spate of attacks on this large and downtrodden community by Islamist extremists or villagers giving a religious pretext to petty quarrels have provoked accusations of officially tolerated discrimination and heightened fears that Islamists will be emboldened to undercut the laws that promise religious freedom and legal equality in Egypt.

Clashes broke out in Kafr al-Barbaqri, a Nile delta town, in July after a shopkeeper stabbed a teenager to death in a dispute over an empty soda bottle. The Christian grocer had refused to give the Muslim boy a partial refund, and in the ensuing argument the grocer struck the boy with a knife, leading to his death. Dozens of Muslims went on the rampage, setting fire to the grocer's house and the one next door, leading to 30 arrests.

A month earlier 18 people were wounded in fighting in a village south of Cairo after a Coptic priest celebrated Mass in his home. In August two Copts were arrested "for security reasons" after reporting to the police that they had been attacked by a mob.

The incidents usually stem from petty quarrels in villages where prejudice against Copts has been growing as the influence of Islamist extremists has eaten away at former tolerance of this religious minority. Copts complain that the State frequently fails to protect their rights, and that some officials actively connive in discriminatory measures against them.

A wave of anti-Coptic feeling prompted the recent mass slaughter of pigs in Egypt, officially sanctioned to stop the spread of swine flu. Many Copts work as rubbish collectors in the big cities, and pigs are used to feed on discarded food and remains. The move appeared to be directed at the Copts while reinforcing the Muslim view of pigs as unclean.

Copts are the oldest and largest Christian community in the Middle East. Representing between 10 and 20 per cent of Egypt's population of 80 million, they claim descent from the church brought to Alexandria by St Mark during the reign of the emperor Claudius, and call themselves the Church of St Mark. For centuries Copts formed the majority in Egypt, until the advent of Islam in 641, when most were forcibly converted or became Muslims to avoid heavy taxes imposed on them.

Egyptian Christianity was immensely important in settling the direction of the early Church. The pivotal Council of Nicea (AD325) was presided over by Pope Alexander of Alexandria, and took binding decisions on liturgy, Church authority and the date of Easter. Egyptian patriarchs also headed the next two main councils, Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431).

Some 95 per cent of Egypt's Christians today belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, with the rest divided between Catholic and Protestant churches that established themselves in the past century. The present patriarch is the 85-year-old Pope Shenouda III, who has led the Coptic Church since 1971.

He recently caused controversy when he plunged into politics by declaring on an Egyptian satellite station that he believed Gamal Mubarak, the son of President Mubarak, would be the perfect candidate to succeed his father. His remarks were seen as a way of currying favour with the man widely tipped to take over from his father soon. But they reflected Coptic fears of the growing Islamist influence in Egypt. Pope Shenouda said that, while he had good official relations with the country's top Muslim leaders, there were "many tensions" today between Muslims and Copts.

He complained that neither Egypt's parliament nor its local councils could resolve the conflicts, which led to further problems. His remarks were attacked by some Copts, aware of the growing row over the lack of democratic choice in the likely succession of the younger Mubarak. Some also questioned his right to speak on politics for all his

community. Discrimination against Copts has varied over the centuries. They began to prosper, especially in the 19th century, and many were leaders in business and commerce. But their position deteriorated again after the overthrow of King Farouk and during the nationalist rule and socialist measures of President Nasser.

Many senior Copts have been waging a campaign to force the Government to ease the law that prevents them building new churches or even repairing existing ones without special presidential permission. An unofficial strike was staged by some on September 11, when they refused to leave their homes.

The Government recently agreed that repairs could be carried out with permission of the local authority. But it has largely failed to soften unofficial discrimination. However, permission was recently given for the community to open two private television channels, a considerable concession to their calls for more equal broadcasting time.

Muslims complain, however, that Western Christians, especially evangelical churches in America, have been using the Copts and the few Egyptian Protestant churches to proselytise among the Muslim majority.

The issue of changing religion is explosive, and there is widespread anger at attempts at proselytising and numerous instances of Muslims being killed who converted.

Western Christians are accused of using community programmes as a way of spreading Christianity. The Copts reject this, but acknowledge that resentment against Western, especially American, influence in Egypt is growing. In return, Copts claim that in some villages young Coptic girls are kidnapped and forcibly married to Muslims. They say appeals to the authorities to find missing Coptic girls are rarely followed up and that the strong penalties for abduction are not enforced.

This cycle of accusation and counter-accusation has fuelled the growing acrimony and mutual suspicion. As a result many Copts have emigrated, especially to America, where Egyptian Muslims accuse them of influencing Washington's policy towards Egypt.

The Copts also complain of official barriers to advancement within the state. Copts are not allowed to join the army and few are accepted in government service.

Boutros Boutros Galli, the former UN Secretary General, is a Copt. But in Egypt he never rose higher than acting Foreign Minister. His brother Peter is currently one of only two Copts in government.