The Copts of Egypt
Minority Rights Group works to secure rights and justice for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. It is dedicated to the cause of cooperation and understanding between communities.

Founded in the 1960s, Minority Rights Group is a small international non-governmental organization that informs and warns governments, the international community, non-governmental organizations and the wider public about the situation of minorities around the world. This work is based on the publication of well-researched reports, books and papers; direct advocacy on behalf of minority rights in international fora; the development of a global network of like-minded organizations and minority communities to collaborate on these issues; and the challenging of prejudice and promotion of public understanding through information and education projects.

Minority Rights Group believes that the best hope for a peaceful world lies in identifying and monitoring conflict between communities, advocating preventive measures to avoid the escalation of conflict and encouraging positive action to build trust between majority and minority communities.

Minority Rights Group has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has a worldwide network of partners. Its international headquarters are in London. Legally it is registered both as a charity and as a limited company under the United Kingdom Law with an International Governing Council.

As part of its methodology, MRG conducts regional research, identifies issues and commissions reports based on its findings. Each author is carefully chosen and all scripts are read by no less than eight independent experts who are knowledgeable about the subject matter. These experts are drawn from the minorities about whom the reports are written, and from journalists, academics, researchers and other human rights agencies. Authors are asked to incorporate comments made by these parties. In this way, MRG aims to publish accurate, authoritative, well-balanced reports.

Minority Rights Group gratefully acknowledges all organizations and individuals who gave financial and other assistance for this report.

This report has been commissioned and is published by Minority Rights Group as a contribution to public understanding of the issue which forms its subject. The text and views of the individual authors do not necessarily represent, in every detail and in all its aspects, the collective view of Minority Rights Group.

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Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities
(Amended by the UN General Assembly, Resolution 47/15 of 18 December 1992)

Article 1
States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

2. States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve these ends.

Article 2
Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) shall have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language. In private as well as public, and without interference or any form of discrimination.

3. States shall cooperate in order to promote respect for the rights as set forth in the present Declaration, within their respective fields of competence.


Article 28
Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall not be subject to any law or regulation, and shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms.


Article 7
Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms.

or centuries, the Copts in Egypt have been socially, economically and culturally integrat-

ed. A foreign observer would hardly be able to detect any difference between the Coptic minority and the Muslim majority in looks, manners or values. Nevertheless, the political integration of the Copts is less than a century old, and has at times deteriorated to tokenism.

Despite the Copts share of wealth, education, and professional prestige, they have found that when Egypt experi-

ences social tensions, they pay a disproportionate price. The rise of Islamic militant groups in the 1970s and 1990s, itself a reaction to mounting social tensions, has made Egyptian Copts more of a scapegoat than ever. In recent years, 1982 stands out as having been particularly violent with 22 Copts murdered and 285 injured. In a country of 60 million, these figures may not seem high, particularly when compared to sectarian strife elsewhere in the world, but for Egypt, such figures are unprecedented in modern history.

The Egyptian Copts are the largest and one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East, dating their origin to 42 A.D. with the formation of the first church in Alexandria by Saint Mark the Evangelist. Their number is currently estimated to be 5 million, almost 10 per cent of the Egyptian population. Before the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640 A.D., all Egyptians were known as Copts and early Arabs called Egypt the Land of the Copts. After the conquest, Copts gradually converted to Islam and the Muslims became the majority population of Egypt.

This report which has been written by Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Director of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, carefully examines the histor-

ical role played by the Copts and the tensions to which they are vulnerable. The report aims to promote con-

structive responses. The recommendations reflect this approach and stress the importance of freedom of wor-

ship, equal access to employment opportunities; an edu-

cation which recognizes the Coptic contribution to Egyptian history; the importance of preventing stereotyp-

ical and defamatory remarks about Copts in the Egyptian media, and the need to end discrimination against the Copts.

It has been the experience of the Ibn Khaldoun Center and Minority Rights Group that treating the Egyptian Copts as a minority is a controversial approach in Egypt. The Conference on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Minorities and Peoples in the Arab World and the Middle East was held jointly by the two organizations in May 1994. It was a controversial event in the region and initiated a national debate over the inclusion of the Copts as a minority. Some Coptic opposition to the Minorities Conference was based on the desire not to be seen as having a lesser status, because they felt it could imply the term ‘minority’.

However, the decision to include the Copts was because religion is one of the accepted categories for minorities under the United Nations Declaration on Minorities and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. However, the Ibn Khaldun Center decided that suitable phraseology could include the terms ‘sect’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘minor groups’ in future.

Some states refuse to acknowledge the existence of minorities. However, the experience of other countries shows that a strong national identity can be forged whilst acknowledging and respecting differences. As this report concludes, the fate of the Copts is inseparable from that of Egypt. A stable, prosperous and democratic Egypt holds the greatest promise for the Copts, while discrimination and marginalization could lead to serious inter- communal conflict.

Alan Phillips
Director
December 1995
**An historical overview**

**Copts before Islam**

Alexander the Great of Macedonia landed in Egypt in the year 332 B.C. Three centuries later, the Romans took over in the year 31 B.C., thus Egypt entered into 10 centuries known as the Greco-Roman era. Under Roman rule, Egypt was part of the Byzantine Empire. This led researchers of Egyptology to speak of a Greco-Roman era in Egypt, of a Coptic era and a Coptic civilization. This latter period is characterized by the conversion of Egyptians to Christianity, their fight for their cultural identity, and their desire to throw off Byzantine rule.

Foreign rulers exercised different forms of oppression and abuse against the people. They refused to acknowledge the right of Egyptians to citizenship, which resulted in their racial, religious, economic and political downgrading. The Greeks built special cities for themselves, separate from the majority of Egyptian peasants. In addition, they sought to impose their culture and to dissolve the Egyptian language into their own. Egyptians were required to pay taxes per head, yet were considered slaves for their ruling masters. Occasionally Egyptians rebelled against their foreign rulers, yet these uprisings were repeatedly crushed.

Christianity quickly spread in Egypt from the middle of the first century A.D. However, many Egyptians shaped Christian teachings to fit their own needs and beliefs. It may even be said that the more that Roman rule oppressed them, the more they were bent towards creating a new ideological concept combining religion with a national consciousness. Perhaps that is why Egyptians decided to begin the Coptic dating system with the rule of Diocletian in 28 August 294 A.D., because his reign was considered the most bloody and oppressive against Christians, and was known as the Age of Martyrs (303-11 A.D.).

When Roman Emperors realized their failure to impede the spread of Christianity, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, Constantine the Great, issued the Milan Decree of 312 A.D., announcing Christianity as the official religion of the state. This only reduced Coptic resistance for a very short period of time.

In the third century, Egypt was invaded by several countries: Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, destroyed an army of 70,000, while other African tribes attacked Upper Egypt. This, and the heavy burden of taxation, threatened the social and family system which had been stable for thousands of years. Poor peasants fled, while those who stayed behind amounted to a mere one eighth of their original number. Middle-class landowners gave their land to upper class landowners in exchange for protection.

Matters worsened in the fourth century, peasants fled their villages to the deserts and abandoned their crafts. The fifth century witnessed an age where landowners tried to gain independence from Constantinople. Reformations decreased to control corruption in local administrations, because landowners were themselves the responsible employees. During the fifth and sixth centuries, the Church of Alexandria owned large areas of land, and whole regions were under the authority of the Church and monasteries. Bishops had private armies and police, in addition to their own special courts. The clergy began forming their own class distinction.

When Justianus the Byzantine Emperor died in 622, the Coptic Church rejected the official Church religion, for its belief in the concept of the ‘two natures of Christ’. The Coptic Church, together with the Egyptian people, fought for their own doctrine, which is the concept of the ‘one nature of Christ’. Christianity became a leader of Christian philosophical and theological thought, throughout the entire Christian world at that time. Several researchers claim that the schism that divided the Church around those controversies was due more to Egyptian nationalism than to genuine theological factors.

The most important contribution of the Church of Alexandria was the Didascalia, the famous theological school which set the foundation of the philosophies that govern Christianity in general and Eastern Christianity in particular. In addition, the Church of Alexandria contributed Monasticism to the world.

The movement towards independence from Byzantine rule failed to achieve its objectives. There were several economic, social and cultural factors that explain the failure of people’s movements against Byzantine rule. The uprisings and rebellions were primarily carried out by peasants, most of whom did not have a clear understanding of how to overcome nor change existing economic and social systems, and the leadership was confined to the few educated individuals of the villages and the clergy. The Coptic Pope, with his spiritual, religious and national position, refused to succumb to the authority of the Emperors, but he was forced to make peace with them. During the period 620-30, Emperor Heraclius (610-41) decided to create a reformation movement to protect his kingdom. He decided to create a new religion for the state which encompassed all the conflicting Christian doctrines throughout the Empire. Heraclius presented his denomination known as the ‘Monophysite’, and tried to enforce this over the Egyptian Church in Alexandria and Antioch, but to no avail. He began to use violent methods and Egypt entered into a new phase, now known as the phase of the

**Introduction**

Egyptian Copts are the largest Christian community in the Arab world. The Coptic community is currently some 5 million strong in Egypt, representing 10 per cent of the population. They constitute four times the number of Christians in Lebanon, and more than twice the number of Christians in Sudan.

Most Copts gradually converted to Islam following the Arab Islamic conquest of Egypt (640 A.D.). By the end of the tenth century and the start of the eleventh, Muslims had become the majority population in Egypt. Despite the general Islamic spirit of cooperation and compassion, Copts were not treated equally. Discrimination against Copts has happened throughout history, however it has been particularly prevalent during times of economic recession and political despotism.

Before the Arab conquest, all Egyptians were known as Copts, and the early Arabs called Egypt the ‘land of the Copts’. Since Christianity was the religion of the Egyptians, Arabs used the terms ‘Coptic’ and ‘Nazarene’ to indicate the original population of the country.

Opinions differ as to the origin of the word ‘Copt’. Most people agree however that it is a derivation of the Greek term ‘Aegyptos’, with which the Greeks named Egypt and the Nile. In its current usage, the term ‘Copt’ indicates the original Christians of the country who kept their faith after most of the population converted to Islam.

**Socio-demographic characteristics**

In Egypt, the term ‘Coptic’ in official statistics refers to the total number of both Copts and other Christians native to Egypt. The official figures for 1976 show that the number of Christians in Egypt was 2.3 million constituting 10.8 per cent of the total population of Upper Egypt. However, in Lower Egypt areas they represent less than 2.3 per cent (1976 estimate). Coptic migration from rural to urban areas has been part of a wider phenomenon that includes both Muslims and Christians. It was particularly emphasized during the 1920s, when official statistics revealed that Copts preferred living in urban areas. This is perhaps due to the fact that minorities tend to live near governmental centres where they may feel protected from violence, and where improved employment opportunities and social promotion prospects exist.

Coptic social demographics are influenced by several variables, including: the higher Muslim birth-rate; conversions to Islam; and Coptic migration to countries such as the USA, Australia and Canada.

Copts are represented in all classes in Egypt. There are a large number in the middle and upper classes because they have long been known for their interest in education. This helped them get on in the public sphere and in business. However, like their Muslim counterparts, the poor classes constitute the majority of Copts in Egypt.

Copts follow three different denominations: the Orthodox, Anglican (Protestant), and Catholic. The majority, however, follow the Orthodox Church, which is also known as the Church of Alexandria, or simply the Egyptian Church. It is the oldest church in Egypt. Coptic Orthodox traditions claim that the Orthodox Church was established by Saint Mark, who is said to have arrived in Egypt between the years 48 and 64 A.D. Despite the fact that Francis monk ascetics, according to some researchers, began their activities in Egypt in 2129, the organization of the Catholic Church in Egypt officially only began in 1895, and the Egyptian Protestant community founded the first Anglican Church in 1860.

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**THE COPTS OF EGYPT**

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Great Tribulations. During that time Benjamin, the Coptic Pope (623-62), was forced to abandon his seat and flee to the desert for almost a decade, while priests and bishops dispersed. Many citizens, including the clergy, were compelled to deny their faith. Meanwhile Egyptian administrators were already suffering due to economic and social problems; village stability was shaken to the core, and trade deteriorated. All these factors contributed to the welcoming of the Arab Muslim conquest, in the hope of finding a better life under their rule.

There were, however, at least six rebellions against the new rulers between 725 A.D. and 773 A.D., after which Copts acquiesced to their new rulers and many of them converted to Islam. The Arabization of Egypt

Three major factors contributed to the Arabization of Egypt:

- Arab migration,
- The spread of Islam,
- The introduction of Arabic.

Arab migration

Arabs were well known to Christian Egypt. In the 610 B.C., an entire population was living in Alexandria. After the Arab conquest, however, Egypt witnessed a new era of Arab tribal migration activities, whose origins came from the Arabian Peninsula. Migration waves began in the seventh century and continued until the thirteenth. Migration continued to increase due to several factors:

- There was a high birth-rate among the Arab migrants.
- Egyptian rulers were appointed by the Caliphs, and arrived in Egypt with a large number of their tribespeople in order to strengthen themselves.
- Arab tribes continued to be attached to the agricultural land, mingling with the local population leading to their full integration with the original landowners. Furthermore, intermarriages increased.

The spread of Islam

Copts converted to Islam for several reasons:

- Large groups of Egyptians embraced the new religion voluntarily and in genuine conviction.
- Many Copts converted to Islam after suffering under Arab rule, especially during times of heavy taxation.
- Others converted to Islam wanting to become equal partners with Muslims on political and social levels.

Arabs had given the original landowners several promises to protect them from Tartar invasions, and to allow their freedom of belief in return for taxes. Some researchers claim that Omar Bin Al Khattab placed several restrictions on the freedom of Christians to build churches, and made them dress differently to distinguish them from their Muslim counterparts, as written in the Omar Charter.

The Arabization of Egypt

When Arabs arrived in Egypt, the Coptic language was the language used by Egyptians. However, it began to slowly die out with the introduction of Arabic. The Coptic take-over of the kingdom was an eventual process when compared to Arabic’s spread in countries like Iraq and countries of the Levant. However, the Coptic language continued to exist in the minor sectors of society, whether as authors, priests and bishops, peasants, service workers or skilled labourers. While most Copts belonged to the minor sector, in the minor social and upper sectors of the community, there were also Copts in the dunes who played an important role in the financial administration of the country.

The number of Coptic clerks and service workers increased because of their traditional experience in this field. This enabled sharp contradictions in Memeluke society.

The duty of Coptic employees was increased in all its ramifications, including the wealth of the sultan, and there was no barrier between the wealth of the sultan and that of his ministers. There were Copts who amassed huge fortunes, owning servants and slaves, and some of their buildings were grander than those of Muslims or their mosques. Copts were even given the same titles as those usually only given to Caliphs.

Out of jealousy and because of their wealth and powers, some Copts were subjected to various forms of harassment and humiliation. Copts were interested in power and power served in the state. Coptic bureaucracy in its different forms began to intervene on the political and social levels. In addition, the Memeluke sultans sought to create a balance between the different denominations, and in their search for securing their power, they preferred to ignore Egyptian Muslims and Arab employees, especially in administering some of the dunes.

The Memeluke era had its fair share of mutual violence between Muslims and Copts. The Portuguese tried to exploit the Copts and Al Makrize’s writings include what we now call investigative reporting about sectarian strife during the times of Sultan Mohammad Bin Almohamad.

The role of external influences on the relationship between Copts and Muslims

During the reign of the Tulunids (923-1517), the sultans stopped the Tartars from invading Egypt, and dissolved the last Crusader camps. Under the Memelukes, Cairo became an influential place and flourished both economically and culturally. However, during their second dynasty (1290-1439), the administration became so weak it was incapable of carrying out its duties or catering for the agricultural land. Worse still, the Portuguese endeavours to tempt Ethiopian rulers and Copts into alliances in order to control the Egyptian Sultan. The Portuguese, after the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope, sought to convert Ethiopia to the “idol” route away from Egypt. The Egyptian Church found itself in an impasse which threatened national security. The strained political Egyptian-Arabian relations imposed an immense amount of pressure on the Coptic Church.

Regarding the relationship between the kings of Nubia and the Memeluke sultans, the Christian rulers of Nubia agreed to pay taxes to the Arabs in the year 651-52. These were known then as “Coptic taxes” and the relationship between the two peoples, ranged from periods of silence to outright instability and unrest. Since Nubians followed the Egyptian Calendar, they occasionally paid Egyptian land whenever they heard that the Egyptian Patriarch was being mistreated, or was being forced to pay a large fine.
Copts in Ottoman Egypt

Following the invasion of Sultan Selim I in 1517, Egypt was transformed from a country governed by the Mameluke sultans to a state appended to the Ottoman Empire. A ruling class was formed, controlling the Egyptian administration and military, followed by wealthy traders, and the influential ulama. In the early Ottoman period, Copts had no influence in the higher administrations. There were only two dioceses and these were restricted against Copts.

Gradually, in the second half of the eighteenth century, several Coptic leaders began to emerge as wealthy traders and administrative employees in the dioceses. The peasants and agricultural labourers, Coptic and Muslim, continued to live together in poverty and oppression.

The second century of Ottoman rule witnessed the disintegration and fragmentation of the Empire, mainly for internal reasons. However, there were also external factors due to a European infiltration of the Ottoman Empire, especially after 1863. Countries like France, Austria and Russia demanded and sought the reformation of certain ethnic and denominational characteristics, for the benefit of European world expansion, and an alliance was formed between the European traders and the missionaries. Ottoman markets were invaded in the name of religion. France cooperated with the Vatican to push the Catholic denominations (Arabic or otherwise) into the arms of the Roman Church.3

In 1864 the Franciscans, with the approval of the Ottoman rulers, sent a Catholic missionary to Upper Egypt, and the Jews sent another missionary to Cairo. These attempts halted in the 1740s. After the fall of Ali Bey the Great, the Vatican sought to win the approval of the Coptic Pope and his acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Roman Pope in exchange for the protection of the Copts (this would have exempted Copts from paying taxes). But this also failed.

As the Ottoman Empire continued to decline, several political and social changes that had a long-term impact on Egyptian society began to take shape. An extremely wealthy Egyptian bourgeoisie class appeared. Mameluke princes and traders sought to become independent from the Ottomans, and were encouraged by wealthy Christian traders who came from the Levant and lived permanently in Egypt. French interests had developed and increased in Egypt, and the weakness of the Empire led Napoleon Bonaparte to invade the country in 1798. In light of the political difficulties that permeated Egypt, the wealthy and the middle classes sought a different rule which would bring about stability.

The nineteenth century

Egyptian society witnessed many economic, political and social changes in the nineteenth century, leading to the destruction of several inherited institutions, and their reorganization based on a class structure. Three factors contributed to that change:

- Mohammed Ali built an independent, contemporaneous modern state. His strategy was founded on the creation of a strong and contemporary modern military power, the reconstruction of the administration, the modernization of industry, and the creation of a modern educational system.
- The rise of national consciousness, and the development of a national democratic movement opposing foreign control and tyrannical rule.
- The British colonization of Egypt in 1882, which spread its own economic, political and social policies, leading to an exploitative form of development which linked the state to Britain.

The Hamayouni Decree

The Hamayouni Decree sought to achieve equality between Muslims and Copts, to help support the modern state. The most important articles in the decree include:

- The re-establishment of all previous laws concerning Copts, especially the independent personal status laws.
- The formation of Lay Councils consisting of the clergy and seculars to administer the financial matters of the Church and to discuss personal status affairs.
- Requests for church-building to be presented by the pope to the sultan and a licence to be issued.
- No one is to be punished nor prevented from exercising his (sic) rites and no one should be forced to abandon his religion.
- Equality between Muslims and Christians in employment.
- Military training and participation is a duty for all males, regardless of religion.
- All terminology that discriminates between people on the basis of religion should be abolished from the dioceses, and offending people on a religious basis is forbidden.

This law, contrary to what many people believe, is an advanced law that sought to remove discrimination between citizens on the basis of ethnicity, race or religion. For example, the article regarding licences was formulated after complaints from Copts that they were not allowed to build their churches. The new law was to ensure that they acquired that right, and this law existed for 78 years. In February 1934, however, Al Ezabi Pasha, Minister of the Interior, issued a Ministerial Decree, adding 10 conditions for building churches. Those conditions were:

1. Is the land on which the church is to be built empty or agricultural land, and does it belong to the person presenting the request?
2. What is the distance between the proposed church and surrounding mosques?
3. If the land is vacant, is it near to Christian or Muslim settlements?
4. Is it close to Muslims, do they have any objection to it?
5. Is there another church belonging to this denomination in the same town or village?
6. What is the distance between the nearest church belonging to this denomination and the town in which the requested church is to be built?
7. What is the number of Christians in the area?
8. If the land on which the church is to be built is close to the Nile, or bridges or public utilities belonging to the Ministry of Irrigation, an approval should be sought from the Ministry itself. Also, if it is near to railway lines, the railway authorities should also give their approval.
9. An official report should be made on all of the above points, and it should indicate the surrounding buildings to the requested spot on which the church is to be built, including the

When the Nubians resisted paying the annual taxes to the sultans, Sultan Bihans (1300-77) and his successor Sultan Kalawoon, raided the Nubians and defeated them. Those defeats, combined with internal instabilities in Nubia, quickly led to the fall of the Christian kingdom. Islam began to spread from the beginning of the thirteenth century, and since then, the Egyptian Church has failed to have any influence on the Christians of Nubia.30
Copts between 1919-51

Coptic participation in the 1919 Revolution has established their role in building the civil national state. Copts from all sectors of society and from all social classes were involved.

Britain's attempts at inciting sectarian strife

Britain secured the support of the allies in the Peace Conference and Egypt was considered a British protectorate. Sensing the threat to national sovereignty, and as a continuation of its policy which aimed at portraying Egypt's population as being diverse and irreconcilable, the declaration of 28 February 1922 was issued, recognizing Egypt's independence but with four provisions, including the protection of foreign interests and the protection of minorities.

A Constitution Committee was formed on 3 April 1922, to draw up a constitution on the basis of the 1922 declaration. As soon as the declaration was announced, both Copts and the liberal Wafd Party vehemently opposed it, saying the British had no right to assume protection of minorities and that this was considered an unacceptable intervention.

For the first time, Saad Zaghloul appointed two Coptic bishops in his ministry of 1924. The Wafd government adopted the same policy until 1944. Saad Zaghloul was also the first to appoint Coptic headteachers in state schools. When parliament, headed by the Wafd, appointed the Copt Weesa Wassel as speaker, his opening speech discussed national unity.

Missionaries and the rise of religious movements

In 1928 several important incidents had a strong impact on Egyptian political life in general, and on the relations between Muslims and Copts in particular. In 1911, a number of wealthy Copts called for the organization of a general assembly of Copts, to be known as the Coptic Conference. This assembly was organized under the slogan ‘Looking into Coptic demands’. Their agenda had five demands, one of which was establishing Sunday as a public holiday alongside Friday. They also demanded that Copts had the right to be represented in councils and in the legal system. In April of the same year a Muslim conference was organized and was given the significant name of the ‘Egyptian Conference’. It discussed Coptic demands and rejected them altogether. Both conferences could have grave consequences, exacerbating already existing differences between Muslims and Copts. However, this provocation failed to accomplish its objectives.

On an ideological level, however, the Coptic and the Muslim elite adopted the concept of one nation and one people, uniting all Egyptians. This allowed Egyptians to have diversity in their religious beliefs, but avoided segregation. The majority of Copts therefore vehemently opposed the embodiment of the rights of religious minorities in the 1923 constitution.

The role of Habib Guirguis and the beginning of the Sunday School Movement

Pope Cyril IV sought to reform the Church and to oppose Protestant and Catholic missionaries. He began by banning missionary work, and to counter the missionaries’s conservative ideologies and basic thoughts. Hassan Al Banna was influenced by a Sufi missionary to Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and editor of Islamic World magazine, entered the Al Azhar on the morning of 17 April 1928 and began proselytizing and distributing religious pamphlets. On 27 April, Zoimer incident in parliament, and several members asked the government what action it would take. Zoimer apologized, commending the Azharites for their wisdom and rationality. Several similar incidents occurred, until the Meastro Convention of 1937, when Egypt gained full sovereignty over its lands.

The The Muslim Brotherhood

The presence of Catholics in Egypt may be traced back to the fifth century, however, until the thirteenth century they were regarded as a marginal minority. Some researchers take the beginning of the Catholic movement in Egypt to be the year 129 A.D., which is the date of the arrival of Francis Assisi, the Catholic monk, to Egypt. In 1808, there was a minor conflict between the Church to influence the public. He therefore played a transitional role between the newly educated clergy and population and the Church's conservative leadership. This conservatism began to gradually change with the involvement of Archdeacon Habib Guirguis (1876-1951), who was a member of the Catholic movement. He began by moving towards the Catholic movement, which was based on the above ideas.

Although he was a conservative in thought, Guirguis was also a mediator between the Lay Council and the Church's leadership. He was almost the only person who could understand the lay members' demands, being a lay person himself and to Egyptians at the same time. This sensitivity led him towards the Church's leadership, as he was able to appeal to the consciences of missionaries. Hence, while Pope Cyril IV presented a reformation of the religious aspect, Guirguis presented a reformation of its more social aspects, and the ability of the Church to influence the public. He therefore played a complementary role.

Following Guirguis, the Sunday School Movement could be divided into three major stages.

1. From 1918 it had a religious, revivalist role in confrontation with foreign missionaries.
2. From 1940 it had a social, philanthropic role;
3. From 1950 it had a political role.

Catholicism

The Muslim Brotherhood, led by Sheikh Hassan Al Banna, came into existence in the same year as the Zoimer incident. The rise of this group at this time was no coincidence. Hassan Al Banna was influenced by a Sufi group named Al Hasyla, which resisted missionary evangelism, and the move toward mass conversions. The Brotherhood's attack on missions continued until the British capitulation in 1937.

Habib Guirguis and the beginning of the Sunday School Movement

Pope Cyril IV sought to reform the Church and to oppose Protestant and Catholic missionaries. However, the Pope sought to reform methods rather than ideologies or concepts, and began by banning missionary work, to counter the missionary's conservative ideologies and basic thoughts. He began by promoting the Church's public relations efforts, and eventually founded a newspaper, prompting and inciting people to fight and resist the missionaries. The Brotherhood's attack on missions continued until the British capitulation in 1937.

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2. From 1940 it had a social, philanthropic role;
3. From 1950 it had a political role.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The presence of Catholics in Egypt may be traced back to the fifth century, however, until the thirteenth century they were regarded as a marginal minority. Some researchers take the beginning of the Catholic movement in Egypt to be the year 129 A.D., which is the date of the arrival of Francis Assisi, the Catholic monk, to Egypt. In 1808, there was a minor conflict between the Church to influence the public. He therefore played a transitional role between the newly educated clergy and population and the Church's conservative leadership. This conservatism began to gradually change with the involvement of Archdeacon Habib Guirguis (1876-1951), who was a member of the Catholic movement. He began by moving towards the Catholic movement, which was based on the above ideas.

Although he was a conservative in thought, Guirguis was also a mediator between the Lay Council and the Church's leadership. He was almost the only person who could understand the lay members' demands, being a lay person himself and to Egyptians at the same time. This sensitivity led him towards the Church's leadership, as he was able to appeal to the consciences of missionaries. Hence, while Pope Cyril IV presented a reformation of the religious aspect, Guirguis presented a reformation of its more social aspects, and the ability of the Church to influence the public. He therefore played a complementary role.

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people converted to Catholicism as opposed to Protestantism. In Catholicism, Catholics found similar rituals, and there was no need to convert, whereas Protestantism received a totally new presentation of religion, which was much simpler and easier for people to understand, hence their faster spread. The Bishops, as the apparent Established Church, Catholics focused on education as a means of propagating their beliefs. The Franciscans built many schools, and by the nineteenth century these were widely spread throughout Egypt. The schools were not confined to Catholics, but extended throughout society, especially as they were generally the best schools providing superior education.

The Evangelical movement

When Pope Cyril V began his reforms, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were active, the former from the start and the latter from the middle of the nineteenth century. The Coptic Church considered them rivals, and hence the Pope sought to increase the number of schools for the education of Copts. The Evangelicals who arrived in Egypt were non-political in essence, and puritanical in trend. Soon, however, politics began to infiltrate. Evangelicals were convinced that Muslims should understand the Bible, but they believed their primary mission was to evangelize Coptic Orthodox people which they felt was not related to Christianity in any way. This led them to try to convert the Orthodox community, which revealed a clear discrepancy between Western and Eastern Christianity; the latter having been influenced by the Orthodox Traditions.

Language was also an obstacle in preaching, and the Evangelicals decided to publish the Bible in Arabic. They also sought to write books in Arabic that explained the Protestant concepts, and began carrying out Church rituals in Arabic.

Presbyterianism became popular in the poorer areas and in Assuit. Because it was puritanical and revivalist, it also found many followers among the most conservative. It should be noted that many Copts were educated in the missionary schools.

With the advent of the twentieth century the seeds for the nationalization of the Egyptian Church were sown. In 1917 Father Tadros Yussef was appointed priest to the Egyptian Church in the Presbyterian Church. He began writing the minutes of the Council in Arabic, which paved the way for Arabic in Coptic Evangelical Church.

The Church gained independence from the American Church in 1908, and its finance and administration was restored during the Macarius period and persists until today.

The rise of sectarian strife

In the mid-1930s, there was an intense political crisis, and an economic recession in Egypt. In addition there was the traditional conflict that began in 1919, between the

The Copts of Egypt

The Copts of Egypt

Copts between 1952-70

A few months after the 1952 Revolution, a coup involving Lt-Col Gamal Abdel Nasser vastly changed the social and economic characteristics of Egyptian society; and Copts, like other religious minorities, were forced to adopt new ideologies. The Revolution ousted the King on 26 July 1952, and a Republic was announced in 1953. Parties were dissolved in 1954, a law of agricultural reform was adopted on 9 September 1952 and nationalizations laws in 1961.

Just like other Egyptian citizens, Copts welcomed the 1952 Revolution, but as time went by, they became suspicious because the military movement did not include any Copts, and the Free General Organization which led the Revolution had only one Coptic member. Furthermore, the Coptic elite was gradually reduced due to agricultural reform and nationalizations.

The election of Joseph II

The most infamous of the popes was Pope Joseph II whose election process began during the government of Pope Macarius III, but was finally confirmed on 20 May 1992.

After repeated mutual accusations, the Pope and the Council reached an agreement which the properties of the monasteries would remain under the Pope’s supervision, and the monasteries would keep the resources and revenues from land, buildings, etc. Despite that the chartering of the Council, in the event of the Pope’s absence, should be carried out by a member of clergy and that the Pope was the right to appoint one third of the Council without elections.

Although the agreement was in the Pope’s favor, he renounced the initial agreement, and the Council asked the government to banish or dismiss the Pope. The Pope was banished to Abu Mosay mosque in Natroun Valley where he remained in exile for just over a year. With his return on 4 February 1993, his popularity increased despite being even more conservative than before. He decided to return the land under Egyptian law, on condition that he had a Lay Committee working with him, instead of the elected Council. By achieving this, the Pope managed to totally destroy the sense of the by-laws. This situation continued for approximately 12 years.

After the 1919 Revolution, the national movement was all about to embrace the reformation and enlightenment aspects. In the first parliamentary rounds of thewards, Dr Sarra Gerguis, a Coptic Member of Parliament (MP) presented draft laws. One of the draft laws canceling the amendments which Cyril V made in 1908 and 1912, and returned to the by-laws of 1875, was the Pope. For instance, the by-laws of 1875 contained a legal system that the Pope had the right to appoint one third of the members of the Council. The draft cancelled the two amendments which Cyril V made in 1908 and 1912, and returned to the by-laws of 1875. This decision that induced instability. The papal headquarters were closed and the police took measures to prevent the Pope from reaching it. On his return, the Pope went straight to the Coptic hospital where he remained for some time. As he became increasingly ill, he was carried to the papal palace quarters where he died on 13 November 1956, ending the most scandalous papal affair in Egypt.
for all and the immediate appointment of graduates in the workforce. Although this could have strengthened national and civil ties, this did not happen. In the conflict between Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood, which Copts usually accepted with quiet approval, Nasser issued two decrees:

- In 1957, he enforced religion as a basic subject in school curricula. Whereas previously, as established by the Wafd Party in 1957, religion was a complementary subject in schools, to increase religious consciousness.

- He reformed the Al Azhar University to meet contemporary demands, but confined it to Muslim students. If religion separated students of the same class in school, the Al Azhar University deepened that separation, because it provided Muslim students with excellent opportunities, yet excluded Copts completely.

The second feeling was of equality on the economic level. The nationalization in July 1951 did not differentiate between Muslims and Copts. The nationalization process however affected Copts more than Muslims, because it abolished many of the skilled jobs which Copts excelled in. In general, Copts lost 75 per cent of their work and property.

In the executive and in parliament, Copts represented less than one per cent. The number of committees which Copts headed from 1952 to 1970, and in both Coptic and Muslim ministers were chosen on the basis of the approval of state security reports, and non-political involvement.

After the disintegration of political parties in January 1953, Copts were no longer able to nominate themselves in general elections, especially after the dissolution of the Wafd Party. Only one Copt won in the elections of the Nation's Council in 1957. Nasser therefore picked 10 carefully chosen districts in which only Copts were allowed to nominate themselves, and hence were left to Coptic competition. This process failed, and Nasser implemented a new constitutional principle, that of appointing individuals, and added it to the temporary constitution in 1956, allowing the President to appoint 10 members to Parliament. This led to a negligible number of Copts winning electoraly, yet most of the appointees were Copts.

### Coptic migration

F
ollowing the 1952 Revolution, the role of Copts lessened in the community. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, particularly after the dissolution of political parties (and especially the Wafd Party). Copts lacked a government's platform for self-expression, and there was the first wave of Coptic migration. It is estimated that the number of Egyptians who migrated to Canada between 1962 and 1970 was 5,427 among them 4,599 Copts and 906 Muslims. During that same period, the number of Copts who migrated to Australia and the USA were 4,764 and 3,314 respectively.

By the year 1977 the numbers reached 85,000 in Canada and the USA. At the start of the 1980s the Coptic Nation group was formed, but was immediately dissolved. This group was a dissenting branch of the Sunday School Movement but was considered illegal in existence and in its demands. It attacked the clergy and demanded that the Coptic language be taught to all Copts instead of Arabic. It was a sectarian based movement, and was behind the kidnap-ping of Pope Joseph II.

Migration abroad began during that time. It undoubtedly denoted Coptic unrest and anxiety. Those who migrated did not sever their relationship or emotional contact with the homeland, but were still seen as rebellious and as rejecting the status quo. However, in their newly-found communities, Copts met with a different set of problems which were no less threatening to their identity, and they had to learn to deal with them. It is noticeable that Copts in the diaspora got together to form communities and the Coptic Orthodox Church built Orthodox churches in those communities.

During the 1960s and 1970s, most Coptic migrants took active political roles, albeit from afar, demanding Coptic rights and deeming Coptic persecution in Egypt. President Anwar El Sadat's policy of mixing religion with the political discourse, gave rise to an opposite and equal Coptic religious discourse, which found vent in the diaspora where there is an ability and a means for free self-expression. Although it could not be denied that Copts were suffering during that period, (along with their Muslim counterparts), the damage in general did more harm than good by its intervention.

Some Copts began forming a sort of government in exile while others sought to criticize the government and movements of Copts through the international media. Most of those so-called rebellious communities are separated from the authority of the Church in Egypt, which continually seeks to pacify them and bring them under its control.

Several organizations have been formed in the diaspora, including the American Coptic Organization which issues a publication called The Copts. This organization not only calls for Coptic rights, but also stresses Coptic identity in the sense of being the ‘owners’ of the country, and rejects the concept of assimilation.

Although most Copts in the diaspora are closely linked to the Church in Egypt, there are many opposition groups whose characteristics can be summed up as follows:

- Some of the opposition groups are political rather than religious movements, trying to influence state policy and exert pressure on the government.
- Some of the opposition have a sectarian basis, emphasizing ethnical roots and the historical background of the Copts.
- Parts of the opposition are inclined towards modernization in religious matters, being influenced by the Western environment.
- Others seek genuine, internal reformation of the Church.

### The Coptic elections

The July Revolution and the Lay Council

A law was issued in 1957 which replaced all the Church’s synods with government stocks. Copts complained to the government to issue another law, limiting Church and monastic properties to 200 acres. Then a general body was founded to supervise the Coptic synod, leaving the Lay Council without a role. The conflict about the by-laws continued for 34 years.

The election of Cyril VI

T
here was a sudden Presidential Decree stipulating new by-laws for papal elections, which included all the clergy’s demands. The Lay Council objected and presented a petition stating that the people should have the right to choose the pope. The petition objected to a condition which prevents the more educated younger generations from becoming popes. Another complaint concerned the fact that there would be a casting of lots among the candidates to decide who became pope. The petition met with no response, and the clergy continued to issue another law.

It should be noted that there were three suggested candidates for the papal election, including the current Pope Shenouda. But as people were worried about the candidates’ youthfulness and unorthodoxy, a new by-law was introduced regarding candidacy for the papal seat, which included a minimum age and a minimum number of years spent in the monastic life. The petition met with no response, and elections proceeded as scheduled with the new by-laws. Bishop Cyril VI won the least number of votes, but by casting lots at the temple, he was chosen as Pope. However, the Copts immediately continued their protests, and appointed many of them to important positions in the Church. Of those, the most notable are Bishop Samuel, Bishop of Public Relations and Social Services; Bishop Shenouda, Bishop of the Clerical School and Church Education; and Bishop Gregorios, Bishop of Scientific Research and Higher Education. This new generation was an extension of the old school, and they sought to make some enlightened reforms.

Immediately following the Pope's election, there was a confrontation with the Lay Council. For the first time in the history of the Church, the Pope was criticized because he prayed too much at the expense of Church work. It was unfair to criticize a pope, who goes to prayer every day and evening. Other popes used to leave prayers to the clergy and carry out their own papal duties and tender to other Church concerns, but Bishop Cyril VI did not concern himself with these complaints and continued with his prayers.

Angrily, the Lay Council declared that it did not have the money to pay for the expenses of the papal headquar-

tors nor the Church in general, and claimed that they had to borrow from the Coptic Televangelism to pay the salaries of priests and employees. They suddenly stopped paying the salaries. The Pope immediately resorted to President Nasser, who ordered the dissolution of the Lay Council, and made in 1956, including the current pope, to serve as the permanent administration council. The council was dissolved until Pope Shenouda III ordered it reformed immediately after his election on 31 October 1971, following the death of Pope Cyril VI.

### Copts between 1971-81

Egypt underwent serious economic, political and social changes from 1971-81. In the 1973 war, Egypt was victorious over Israel for the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the economic front, law no. 43 in 1974 declared an open-door policy, which started the dissolution of economic centralization. Politically, three new forms were formed in 1976, left, centre and right, in preparation for the formation of the National Assembly. In December of that year. On 18-19 January 1977 there followed the Revolution of the Hungry, as Egyptians now call it, which rose in rebellion against the economic policies of the ruling regime. It was considered the beginning of a political movement that continued until 1976. However, sectarian strife increased as well, due to economic and social frustrations. Such inci-

dents continued to grow to a peak height between President Sadat and Pope Shenouda in 1980-81.

### The rise of religious groups

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rom the outset, Sadat called himself the ‘believer president’. He began giving his speeches on the day of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, which was w

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trend towards considering the Islamic sharia the sole source of legislation, in contradiction to Coptic demands of freedom of belief and the ambitions to cancel the 10 conditions for building churches. In protest against the proposed constitution, Coptic clergy organized a conference in Alexandria on 17-18 July 1972, after which they sent telegrams to the People's Assembly, concerning the protection of their rights and of their Christian faith. They also stated that they would rather die as martyrs than live a life of oppression.

Sadat realized that society was starting to polarize, so he called for a consultative conference on national unity on 24 July 1972. He then asked for an emergency meeting with the National Assembly in August of the same year and decided to form a National Assembly to make a declaration of freedom of belief and the respect of freedoms.

Despite that law, there were consecutive attacks on Orthodox churches and organizations such as the Coptic Orthodox Nadala Organization in Salkhur, Beheira, on 8 September 1972, and the Bible Organization which the Copts of Khanka used as a church - this was burnt down on 8 November 1972. On 12 November, a large number of priests along with some 400 citizens went to this church to pray. In the evening, Mubarak passed through the neighborhood of Sultan Ashraf close by, and went on a provocative demonstration to the police station saying ‘Allah Akbar’ (God is great). Officials asked them to disperse and leave, which they did. But as they passed a shop owned by a Copt, the Copt was said to have shot at them and they burned down his shop, along with a number of houses and other shops owned by Copts in the area. The area was slightly hurt, and many were arrested for theft, destruction and rioting.

Following this incident, a parliamentary committee was formed and met with renowned Coptic and Muslim figures. The committee worked day and night and wrote an important report identifying the exact source of the conflict. They said that the reasons included the building of churches in the area, the prohibition of drinking alcohol, the construction of religious centers, the second conference on the history of Egypt, and the conference which showed its resolution by declaring a referendums on the Ottoman laws that restricted the building of churches, or an end to discrimination in high state positions, or the freedom to publish the Christian history and heritage. The conference showed its resolution by declaring 31 January to 2 February 1977, a period of three years, as the period of the freedom of belief and the respect of freedoms.

The document discussed several aspects: freedom of belief and of rites, the protection of the family and Christian marriages, equality and equal opportunities, the representation of Christians in local councils, and warnings of extremist trends. The statement also demanded that officials direct the draft law and stop thinking of applying laws taken from the sharia to non-Muslims. It also demanded the cancellation of the Ottoman laws that restricted the building of churches, or an end to discrimination in high state positions, or the freedom to publish the Christian history and heritage. The conference showed its resolution by declaring a referendum on the Ottoman laws that restricted the building of churches, or an end to discrimination in high state positions, or the freedom to publish the Christian history and heritage. The conference showed its resolution by declaring 31 January to 2 February 1977, a period of three years, as the period of the freedom of belief and the respect of freedoms.

The Al Azhar presented a draft law to parliament, calling for the execution of apostates and enforcing the hudud laws. Coptic bishops, including Pope Shenouda, announced the death of three individuals and the wounding of 59 in a bomb explosion near the Masarra Church of Shobra. This led to both Muslims and Copts deliberately trying to embarrass Sadat during his visit.

In an unprecedented move, on 4 September 1981, security officials arrested 1,536 individuals from different political and religious groups which government perceived to be a threat. Among these arrested were 22 priests and bishops. The following day, Sadat announced the cancellation of the Presidential Decree of 1971 which approved Pope Shenouda, and replaced him with a committee to carry out papal duties. The Pope received the news in his monastery in Natroun Valley where he was placed under house arrest. The Church, which considered the Pope as ‘elected by God’ and not a mere presidential appointment, believed that he could not be banished. Therefore, all Coptic rites and rituals continued to take place in the Pope’s name, despite his arrest.

Sadat announced that a referendum would take place in accordance with article 74 regarding the dissolution of all religious organizations, the closure of their newspapers and journals, and licensing of church buildings.

The Lay Council, with which the Pope did not initially have an official or direct, strong position of support, visited the Pope Shenouda and the Metropolitan of Alexandria to protest Sadat’s decision. The Holy See (with the exception of some members of the papal committee) and the clergy, as well as the secular officials of the Church, were totally against Sadat’s decision, and all churches continued to pray in the Pope’s name.

The Lay Council called for a special meeting to which the papal committee was invited. After the announcements of the results of the ‘referendum’ of 10 September 1981, approving Sadat’s infamous decisions, the Lay Council issued a statement on 23 September fully supporting, endorsing and accepting not just the decisions regarding the Pope, but also all of Sadat’s decisions, including the arrest of hundreds of Egyptian intellectuals.

The Theology of the Copts of Egypt
Endangering national unity and peace, inciting sect... of 299 defendants and life sentences for three. This... 190 defendants were declared innocent, among whom... the game of confrontation in Assiut between Islamic groups and the state which the Muslims invaded and controlled.

Values which was initiated by Sadat’s successor, was a military man, and his legitimacy emanated from being a leader of the military forces in the 1973 October victory. The President began his rule in December 1981, trying to pacify and improve relations between the nation’s divided people. He started by freeing all political detainees. The government began differentiating between the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious groups, accepting the legitimacy of the Brotherhood because they were non-violent in reaching their aims. The partition of the Brotherhood in parliament gave additional legitimacy to the entire institutional system in Egypt. The Brotherhood members presented several requests for the application of the sharia. Copts were very anxious about this, especially since the matter of the Pope's house arrest had not yet been resolved. Many Muslim writers began demanding the Pope's return.

The return of the Pope

The Pope was to be tried in front of the Court of values which was initiated by Sadat’s government, accused of:

- Endangering national unity and peace, inciting sectarian strife and repeating that Egypt was a Coptic state which the Muslims invaded and controlled.
- Provoking people to hate the current regime.
- Giving the papal seat political overtones, and using religion to achieve political aims and objectives.
- Inciting conflict and instability by organizing an meeting in Alexandria and asking the priests to coerce the government to succumb to their demands.

In 1985, Mubarak issued a Presidential Decree allowing the return of the Pope.55

Copts and the 1984 elections

The government of Dr. Fouad Mohi Al Din was preparing for its first legislative elections during the Mubarak era. Law no. 13 of 1983 was issued to organize parliamentary elections, and was approved by the People’s Assembly on 30 July 1983. The law stipulated that the elections of the MP’s would be according to party lists, and for the first time, the law stipulated that any party which did not win at least 8 per cent of the total votes in all districts would not be represented. Opposition parties attacked the law while Coptic circles welcomed it because it would increase their chances of representation. The elections resulted in the success of four Coptic members, which was a vast improvement on the elections of 1976-77 (when no Copts were elected). In addition, on 2 January 1984, the High Administrative Court unanimously voted for the return of the New Wafd Party which had dissolved itself in 1987, in protest at Sadat’s oppressive policies.

Copts, more than any other group in Egypt, welcomed the return of the Wafd Party to political life, especially with its traditional Coptic involvement, and its commitment to national unity. The New Wafd elected Ibrahim Farag as Secretary General. However, Sadat’s government announced that security was taking full priority and that fighting the terrorism which had been behind religion had to be accomplished not only through security, but also through political and intellectual means. The government also announced that it was pursuing people for criminal rather than political or ideological reasons.

In the case of the Islamic groups, in September 1984, 190 defendants were declared innocent, among whom was Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman; 17 were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour, with 2-15 years for those who had participated in the escape of new prisoners. The government also announced that it was pursuing people for criminal rather than political or ideological reasons.

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The Pope

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The clergy groups

Copts 1953-93

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(Source: The author)

The lay groups

The primary group is the Sunday School Movement that opposes the Pope in his methods on both spiritual and secular matters. They basically seek to give prominence to the role of secularists in the Church and gain control of administrative and financial matters. This had previously been the role of the Lay Council in its conflict with consecutive popes, but as the Lay Council is currently elected by lots, one of which is the Pope’s lot which always wins, this role has been taken over by the Sunday School Movement. The Pope had issued a decision to banish all members of that group and prevent them from serving in the Church and called for a boycott of their magazine. However, a group of them denounced and requested forgiveness, publishing their request in the Coptic newspaper Watani. The Pope, however, continues to reject them. The remaining group are headed by Kamal Zahir Moussa, who remains in opposition to the Pope.

The Coptic groups in exile

These are spread over the USA, Australia, Canada, France and the UK. They all have their own magazines through which they publicize and voice their opposition. However, in the USA there are perhaps the most famous groups, the most prominent being: the Shawkat Karss Group which basically attacks the Egyptian government in addition to attacking the Church, and the Rudolf and Raef Morcos Group which seeks cultural reforms and to educate and raise Coptic awareness of their societies and their religion.

Education

Educational opportunities, according to the constitution, are provided on a basis of equal opportunity. Both Muslims and Copts have access to free primary education as well as to free university education.

More recently, with the growth of religious extremist thought in the education system and ministries, school curricula have tended to be more inclined towards increasing the schism between Muslim and Christian schoolchildren. In some areas in Upper Egypt, especially those that are out of direct reach of the government, female students, both Muslim and Christian, have been coerced into wearing the veil.

Muslims have an additional advantage in education. The state-funded Al Azhar University covers all branches of education (medicine, pharmacology, literature, etc.), yet, Copts are excluded from them. By contrast, Coptic religious institutions are not supported by the state. There are additional complaints about discrimination in joining some schools and institutions, as well as scholarships abroad. As for the national culture, there are no Coptic studies or Coptic-related studies of art, architecture, etc. in universities nor in the school curriculum. Copts are also discriminated against in the scientific and teaching faculties. This has been noticeable in their under employment in these faculties.

Employment

The number of Copts in associations such as the lawyers association, the pharmacists, the medical, the journalists, and the veterinarians, etc. amounts to 25 per cent of the total membership.

There are no mayors, governors or university deans who are Copts, neither are there any Coptic school head-teachers of state schools. In addition, there are hardly any high-ranking Copts in the military, the police force or the judiciary. Moreover, Copts are excluded from the intelligence agencies and the presidential staff on security grounds. Of the approximately 300 heads of state-owned companies, only 10 are Copts. Of 127 ambassadors, there is just one Copt, stationed in a minor country. Copts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs account for only 2.5 per cent of the employees. In the field of education, there are no Coptic deputy ministers, regional directors of education or university presidents, and there are currently no Copts out of 166 faculty deans.

Property

The nationalization of 1961 did not discriminate between Muslims and Copts. However, Copts owned the following: 75 per cent of transport, 44 per cent of industry, 51 per cent of banks, 34 per cent of agricultural land (this constituted 15 per cent of total national wealth). After the issuance of law no. 47 in 1974 regarding the economic open-door policy, the traditional capitalist system partially returned. Currently Copts own 22.5 per cent of all the private investment companies that were founded between 1974 and 1993.

According to the restrictive rules of the Hamayouni Decree, churches may not be built or renovated, except by Presidential Decree or with prior permission from the state. Permission to build churches tends to take some 10-30 years for approval. According to the report of the Institute for Religious Minorities in the Islamic World for 1993, between January 1983 and December 1990 the Orthodox Church received only 10 permits to build new churches and 26 permits for repair. Some churches have been closed down by the government for ‘failing to comply with building regulations’, including St John’s Church in Menya and the Coptic Orthodox Church in Khanka. Other denominations received 44 building and repair permits.

Political participation

In general, the relationship between status, wealth and participation may be categorized according to the following periods:

1924-50 - The 1919 Revolution solved a problem concerning the Copts status and their wealth in relation to their political participation. Copts sometimes had a higher degree of political representation than their corresponding numbers in society, such as in the parliaments of 1929 and 1942. The Wafd succeeded in all seven elections that took place following the 1923 constitution with Copts representing between 4.9 and 9.8 per cent of the MPs.

1952-71 - Copts wealth and participation decreased, and the issue of participation was resolved only in so far as appointments were made to parliaments.

Copts today

Despite cases of discrimination against Copts, there are some positive aspects in Egypt. Here we will look at rights regarding education, employment, property, political participation, and women’s rights.
The first demonstrations for women took place in 1862, along with the 1919 Revolution. A feminist movement began to form and women obtained suffrage in 1956, long before other women in the region. Egyptian women have a long history of fighting against gender discrimination in schools, universities, and employment.

With the rise of religious extremism in the 1970s, the discourse concerning women in Egypt became stereotypical, depicting women as home-makers whose primary role is the family and the rearing of children. It is a discourse that has been strengthened over the past two decades with calls for women to go back to the home, forgetting their gains, and acquiescing to their ‘customary’ roles of housekeepers. This discourse has been and still is, emphasized and endorsed by both Christian and Islamic religious institutions.

In addition to being enforced by the law, the inferior status of women is also supported by conservative traditions and customs that govern Egyptian society.

From a legal perspective

Although laws are responsible for gender discrimination, there are many laws that condone it. Early marriages are condoned by tradition despite the fact that the slighter more advanced civil laws put together. That is why the idea of a new marriage contract is pointles to Christians, unless the marital institution itself in Egypt becomes a civil ceremony, with marriage at a church as an option.

Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims is socially unacceptable in Egypt despite the increase in such marriages over the past two decades. Statistics are hard to find concerning such matters. The Church tends to underestimate the numbers and Al Azhar tends to exaggerate them. However such marriages are discriminatory: a Muslim man may marry a Christian woman but the opposite is forbidden and they are considered adulterers if they marry. The children are, in most cases, not considered and therefore it is difficult to campaign against it especially in rural areas where early marriage is strongly supported.

Girls in Egypt are subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM). This is especially prevalent among the lower and lower-middle classes. Statistics reveal that more than 75% of Egyptian women have been subjected to this procedure. Therefore, it has been commonly assumed that Islam is responsible for the performance of FGM on both Christians and their Copts. However, this myth has been prevalent for centuries, therefore it is difficult to campaign against it especially in rural areas. FGM is performed on girls between the ages of 6-13. They are performed by either the doctor or local barbers. The justifications given for performing FGM include:

- If left to grow, a female’s genital organs would grow like a male’s.

From a social perspective

- Women have had a significant role in governance in Egypt, particularly in the upper and upper-middle classes where women have been involved in voluntary charitable work, forming a whole history and movement. However, as the role of NGOs decreased after the 1980s revolution, women’s involvement also decreased.

- Women have been employed in different jobs, but their numbers remain limited in the higher, decision-making positions, including ambassadors.

- Women are not allowed to bejudges, district attorneys, or hold military positions. This is due to tradi tion rather than specific laws, in direct contradiction with the constitution.

Women are represented in parliament, but, like Copts in general, tend to be appointed rather than elected. Although this is also the case for Muslim women, the situation is doubly aggravated because Coptic women are normally appointed as Copts and as women, rather than as MPs in their own right.

It should be noted that discrimination against women takes place not only in society, but also within the Church. Women are not allowed in key, decision-making positions within the Church and the Lay Council has no women members recenty.

The Orthodox Church preserves conservative in matters concerning women and as women, as well as Copts, are often removed from the Church, and this accounts for numerous conversions from Orthodoxy into either Islam or Protestantism to escape failed marriages. There are thousands of cases pending in Church concerning divorce.

Recently, feminist organizations have initiated and endorsed a ‘new marriage contract’. This contract proposes to make the bride and groom sign a pre-marriage agreement, whereby, among other things, a wife may divorce herself if she so wishes, something which is endorsed by Islam. The document has been seriously attacked by religious leaders, who state that marriage is ‘holy and based on love’, and therefore needs no such contracts. Although feminist groups continue to divorce the implementation of the document, it has no effect on Christian marriage and divorce. Christian marriage are considered ‘holy marriages’, whereas Islamic marriage may not be put together. That is why the idea of a contract is pointless to Christians, unless the marital institution itself in Egypt becomes a civil ceremony, with marriage at a church as an option.

The Copts thus have a double disadvantage in that they do not have the advantage of the Church, and this accounts for numerous conversions from Orthodoxy into either Islam or Protestantism. As such, it is easier for men to get divorced than women, and a Coptic female Minister has only recently been appointed under the influence of the Eastern culture and Al Azhar, but still is, emphasized and endorsed by both Christian and Islamic religious institutions.

Women are not allowed in key, decision-making positions within the Church and the Lay Council has no women members recently.

In addition to being enforced by the law, the inferior status of women is also supported by conservative traditions and customs that govern Egyptian society.
Several Coptic Churches have recently produced films that deal with the lives of saints. These films are acted, written and directed by renowned Coptic actors, writers and directors in the film industry in Egypt. This is considered an ‘alternative’ medium for expression. Such films do not discuss Copts today, they deal with the historical persecution of Egyptian saints. However, as recently as December 1995, a shop owner selling these films was arrested.

In addition, there are tapes of Coptic hymns that are available throughout the Orthodox and the Evangelical Churches. These are sold solely within the Church, and may not be bought elsewhere. Some critics tend to consider this a form of polarization, where Copts, due to governmental negligence in the media, resort to having their own media with their own subject matter.

The media

The official media

Although many of the press pioneers in Egypt were Copts or Christians from the Levant region, there are currently no Coptic editors-in-chief of any major newspaper, nor are there any Copts in key positions in the Ministry of Information to which television and radio broadcasting are subject. During the 1970s and the 1980s, the media was strongly infiltrated by Muslim extremists. Far fewer Copts were employed in media positions, and there was an increase in religious programmes attacking Coptic doctrines and creeds. This has been silently condoned by the government despite Coptic protests. However, more recently, especially since 1994, such programmes have stopped, particularly after the government came to fully realize the impact of such religious extremism on its own powers and authority.

Private media

During the same period, the 1970s and 1980s, the market was saturated with books attacking Copts and the Christian creed and doctrines. In addition, there was a widespread circulation of tapes spreading a hatred of Copts and of Christianity. There have been several crackdowns on places selling such tapes and their confiscation, after their dangerous ideas and impact were felt by the government.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report reveals several key points:

1. There has traditionally been a joint culture between Muslims and Copts in Egypt. Muslims and Copts have long fought side by side, and together they have forged the concept of the contemporary state since Mohammed Ali, through the 1919 Revolution, and up to independence from 1922-52. There was also a mutual stance against invaders and foreigners throughout the ages starting with the Crusades through to the conflicts with Israel.

2. There were social and psychological factors that rooted the concept of this joint culture, such as the Copts and Muslims sharing the same ethnic background, language, individual and group traditions, and other joint factors of an anthropological and ideological nature.

3. This report also shows that there was a cultural specificity to both Muslims and Copts which was not an ethno-cultural specificity but one which related to the religious cultures.

4. Despite the fact that those involved in sectarian conflict always tried to highlight the Coptic identity as being separate from the Muslim one, the two cultures remain bound in forming a genuine Egyptian culture.

Recommendations

Freedom to worship

Concerning the building of churches, the Ministerial Decree of 1936 and its 10 conditions should be abolished, and a new law issued that conforms to the contemporary situation, giving equality to all citizens in matters of building both churches and mosques in relation to the population statistics should be enacted.

Freedom of belief

Current unofficial statistics claim that in the period 1988-90, approximately 50,000 Coptic university graduates have converted to Islam for economic reasons. Concerning missionary work and Da’wa, Muslims and Christian missionaries who use coercion and threats to convert people should be punished. Concerning Christians who wish to convert to Islam, the regulations which allow that person to talk the matter over with a priest, should be respected. Furthermore, there should be protection for those who want to convert to Christianity.

The Wafd Ministry

The Wafd Ministry used to oversee Islamic properties only, not Coptic ones, but since 1968 it has begun seizing Coptic property. This needs to be looked at, as a matter of urgency.

Education

Education, especially in primary and secondary schools, should stress tolerance and anti-discriminatory concepts. The Coptic history in Egypt should not be overlooked in school curricula but should be included and studied by children together with the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman periods.

Some Copts demand that Coptic children should not be forced to study the Koran in school, and that if such studies are required, that Christian doctrines and creeds should be equally implemented in schools.

Employment

It was common for Copts not to be appointed to the higher positions of the Ministry of Interior, but this spread to other ministries as well, especially Education and Foreign Affairs. There should be fair representation of Copts in all governmental positions including the key decision-making posts. Those who persecute and/or discriminate against Christians should be strictly dealt with, especially if they are government employees.

The media

Action to stop the attacks on Christianity in the media, has been successful. People who incite hatred and discrimination should be severely punished in accordance with the law.

Women

The unification of the personal status laws (ie, the state and the Christian one) would improve women’s position. The government should apply the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women without its reservations.

More women should be encouraged into leadership of the Church.
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The Copts of Egypt

There are an estimated 5 million Copts in Egypt, constituting the largest Christian community in the Arab world. However, the Christian Coptic way of life is under threat, and Copts face subtle but routine discrimination.

The Copts of Egypt demonstrates that this threat is not a new phenomenon. Yet the report clearly explains how religious extremists are seeking to divide the Muslim and Christian communities, where Copts and Muslims have long shared a common culture, ethnic background and desire for national unity.

The report’s author, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, discusses the historical context to the situation the Copts find themselves in today. The Copts of Egypt highlights successive government’s policies towards the Copts and considers the Coptic community’s response from within Egypt and the growing diaspora.

In addition, the report contains important information on current opinion within the Coptic community, including its opposition groups, and a discussion of the specific discrimination faced by Coptic women both within the Coptic Church and wider Egyptian society.

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An indispensable resource, which will prove of great value to academics, lawyers, journalists, development agencies, governments, minorities and all those interested in minority rights.
References to Copts in the Coptic language are both Greek and Coptic in origin. The words kuptaion (Sahidic) and kubti (Bohairic) are attested, but are used in the surviving texts to refer to the language, rather than the people; these both derive from Greek Ἄιγουπτιος aiguptios "Egyptian." The Coptic term for the word "Egyptian" is rem en kēme (Sahidic). Medieval writers before the Mamluk period often used the words Copts (Arabic: قبط) and Egyptians (Arabic: مصريون) interchangeably to describe all the people of Egypt whether Christian or Muslim. After the bulk of the Egyptian population converted to Islam, the word Copt came to be associated with Egyptians who retained their Christianity.