The Coptic Orthodox Church: Challenges and Opportunities following the Arab Spring

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INTRODUCTION

Egypt's Copts are one of the most ancient communities in Christendom and one of the largest in the Middle East. The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria claims an unbroken line of patriarchal succession to the See of Alexandria founded by Saint Mark the Evangelist, a Christian group who turned the deserts of Egypt into a heartland of monastic life.

The word Copt stems from the Arabic Qibt, a word based on the the Greek name Aigyptios, meaning Egyptians. Its etymology stretches back to the word Hak-Ka-Ptah which means spirit of Ptah, a deity in Egyptian mythology.

Copts make up only a small proportion -- 4-10% today, depending on the source -- of the Egyptian population. They have witnessed Biblical civilisations, Roman conquerors, Byzantine emperors, Christian crusaders and Muslim caliphs, times of plenty and times of hunger, freedom and oppression.

Milad Hanna, a Coptic writer, says the Copts are one of many cultures that have accreted in Egypt over millennia. In 'The Seven Pillars of Egyptian Identity,' he describes Egypt as a collection of 'compounded identities' of Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean and African. Egypt's Islam, he says, has “a Sunni face, Shi'ite blood, Coptic heart, and Pharaonic bones.”

In 2013, the future of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the continuing Coptic presence in Egypt became an acute question, brought into focus by the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamist governments.

As it heads towards its third anniversary, the revolution in Egypt has swung from consensus and unity to confusion and uncertainty. The Coptic Church has been interwined with each phase.

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1 HANNA Milad The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity Cairo : General Egyptian Book Organisation (Egypt) 1994, pp.13.
In the early days of the uprising against President Hosni Mubārak, Christians and Muslims prayed together in the Makram Mosque in Cairo's Tahrir Square. On 6 February 2011 Christians and Muslims joined in a Sunday mass and *Salāt al-Ghaeb* (prayer for the absent) in honour of martyrs who had fallen in the fight.

Yet on 3 July 2013  Pope Tawadros II and Grand Sheik of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayeb, head of Egypt's highest Sunni Islam institution, flanked Egypt's defence minister, Lt.-Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, when he appeared on national television to announce the removal of President Mohamed Morsi, the champion of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Tawadros's public show of support for Sissi and the military's legal moves to restrict the Muslim Brotherhood coincided with an alarming surge in violence, targeted in particular at church buildings and Coptic worshippers. In this polarising environment, Copts face disgruntled extremists who promote *Sharī'ah* and who regard non-Muslims, as well as Sufis, as interlopers.

What are the risks for this small, ancient community? What are its options? Can it survive and even thrive, in the new Egypt?

These questions go beyond the borders of Egypt, for they touch at the heart of pluralism and tolerance in the Middle East.

In seeking to answer them, I will look into Egypt's unresolved issue of national identity, the Copts' response to past periods of religious tension; the factors that are helping to drive the country's turbulence; and whether laws or a special status for Copts offer the best prospects for rights and freedoms.
WHO ARE THE COPTS?

The story of the Copts has been interlaced with that of Egypt for nearly 2,000 years; they have one of the oldest continual ancestral claims on the country.

Copts are important figures at many levels, and stud the educated and business elite. Prominent Copts include former prime ministers Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Youssef Wahba; the writers Salama Moussa and Lewis 'Awad; the British-based heart surgeon Magdi Habib Yacoub; and billionaire businessmen Naguib and Nassef Sawiris.

The size of the Coptic population is hard to establish accurately. In 1927, the official census put them at 8.34% of the total population; it declined to 7.33% by 1960 and to 5.50% by 2000, according to official figures. In contrast, the Church says the figure is at least 10 percent of the population, a claim based on baptisms and marriages registered at each diocese.

The remarkably diverse range of estimates also points to different attitudes to the Coptic community. On the one hand, there are those who inflate figures to highlight the Copts' status and under-representation in political and civil arenas; on the other, those who want to diminish the Copts' importance.

A neutral estimate is provided by a U.S. institution, the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, which in 2011 tallied census and survey data rather than religion databases, and found the Coptic Orthodox community numbered 3.8 million, or 4.8 percent of the 82.5 million population.  

What is certain, though, is Copts now represent a smaller percentage of the overall population of Egypt than before. The causes -- again, poorly researched -- are likely to be lower fertility among Christians compared to Muslim families, and emigration.

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Copts are clustered especially in the governates along the Nile from Minya to Aswan; in Alexandria; and in Cairo, particularly in the districts of Shoubra, Heliopolis and Zeitoun. The Coptic population abroad numbers between one and four million, according to conflicting sources. They are clustered especially in the United States, where there are 60 official churches, two theological colleges and a monastery, and in Canada, where there are 15 churches. In Europe, there are 41 Coptic churches in 11 countries.  

The community's distinctive identity lies not with ethnicity but in its faith. The Copts form one of the early Christian communities outside the Holy Land, tracing their connection to Jesus through the flight of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Egypt. To Copts, the liturgical hymnody acts as a bridge between Heaven and Earth and carries them from birth to the afterlife. Self-sacrifice and devotion to the divine mysteries are other cornerstones of the faith: observant Copts fast for more than 210 days of the year.

3 The Coptic Orthodox Church Centre UK
The Coptic Church was founded by St Mark the Evangelist, who is said to have travelled to Alexandria for the first time around 43 CE from Palestine and converted some Jews there; he returned around 60 CE and was martyred around 68 CE.

Alexandria was an opportune choice. At that time, it was one of the major port cities of the classical world, a hub for trade between Asia, Africa and Europe and a centre of intellectual and religious scholarship.

“Indian sadhus wandered its streets, debating with Greek philosophers, Jewish exegetes and Roman architects. It was here ... that a great team of seventy-two Hellenistic Jews produced the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Old Testament.”

In early Christianity, Alexandria became home to the world's first catechetical school, the Didascalia, and grew into one of the chief sees of the Roman empire. The city's important role in the infant religion – and its fierce theological rivalry with Antioch -- gave Copts a direct line to the 'faith of the fathers' of the Christian church.

In the late IIIrd century, St. Anthony of Egypt pioneered ascetic monasticism and by the early IVth century St. Pachomius was establishing cenobitic monasticism. Monasticism remains a pillar of the Coptic faith and has spread to the wider Christian church. Ironically, Anthony retreated to the caves of the desert to escape the fervour of the Graeco-Romans who travelled to Alexandria to marvel at his asceticism.

The Coptic Church is one of five that make up the 'Oriental Orthodox’ group alongside the Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian and Malankara Christians who do not accept the Chalcedon Council of 451, which defined Christ as possessing two natures, divine and human, joined in one person.

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“Copts believe Jesus Christ is fully man, fully God, without separation in one nature of God the word incarnate.”  The Oriental Orthodox adhere to the teachings of the first three ecumenical councils.

Others contend the split with Rome was less theological, and more a break from Alexandria's new rival, Constantinople, and an assertion of Egyptian national pride. “Egypt's refusal to endorse the doctrinal decrees tabled at Chalcedon was a nationalistic statement of cultural independence from foreign occupation,” notes Jill Kamil.

According to religious historian Mark N. Swanson, the split allowed the Coptic faith to develop “a specifically Egyptian church, freed from increasingly problematic ties to Constantinople, creating its distinctive forms of life and witness within the ‘new Islamic world order.’”

The head of the Church is the Patriarch, whose official title is Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark. He is generally expected to be a monk. He is both a spiritual and civil leader, drawing on canon law and tradition for his authority as head of the Coptic community. The Patriarchate moved from Alexandria to Cairo in the early XIth century. Some scholars say this move, shortly after the establishment of the Shī'a Fātimid Caliphate in Cairo, hastened the Arabisation of the Church.

The Patriarch has enormous importance in the minds of Copts. He gives the Church an identity, a sense of belonging and security. He is seen as the father of the community and the symbol of the faith. Yet Patriarchs are not regarded as infallible on doctrinal matters; on civil issues, too, Patriarchs have become used to wading into the murkier world of politics, often with consequences that directly affect the Church. In 1981, the then president Anwar Sadat revoked the powers of Pope Shenouda III and exiled him to a desert monastery.

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5 Bishop Angaelos General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom interview with Churches Together in England, August 2013.
6 KAMIL J. Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs: the Coptic Orthodox Church The American University in Cairo Press (Egypt) 2002, pp.190.
The Holy Synod is the Church's highest ecclesiastical body. The Church has a strong structure with religious observance and social structure intertwined. The Church cares for the spiritual aspect of life and assiduously plans and incorporates the community into its mission.

Populist traditions are strong, so lay involvement in Church affairs runs deep. The Church engages in almost every aspect of its parishioners lives: pastoral, official, religious and social development.

The Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services, a social development agency, has an extensive network of Community Development Centers to help the poor and unemployed regardless of their religion; it runs rural development, healthcare, and literacy programmes; as well as vocational training in trades such as carpentry and plumbing. It works alongside many foreign aid organisations, such as Christian Aid in the UK.
A HISTORY OF PERSECUTION

If Copts feel their history is one of being buffeted by alternate periods of suffering and martyrdom, that sentiment is largely rooted in fact. As early as the IIIrd century, Roman emperor Diocletian issued edicts ordering the killing of between 140,000 and 800,000 men, women, and children for their faith, removed all Christians working in state offices, ordered the closure of churches and destruction of Christian literature. The Coptic Church calendar starts in the year 284, the commencement of his reign. It is known as 'Anno Martyrum' or 'Era of the Martyrs.'

A turning point came in 313 with the Edict of Milan, which established religious tolerance in the Roman empire and placed Christianity on equal footing with paganism. This establishment of Christianity as 'religio licita' opened a door that enabled Christianity and paganism to flourish side by side in Alexandria. 8 The Coptic faith coalesced further around the great port city and began nurturing an independent spirit. Church theologians such as Athanasius and Origen began shaping their doctrines.

From 395 onwards began a period that became known by some as the Copts' Golden Era. Egypt was incorporated into the Byzantine empire, and Alexandria thrived on the lucrative grain trade with Constantinople. The city's power as a trading hub and food source and its distance from Constantinople allowed Egyptians to be generally freed from the empire's economic demands. 9

This freedom also allowed Copts the space to diversify into artistic areas such as textiles, paintings and sculpture. The period of peace proved to be short-lived.

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8 Religio licita = permitted religion
Constantinople's siege mentality worsened and theological quarrels intensified, prompting Copts to feel little compunction to aid their distant, beleaguered cousin church. “Christian communities which had rejected the Council of Chalcedon played no part in the Byzantine vision of the orthodox world but even the Chalcedonian communities in east and west were gradually alienated from Constantinople.”  

Coptic leaders' reluctance to accept religious instructions from emperors brought harsh retributions. Pope Benjamin was forced to abandon the chair and clergy were pressed into denying their faith. The violence of this early epoch and the throwing off of Roman and Byzantine rule is known as 'The Great Tribulations.'

For some historians, Copts initially benefited from the mid-VIIth century Arab Conquest of Egypt.

Some attribute the early initial favourable intentions of the first Muslim leaders towards the Copts to links between the Prophet Muhammad and Heraclius, the Muqawqis of Alexandria and Egypt. Some Arabists, among them A.F.L. Beeston, challenge the authenticity of the contents of the correspondence between Heraclius and the Prophet, although there were links between the two. The Prophet's envoy, Hatib ibn Abi Baltaah, returned from Egypt around 627 and 629 CE with a present of two slave-girls, one of whom, a Copt named Māriyah, became Muhammad's concubine and bore him a son who died at a young age. The Prophet is said to have ordered the future Caliph 'Umar Ibn Al-khattab to respect and protect Egyptians.

As Islamic rule became more established and successive Caliphs sought to stamp their mark on Egyptian society, Copts were forced to decide between maintaining their faith in the face of hostility and punitive taxes or converting to Islam. Many chose to pay the jizya, a tax imposed on the Ahl al-Kitāb, but others yielded.

14 Ahl al-Kitāb = People of the Book. Religionists such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who are possessors of divine books (i.e., the Torah, the Gospel, and the Avesta).
“[Arabs] increased the taxes... And now many of the Egyptians who had been false Christians denied the holy orthodox faith and lifegiving baptism, and embraced the religion of the Moslem, the enemies of God,” John, Bishop of Nikiu, wrote in the VIIth century.  

By 800, as a result of conversions and intimidation, Copts represented barely more than 20 percent of Egypt's total population.

The financial pressure increased as 'dhimmi,' the specific status ascribed to non-Muslims, was enforced more and more rigorously. Social restrictions forced Christians and Jews to wear different clothes from Muslims, and limits on the construction and repair of places of worship were introduced.

One of the tools of enforcement was the 'Covenant of 'Umar,' a VIIth-century document whose authorship remains contested by some historians such as A.S Tritton. Codifying the status of Christians and Jews in Muslim lands, it was used to restrict the progress of non-Muslims in society, forcing them into segregation out of fear for their safety.

The policies of discrimination imposed by Caliph al-Hākim (996-1021) were some of the harshest in Coptic history. They included destruction of churches and monasteries and confiscation of property. Even so, in common with other Muslim territories at the time, the enforcement of these laws was not uniform.

“Laws were made, observed for a time, and then forgotten till something brought them to the remembrance of the authorities. There is no constitutional growth; events move in irregular curves, not in a straight line. One feels that if events had been governed by logic, Islam would have swallowed up the subject religions; but they survive, vigorous though battered.”

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These small openings led to periods of relative freedom, yet none was ever long enough nor sufficiently entrenched to give Coptic communities lasting stability.

This Arabisation of Egypt further chipped away at the Copts' identity. The Copts had generally used Greek and Coptic but by the Xth century Arabic had become the 'lingua theologica' though the Coptic language still retained its importance for ligurgical purposes. 19 A landmark came in the Xth century when Sāwīrus Ibn al-Mukaffa', a leading Coptic theologian, began writing in Arabic, claiming few Christians could now understand Coptic.

A series of disputes between Fātimid caliphs and Byzantine emperors prompted sporadic crackdowns and discriminatory measures towards Copts. During the rule of Wazīr al-Yazuri (1050-1058), more than 1,000 churches were closed, the Patriarch was arrested and taxes on Christians were increased.

Less than a century later the tide turned once more, and we find Pope Macarius (1102-1128) expressing his loyalty to the Fātimid rulers who had allowed the church to reopen and even expand its monasteries. 20 Despite the excesses, the Fātimid caliphs (969-1171) “were generally well disposed to the Christians” and allowed their art to flourish. 21

In the Crusader period of the XIIth and XIIIth centuries – an era which bred animosities beyond the Middle East and endure today – the Copts found themselves in the cruellest of positions, sandwiched between the Franks and Islam.

The Copts refused to support the Crusaders, and the Crusaders themselves felt little goodwill towards the Copts. Coptic historian Aziz S. Atiya notes that five centuries had elapsed since the great break at Chalcedon and wonders if many western Christians were even aware of the existence of co-religionists in Muslim countries – and if those who did know were able to distinguish between Copts and Muslims. 22

19 MEINARDUS Otto.F.A. Two thousand years of Coptic Christianity The American University in Cairo Press (Egypt) 1999, pp.56.
The Copts, meanwhile, became scapegoats for the actions of the Crusaders. According to Atiyah, much of the violence against Copts was in the larger towns, where many worked in the administration, and mobs destroyed churches and seized monasteries. 23

One of the most notable acts of revenge was the destruction by Muslim mobs in 1219 of the church of St. Mark in Alexandria, the former home of the patriarchal seat. The Copts were also victims in what became known as 'the last convulsion' of the Crusades in Egypt: the sacking of Alexandria in 1365.

The Copts “were pillaged by the Franks no less than were their Moslem neighbours” and at times fought side by side with Muslims against the invaders. Yet the Crusaders' rampage was an intolerable blow to the prestige of the Bahrī Mamlūks (1250-1382). The rulers turned their wrath on the Copts, imposing new taxes and stepping up persecution. 24

Despite this bleak period, an incident occurred in the Fifth Crusade (1217-21) that offers an intriguing example of reconciliation.

In 1219, as Christian armies besieged Damietta, Francis of Assisi left the Crusaders' camp and undertook a mission of peace, travelling for an audience with Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil which lasted around three weeks. To this day, Francis' mission is held up as a template for inter-religious dialogue; from the Copts' perspective it is doubly symbolic, as it took place in Egypt at a time of inter-faith confrontation.

The end of the Burjī Mamlūk's reign (1382-1517) and Egypt's incorporation in the Ottoman Empire (1517-1798) brought important changes across the region, including improvements across many aspects of day-to-day Coptic life.

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Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) integrated Christian groups into the empire's administration. In his Egypt, Christians and Jews benefited thanks to their centuries-long reputation as skilled scribes and took up posts in the civil service.

The promulgation of the 'tanzimat' reforms in the XIXth century, secularised the empire and introduced the notion of citizenship regardless of religion. It was a move that would turn out to be a double-edged sword. Mahmud included Christians in a system known as the 'millets,' which granted non-Muslim communities limited autonomy under the overall supremacy of the Ottoman administration; the constraints were political rather than cultural.

Historians say these changes were a mixed blessing. According to some opinions, the 'millet' system gave Christians an escape from the 'dhimmī,' but the 'tanzimat' prevented full integration of non-Muslims into a national life that had become more Islamised. The 'tanzimat' imposed restraints such as limits on the building of new churches and regulations that Christians could not bear arms.

Modernisation and social changes introduced by the Ottoman Sultan's viceroy, Muhammad 'Alī (1805-1848), ushered in a new era for the Christians – Copts, Greeks and Armenians – in Egypt. The dismantling of the 'millet' system enabled Christians to rise to positions of authority in the civil service.

Although Copts had been present in the administration for centuries, under Muhammad 'Ali they formed its backbone, occupying 45 percent of posts. Saīd Pasha (1854-1863), a successor to 'Ali, abolished restrictive laws, opening the way for Copts to be appointed to high-ranking positions in the local governorates. In 1855 Saīd Pasha ruled that Christians were no longer excluded from military service and the 'jizya' was abolished.

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25 Tanzimat = Turkish : reorganization. Reforms to effectuate fundamental change from the system based on theocratic principles to that of a European state.

26 Millet = Turkish : system of establishing populations on the basis of religious confession rather than ethnic origin.

27 Dhimmi = Arabic : People of the Book.

Beyond the administration, Copts also began developing skills in finance and commerce.

“Christian subjects could serve in government courts alongside Muslims in districts where Christians were part of the population. There was to be no distinction, Sa’īd Pasha declared, between his Muslim and Christian subjects.”

Within the Coptic Church, a reform movement was set in motion in the mid-XVIIIth century by Pope Kyrillos IV (1854-1861) to counter European evangelists. Kyrillos oversaw various reforms, including the introduction of sermons, opening seminaries, building educational facilities and the purchase of a printing press. In 1874, a lay council, the Majlis al-Milli was set up to represent the Coptic community.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire sowed the seeds of Arab nationalism. Under the early years of British rule (1882-1914), the Copts remained well represented in the civil service as they had a higher level of education thanks to newly-established Coptic schools. In the early XXth century, with Egypt a British protectorate, the Copts' quasi-monopoly on jobs within the bureaucracy came to an end.

On the one hand, education had become more accessible to the general public and Muslims began taking positions that Coptic and Jewish scribes had held for centuries; on the other, Britain's imperial pro-consul at the turn of the XXth century, Lord Cromer, doubted the Copts' loyalty to British rule, as well as their ability to adapt to a Europeanised civil service. The British also wanted overall staff numbers to be “more closely proportionate to the population-ratio of Copts to Muslims in Egypt.”

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30 MEINDARDUS, Otto F.A. Two thousand years of Coptic Christianity, The American University in Cairo Press (Egypt) 1999, pp 73.

Lord Cromer, noted: “[T]he only difference between the Copt and the Moslem is that the former is an Egyptian who worships in a Christian Church, whilst the latter is an Egyptian who worships in a Mohammedan Mosque.” 32

The change prompted many Copts to switch towards professional careers, indirectly creating a confident Coptic intelligentsia that was not shy to express political views.

In 1918, the ’Al-wafd Al-misri’ (Egyptian Delegation) led by Sa'd Zaghlūl, emerged as the vanguard for Egyptian nationalism and the fight against the British. Some commentators have painted the Egyptian National Movement as a glorious era in which all Egyptians mustered behind the Wafd's political flag.

“The events in 1919 were truly an interreligious collaboration. Muslim preachers were coming into churches to mobilize Christians, and Christian leaders spoke to Muslim audiences,” notes Febe Armanios, author of Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt. “The unified spirit was one of religious collaboration and support, and among the Copts, both church and lay representatives strongly believed in mobilization against the British occupation.” 33

Yet not all Copts were happy with its aims, and many doubted the Wafd would nurture ideological diversity. Their hope was for a secular party, along Montesquieuan lines, in which civil laws should not serve as a tool for enforcing religious norms.

Some academics point to the period since the toppling of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952 as the starting point of Coptic social and political marginalisation.

By 1957, President Gamal Abdel Nasser had issued a decree enforcing the teaching of Islam as a basic subject in the curricula, including in Christian schools, and then seized the Coptic educational endowments. Many Copts had much of their land confiscated. Nationalisation laws in 1961 placed factories, banks and other companies under government control.

In 1971 nationalism gave way to Islamic nationalism and Nasser was replaced as president by Anwar Sadat. Sadat's 'infitāḥ' economic opening policy allowed Christians to participate in private business, but this coincided with a worsening economic climate. Christine Chaillot sees the increase in sectarian violence which began in the early 1970s as a marker for a new phase in Coptic history. Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany also points out that sectarian strife in Egypt emerges during these periods of 'national frustration.'

In 1971, the first wave of communal violence erupted since the 1952 Revolution. The following year, in the town of Al-Khanka, a church and the homes of several Copts were attacked, claiming the lives of 21 Christians and one Muslim.

Sadat commissioned a People's Assembly (Egyptian Parliament) report into the incidents, headed by the legislature's deputy speaker, Gamal al-Oteifi. The investigators noted the violence had coincided with public debate on changing the constitution, notably an article identifying Sharī'ah as the inspirational source of law-making.

“Unless we address the roots of the problem, probe the factors that lead to it and come up with a remedy, the follow-up efforts will stop when things calm down,” their report said.

35 Infitāḥ = Arabic: opening. A program of economic liberalization to encourage capitalist investment by domestic and foreign investors.
38 Sharī'ah = Arabic: the path leading to the watering place. Law constituting a divinely ordained path of conduct.
The assessment was accepted by the People’s Assembly on 26 November 1972, but not a single recommendation for improving relations between the communities was carried out.  

By the decade's close, Egypt had made further moves towards an Islamised state. In a speech on 14 May 1980, Sadat declared: “I am the Muslim President of a Muslim country.” Shortly afterwards, Sadat introduced a new tenet into the constitution: Article 2, which stated Islam was Egypt's official religion and Sharī'ah the inspiration for the country's laws.

By the 1990s, militant Islamism proliferated under the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubārak, fuelled by entrenched poverty and inequality. Reports proliferated of attacks on Coptic churches and homes and of families targeted for the 'jizya.'

Instability worsened followed the ouster of President Hosnī Mubārak in February 2011 and the army's removal of his successor, Mohamed Morsi, in July 2013.

THREATS AND GRIEVANCES

Egypt's shifting internal dynamics and the disastrous state of its economy have bred uncertainty and frustration across most of its population, a brew in which the Coptic community has become an easy target.

For many Copts, everyday fears have been compounded by a sense of creeping islamisation. “It is a ... naked struggle for power to assert and impose the supremacy of the Brotherhood's fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam and wipe out other versions,” the international Catholic weekly The Tablet said in an editorial. “Copts (have) feared that if there was no room for more moderate interpretations of Islam, what chance did an alternative religion stand?”

An escalating wave of attacks, which began in the final years of Mubarak's 30-year rule (1981-2011) and amplified after the Muslim Brotherhood was thrown from power, has prompted many Copts into a painful reassessment of their relationship with Egyptians of other religions and, indeed, of their place in Egypt.

At least 15 major assaults on Copts were recorded by Amnesty International during Mubarak's reign. One of the most brutal was on the Nag Hammadi church in Upper Egypt in January 2010, when gunmen killed six Copts and one Muslim security guard as worshippers were leaving after midnight mass. At the time, it was described as Egypt's worst sectarian attack in a decade.

A year later, on 1 January 2011, a suicide bomber attacked the Coptic Orthodox church of the Two Saints in Alexandria killing 23 worshippers and injuring more than 100 others. Archbishop Arweis of Alexandria, denounced a 'lack of protection' from police at a time when the church had been receiving many threats.

40 The Tablet In the Eye of the Storm 24 August 2013.
In February 2011, Mubarak was removed from office and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took power. Amidst the uncertainty and calls for retaliation, attacks on Coptic communities increased dramatically, with scores killed and hundreds injured. Coptic homes and businesses were fire-bombed, priests targeted and churches, the most obvious and vulnerable emblem of the Coptic presence, attacked by mobs. For some Copts, to worship or perform a pilgrimage, once an inconspicuous part of their lives, became an act of personal faith and courage.

Among the bloodiest incidents was on 7 May 2011 when a crowd attacked the Saint Mena church in the Cairo neighbourhood of Imbaba, demanding a Christian woman they believed had converted to Islam and being held there against her will to be freed. The clashes caused 15 deaths and over 200 injured.

On 9 October 2011, at least 27 Christians were killed and 300 injured when military and security forced intervened to disperse a group of protesters in front of Cairo's Egyptian Television building, the Maspero. The crowd had been protesting the failure of officials to investigate the burning of a church in al-Merinab village in Aswan province. 41

On 7 April 2013, one person died when a mob attacked mourners with stones and petrol bombs outside the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo following the funerals of four Copts killed in earlier violence. Coptic officials said there was little police presence outside the Cathedral. The funeral was for those killed after a dispute escalated into gun battles when inflammatory symbols were drawn on an Islamic institute.

Between 14-21 August 2013, mobs attacked at least 42 churches, burning or damaging 37 of them, as well as dozens of other Christian religious institutions in eight governorates. 42 The attacks were reported as retaliation for the Egyptian army's killing of hundreds of Morsi supporters in Cairo. That month, for the first time in 1,600 years, the Eucharist was not celebrated at the Coptic Monastery of the Virgin Mary in Minya during the Virgin Mary fast.

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A common complaint runs through many of these incidents: the accusation by Copts that security forces failed to protect them or failed to investigate attacks effectively and prosecute those responsible.

When he took office in June 2012, President Mohammed Morsi sought to allay fears he would favour Islamic elements in the country. In a meeting with then interim Patriarch, Anba Bakhomious, Morsi said he would not allow anyone to “condescend” to Egypt's Coptic Christians. Rights groups say he failed.

“The Coptic Christians continue to be victims of attacks and harassment by not only radical Islamists, but also the state. Christians were already being persecuted at the time of Mubarak, but after the Jasmine Revolution and the rise the power of Islamists attacks against the minority have increased,” according to Mina Magdy, 27, of the Maspero Youth Union, a Coptic advocacy group that brings together Christians and Muslims. 43

Coptic researcher Suleiman Shafiq feels the problem lies as much in the lack of legal action in response to violence and discrimination, with officials preferring reconciliation to judicial decisions. 44 Shafiq's views are echoed in a 2012 US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report. “In Egypt, the government generally failed to prevent, investigate, or prosecute crimes against members of religious minorities, including Coptic Christians, which fostered a climate of impunity. In some cases, authorities reacted slowly or with insufficient resolve when mobs attacked Christians and their property.” 45

44 Al-Ahramonline 1 April 2013. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/68202/Egypt/Politics-/Egyptian-experts-address-minority-rights-in-Brothe.aspx
The role of SCAF has also been questioned. On the one hand, the military command is viewed as colluding with the members on the fringe of Islamist groups; on the other, some experts say the problem lies in the Army being a conscript force which draws its numbers from the general population who have a prejudice against Christians.

In any case, the conclusion many Copts draw is that they cannot count on protection from the state during times of social turbulence. The fatigue compounds a feeling of isolation and marginalisation in a country their community has called home for 2,000 years.
Poverty and demographic pressure

One must look beyond simply sectarian differences to explain the violence towards Copts and their marginalisation. Poverty, unemployment, concern about rising food prices and lack of opportunities are also powerful factors.

The protests which spread to Egypt on 25 January 2011 after being ignited in Tunisia the previous month, occurred in a country that was in many ways a powder keg. In late 2013, more than two years on, the social volatility which stirred the unrest has worsened.

The main cause, increasingly visible in contemporary analysis of the Middle East, is Egypt's demographic growth. The population of Egypt increased from 27.9 million in 1960 to 44.9 million in 1980; in 1990 it reached 57.8 million; increasing to 59 million in 1996; and by 2010 the population reached 84.5 million, or roughly a third of all Arabs. ⁴⁶

In August 2013, the state statistics body, the Central Agency for Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) reported that Egypt's population had reached 85.2 million, of whom around 60 percent were aged under 30. Between March and August 2013 alone the population increased by one million.

As a result, at least 750,000 people enter the labour market annually. ⁴⁷ During the boom years in Europe and the Gulf, Egypt could rely on expatriate jobs and tourism to act as a pressure valve for this extraordinary growth. Tens of thousands of young people found employment abroad, sending home remittances that were crucial to the economy.

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⁴⁶ United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report 2010*

⁴⁷ http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Templates/Articles/tmpArticleNews.aspx?ArtID=69618
In 2008, the financial crisis erupted. The following year saw the start of a contraction in domestic tourism, foreign employment markets and lucrative export markets. Jobs abroad and money sent home started to dry up. The state was increasingly unable to respond to the demands of the population. Almost three-quarters of the national budget is spent on state salaries, subsidies and interest payments.

The consequence, by 2011, was a vast pool of young people who had no employment, housing or savings. This coincided with a surge in the price of grain, a dietary staple, after a poor harvest in the United States and other exporting countries. Wheat prices are a sensitive issue in Egypt, where bread is a staple diet and the bulk of the grain is imported. Poor households in Egypt were hit very hard. The early slogans of the Tahrir movement were notably directed at hunger and inequality: 'Bread, freedom and justice' and 'Bread, freedom and national dignity.'

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Unemployment rose from 11 percent in 2011 to 12.6 percent in 2012 and to 13.3 percent by the second quarter of 2013, according to CAPMAS figures that many analysts see as a bad underestimate.

In April 2013, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Morocco, Egypt and Algeria were suffering the highest rates of youth unemployment of any region. Almost two-thirds of all unemployed in Egypt are aged between 15 and 29 years. 49 In 2010, the unemployment among those aged under 29 with tertiary-level education was 18.9 per cent, according to the ILO. 50

For any country, having a mass of under- or over-educated unemployed is a great challenge, but especially so if they are young.

According to Coptic politician and activist Mona Makram-Ebeid, who served on Morsi’s Shura Council, of “the serious social ills, to my mind the most serious is youth unemployment.” 51

In 2011 the poverty rate -- those living on less than US$1.25 per day -- reached 25.2 percent. CAPMAS figures for 2012 in rural Upper Egypt, which is home to just over a quarter of the population, show 51 percent are ‘income-poor,’ meaning they have an income but the standard of living is below the poverty line. Nationally, 51.3% of Egypt’s young people suffer from poverty, which amounts to 19.4 million people. The tally of people officially categorised as living in slums rose from around 12 million people in 2007 to more than 18 million in 2012.

A poll by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project released in early 2013 found 81% of respondents described economic conditions as a very important priority. Nearly half said economic progress was more important than democratic progress. 52

51 Middle East Institute, Washington July 11, 2013.
http://www.mei.edu/events/mona-makram-ebeid-egypts-political-future
52 Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project (U.S.A.) http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/01/24/the-tahrir-square-legacy-egyptians-want-democracy-a-better-economy-and-a-major-role-for-islam/
Hardship, inequality and ineffective central government have provided the opening for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose welfare arm, one of the best organised in the Middle East, has justifiably won it substantial support among Egypt's millions of poor.

Resentment also provided the spark for protests against a corrupt, authoritarian regime. Yet it can also be directed against minorities.

In March 2013, Ahmad al-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar University, blamed underlying social factors in both communities for poisoning relations and accentuating radicalism, declaring: “Islam and Christianity are both religions of love, peace and forgiveness that don't result in the making of extremists.”

Church property

Ownership of land and buildings and their use for worship has been one of the Copts' longest-running grievances.

In the mid-XIXth century, a mechanism for controlling Church property was introduced by Ottoman Viceroy Sa'id Pasha (1854-1863), a successor to Muhammad 'Ali, which is still partly in force today.

The 1856 Hamayouni Decree requires non-Muslims to obtain presidential approval from the head of state to build or repair churches and synagogues. The El-Ezabi Decree of 1934 further regulated the construction of churches. It set down ten conditions that regulate where churches can be built, including the stipulation that a church and a mosque be separated by at least 100 metres. Building a church in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods requires prior approval from the Muslim community ahead of any formal application, which again must be submitted to the president for approval.

“For many militant Islamists, churches, as the quintessential symbol of a Christian presence in Egypt, are difficult to accept. Extreme militants oppose both new churches and the repair of existing churches, since no church should stand in Egypt. Churches establish an unmistakable kafirun presence in the midst of dar al-Islam; they are out of place; they are an affront to Islam.” 54

The decree was introduced in a series of reforms that aimed at modernising Egypt and bringing equality between Muslims and Copts. In reality, it means Coptic communities are dependent on the Patriarch's relationship with the head of state to build or repair churches, and that in any case approval may only be given after a range of technical and social hurdles are overcome.

By the end of 1957, as part of Nasser's agrarian reform laws, the Church had been forced to hand over any land measuring over 200 feddans (4,200 square metres) in area, thus depriving it of valuable revenue.

54 PURCELL, Mark A Place for the Copts : Imagined Territory and Spatial Conflict in Egypt Ecumene, 5 (4) 1998, pp.444.
In a show of strength on 5 November 2012 Salafists illegally occupied a piece of land owned by the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo, erecting a sign bearing the words 'Al-Rahma Mosque’ and performing Islamic prayers. The occupation was swiftly ended after the prosecutor general intervened.  

The thicket of rules can be seen as clear obstructions to building and repairing churches, and maintenance of property. A procedural change in 2005, under presidential decree 291/2005, gave the country’s 26 governors permission to allow Christian denominations to expand or renovate existing churches, although it does not cover building new ones.

Pope Kyrillos VI (1959-1971) secured permission to build 25 churches each year, as well as a new patriarchal cathedral in Cairo, in exchange for promoting loyalty to the government. His successor, Shenouda III (1971-2012), had mixed fortunes. Between 1981 and 1990 only ten permits for new Coptic Orthodox churches were granted, and 26 for repairs to existing structures; in 2001, 23 construction permits were issued; in 2002 nine applications were approved. No churches were approved for new construction or repair in 2012, despite applications being submitted to governors, as currently required.

By 2012, it was taking more than four years to get approval for repairs - a delay that is a major concern, as some churches are more than 1,000 years old - and at least a decade to gain authorisation for a new church. In 2011, the SCAF pledged it would work towards introducing a Unified Places of Worship Law to amend the process for constructing and renovating places of worship and eliminate discrimination, but this has yet to be turned into action. In April 2013, Pope Tawadros II urged the bill be implemented.

The Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) licenses mosques and pays the the salaries of imams who lead prayers in them. Many mosques, though are unlicensed. The government does not contribute to the running costs of Christian churches or the clergy.

Education

Education in Egypt is a potent force for economic and social development, yet it suffers from a long tradition of being influenced by religion or segregated along religious lines. It was only in the second half of the XXth century that free, state education became available to the population. In many aspects the different emphasis placed on education by Christians and Muslims has contributed to rivalries and sectarianism.

The Coptic Church and the secular elite were active in education from the earliest time to prepare youngsters for careers as scribes and bureaucrats in the administration, a tradition that carried on for centuries. In the late XVIIth century, Coptic elementary schools were teaching religion, good manners, reading and writing of Arabic and Coptic, as well as geometry and arithmetic because “these two sciences are very useful and necessary on account of the overflowing of the Nile.” By 1848, at least 51 percent of Coptic males aged 5–14 years were enrolled in these schools. 57

By contrast, education in the Arab world was the preserve of the clergy through the Islamic education 'maktab' schooling system. 58 These establishments operated alongside the Coptic schools, catering to their specific focuses - memorising the Qur‘ān and Arabic orthography - and limited to only a small part of the public: just a third of the male Muslim population aged under 15.

In the early XIXth century, Egypt's rulers brought in an education system based along French lines to educate administrators and army officials. Lycées were established in 1816; preparatory schools in 1825; and seven years later, primary schools. These schools were scaled back during the British rule (1882-1922) and fees were introduced in state schools. In 1923 primary education was made compulsory but it was not until 1957 that Nasser made education a priority and allowed free education in schools and later extended this to universities.

58 Maktab = Arabic : muslim elementary school. Until the XXth century, maktab were the only means of mass education. The teacher was not always highly qualified and had other religious duties, and the equipment was often simple.
Among the philanthropic groups created by the Coptic laity, the Benevolent Coptic Society was founded in 1881 to promote education and public health; while the Jami’yyat Thamarat al-Tawfiq Society began in 1891 and focused on free education to the poor and opened a professional school in Cairo in 1906. 59 The societies and professional groupings that sprang from the lay organisations, among them Jam’iyyat Asdiqā ’al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas (Friends of the Holy Bible Society) and the al-Jam’iyyat al-Iman al-Khayriyyah (Iman Benevolent Society), funded schools and training colleges across the country and opened to students of all faiths. 60

According to the Ministry of Education, around 92 percent of Egyptian children today attend state-run schools, which follow the national curriculum. Overall, 95.4 percent of all 6-18 year olds are enrolled in school. Just over 96 percent of boys attend school, compared with 94.7 percent for girls, according to UNICEF. 61 Whether these figures are credible, though, is an open question. In 2010, the UNDP reported that as many as 20 percent of children never go to school, many of them in poor areas, and 81 percent of those are girls. 62

Similarly, questions arise about the quality and neutrality of education in state schools. In state schools, all students are required to memorize parts of the Qur’ān in their Arabic studies class and values such as social justice and equality are taught as religious concepts. One eighth-grade textbook (13-14 year olds), quotes 3: 85 of the Qur’ān “And whoever desires other than Islam as religion — never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers.” 63

63 http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/08/13/religious-education-and-pluralism-in-egypt-and-tunisia/dd4t#
In the 2011 end-of-year examinations, students were faced with a compulsory question in which they were instructed to write a letter to the SCAF, thanking the commanders of the armed forces for their support in the January 25th uprising. 64

Christian history in state schools is taught up to the period of the Arab invasion and again during the period of the Crusades. Primary school textbooks include references to Eastern Orthodox Christians who 'deviated' from the teachings of Jesus. The broader teaching of Coptic history is left to the Church, where it is treated as a religious subject rather than one of national history.

“Religious education in Egypt today neither contributes to acceptance, respect, and mutual understanding between faiths nor helps students develop a more profound understanding of their own faith or themselves,” says Muhammad Faoui, Carnegie Endowment Middle East Centre. 65

In the state universities, Coptic complaints of discrimination are more marked, focussing on access to places and jobs, allocation of resources and islamisation, a trend that began in 1977 when the ministry of education incorporated Islamic culture in the universal curriculum at Cairo University.

In the early XXth century, Egypt had five religious (Qur’ānic) schools with about 3,000 students, some of whom would ultimately join al-Azhar Mosque/University to become imams. By 2005, the number of Qur’ānic schools had ballooned to 7,000, with more than 1.5 million students. Even considering Egypt's population growth, this is still a huge proportional increase, most of it taking place since the mid-1980s. 66 Students leaving these institutions tend to have few vocational qualifications, which affects their employability and thus forces them to work in religion in some capacity – an example of how a sub-culture of dependency, with its risks of tribalism and clientelism, can develop.

64 http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0312egyptedu_background.pdf
66 GUINDY, Adel The Islamization of Egypt, Gloria Center, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya Volume 10, No. 3, Article 7/10 - September 2006.
According to the Egyptian statistical agency CAPMAS, the country has 17 public universities under centralized authority. Each has a director and three of four deputies, plus around 274 deans in Egyptian faculties. In 1972, a law gave the government authority to appoint university presidents and deans of departments. The law was initially intended to keep Islamists from taking over key posts in the universities; now it is widely seen as a means of keeping Coptic professors from such positions.

“Of nearly 700 president, dean, or vice dean positions in the country’s public university system, Christians rarely fill more than one or two,” according to the US State Department. 67

“(…) In Egypt there are no Coptic university rectors, faculty deans or security corps officers. Such partiality fuels fanaticism, particularly in the administrative organs and in state bureaucracy when it comes to legislation,” notes Coptic Catholic priest Father Rafiq Greiche. 68

Far-reaching reforms are needed if Egypt is to develop a system of education where inequalities and political interference are removed. In higher education, there is a specific need to reassess courses and internationalise the curriculum.

The revolution has in some respects exacerbated the problems of Egypt's Copts. Yet the upheaval has also provided the service of bringing these problems into the light of day, where through social media they can be examined and debated rather than masked, and stirred discussion about how to build tolerance and pluralism.

The constitutional path

Copts have closely followed the drafting of the post-revolutionary constitution, given its importance in articulating Egypt's values and form of government, and the country's long history of disappointment with previous charters.

The constitutions of 1923, 1956, 1971 included promises of upholding 'social justice' but many of the clauses failed to come to fruition. In the drafting and approval process for the 1923 constitution, a clause made Islam the religion of state, but it was incorporated with few objections as other articles guaranteed equality for all. 69 The 1971 constitution set down the creation of an independent Supreme Constitutional Council (SCC) to oversee the interpretation and enforcement of its clauses. De facto, it was a rubber stamp for Mubārak, who appointed its members. 70

In December 2012, President Morsi signed into law a constitution to replace the 1971 document. The new constitution was approved in a national referendum by 64 percent despite criticism that it was divisive. Morsi’s constitution maintained Article 2, a controversial feature of a constitutional amendment introduced by Sadat in 1980, which states “Islam is the Religion of the state. Arabic is its official language, and the principal source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence (Shari‘a).”

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This tenet was strengthened by a new article, 219, which declared that “the principles of Islamic Shari'\text{a} include general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the larger community.”  

Suspicious of creeping Islamisation, many Copts felt these clauses boosted Islam's role in society and restricted freedom of speech and assembly. Instead of seeing it as a unifying factor for the country, they perceived it as attempt to drive them into a 'neo-dhimmi' status, marginalising them and burdening them with new inequalities.

The military suspended the constitution in mid-2013 and set up a new constitutional committee of 50 mostly secular-leaning delegates from a range of social and political groupings to start a redrafting process. The wider mix of representatives raised hopes that, this time around, the constitutional process will reflect consensus and include clauses that protect against the abuses of majority rule. As post-apartheid South Africa has shown, a drafting process that is inclusive and transparent and harnesses the competing dynamics helps to lessen ancient tensions and encourage reconciliation.

Outside organisations and monitoring groups such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Amnesty International and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom remain cautious. They say that any charter needs to be backed by laws that implement international covenants on religious worship and freedom that the country has already ratified. 

71 Egypt Government Information Services website
Grassroots Initiatives

While some activists see a secular constitution as the best hopes for tolerance, others advocate a bottom-up approach to improved sectarian relations. The 'Al-Ikha' al-dini' religious fraternity, formally recognised in 1978 but with origins dating back to the late 1930s, has long pioneered dialogue between Christians and Muslims through meetings and seminars. Since early 2011, a number of citizens' initiatives have also sprung up with a similar goal of weaving contacts across the sectarian divide.  

The 1 January 2011 bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria which left at least 21 people dead and more than 70 injured was a trigger to launch numerous projects to promote understanding between Christians and Muslims. Six days after the attack, thousands of Muslims turned out to act as human shields as Christians gathered to celebrate Coptic Christmas Eve.

“We either live together, or we die together,” was the sloganeering genius of Mohamed El-Sawy, a Muslim arts tycoon whose cultural centre distributed flyers at churches in Cairo Thursday night, and who has been credited with first floating the 'human shield' idea.”

Also present that day as a human shield was a charismatic Muslim television preacher Amr Khaled. Khaled who subsequently launched the 'Internet Free of Sectarian Strife' forum, an initiative to counter rumours disseminated on the Web.

74 Al-Ahram Online 7 Jan. 2011 Egypt's Muslims attend Coptic Christmas mass, serving as "human shields" http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/3365.aspx
Among the suggestions: “Do not use blanket generalizations, foul language, or promote rumours without credible sources. Do not use sarcasm or videos that could heighten tensions or encourage violent opinions. Rather, Christians and Muslims ought to foster peace, compassion, and respect for others’ faith. We may disagree on teachings, but we must respect each other. And one final, simple, wise counsel: never post an opinion while angry.” 75

In July 2011, Al-Azhar, Egypt’s highest seat of Sunni Islam, launched the 'Egyptian Family House' initiative, led by the Coptic Patriarch and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. The aim is to bring together Muslim and Christian scholars, develop awareness campaigns and initiate dialogue between local priests, imams, police and local officials. “The committee will be a voice of Al-Azhar and the Church to show Islam’s tolerance towards Christians and Christianity’s tolerance towards non-Christians,” said Sheik al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. 76

Among the groups operating at grassroots rather than institutional level is Taha Hussein Association for Civic Education which operates a network of programmes in schools. There is also the 'Salafyo Costa,' an inter-faith initiative bringing together Egyptians of different religions, sects and political orientations. The group, comprising a third Christians, a third Salafi and third secular Muslims, was set up in central Cairo’s Costa coffee shop. It has around 130 core members, but claims an online following of 21,000. It organises community-based initiatives such as health camps, sports matches and conflict mediation; it also distributes food and blankets to the needy. In March 2011, the group organised a football match between Salafists and Christians in the town of Qena, 60 kilometres from Luxor; a year later it organised Salafi-Copt football match in Cairo. 77

75 http://forum.amrkhaled.net/forum.php
76 http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=32409&lan=en&sp=0
    http://womennewsnetwork.net/2013/04/30/cairo-stop-discrimination
Other initiatives include the *Tolerance Train,* which was partly funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Germany. The *Tolerance Train* involves two young Egyptian men – one a Muslim, one a Christian – travelling through Egypt by public transport and visiting places of importance to each religion. The two blog on their travels and hold round-table discussions with communities along their journey.

Community based organisations such as *Taha Hussein Association for Civic Education, Tolerance Train* and *Salafyo Costa* are useful tools in nuturing social awareness and enhancing the individual's role.
Towards a secular state?

In the 1950s, the notion of a separation of religion and politics was a hallmark of Arab modernity and the Pan-Arab movement. President Gamal Abdel Nasser actively courted an educated elite who had no appetite for an Islamic caliphate and allowed them to promote a secular vision of Egypt. Crucially, during that period, secularism was used as a notion of the state and as a vehicle for national unity and not, as we see in 2013, the idea of the composition of society.

The concept of a separation of politics and religion faded in Egypt after Nasser's death and efforts to foster a sustained large-scale organised political movement to champion secularism were never successful. During the Mubārak era, those promoters of the secular state who commanded significant support, such as the sociologist Sa'ad Eddīn Ibrāhīm and the politician Ayman Nour, were subjected to harassment and imprisonment by the authorities.

“The Arab nationalism of Nasser left a strong sense of Egypt as an Arab country; the surge in Islamic feeling has compelled the state to assert its deep commitment to Islam,” notes Mark Purcell “When different imaginations of national territory share and lay claim to the same physical space, conflict is the likely result.” 78

On 8 June 1992 one of Egypt's most outspoken secularists, the author Farag Fouda, was assassinated by members of the militant group al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya. In his writings, Fouda had accused the government of yielding to religious demagoguery, such as allowing offices in government buildings to be used for prayers or discussions on the Qur'ān. Only secularism could protect personal and religious freedoms, he argued in one of his most famous works, 'The Absent Truth.' 79

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Throughout the Mubārak era, many Copts had become accustomed to being treated as second-class Egyptians, almost entirely excluded from what passed for political life.

The legal but hopelessly small opposition parties, notably the Hizb Al-Wafd Al-Jadīd and Hizb el-Ghad, provided some scope for a few Copts to engage in a simulacrum of politics, but Mubārak’s National Democratic Party scarcely ever fielded Copt candidates. The handful of Copts in Parliament were almost always there by presidential appointment; only three of the 444 members of the People’s Assembly elected in 2000 were Copts. Instead, the government treated the Copts as a politically undifferentiated religious community whose ‘party’ was the Coptic Church and whose political leader and representative was the Coptic pope. 80 The result, say some historians, is that the religion has become intertwined with the country's political institutions and sense of identity, which makes any transition to a secular state particularly difficult.

“Even though Egyptians flirted with secular notions of citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cultural and legal constructions of who is Egyptian have been persistently based on confessional lines, elevating the parochial concerns of one faction instead of fostering collective interests. Celebrated symbols of national unity — like the crescent alongside the cross — have preserved religious markers as the epitome of patriotism,” says Febe Armanios. 81

“[T]he type of secularism that the Egyptian authorities want to institute is not one where there is a sharp separation between the state and religion, or even politics and religion. But it may very well be one where there is a clear distinction between political parties and religion,” says H.A. Hellyer, of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution. 82

82 http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/18-egypt-brotherhood-restrictions-hellyerrssid=islamist+movements
Debates over how concepts of Islamic law and Christian values can co-exist in a secular sphere have become fodder for debates between academics and religious scholars and become a particular contentious issue in discussions on a new constitution. Coptic rights and freedoms that have until now been protected under special clauses in the constitution could come under review in a constitution which allows for pluralism and equality. One of the thorniest issues is the question of personal status, such as inter-religious marriage, civil marriages, divorce and inheritance where the Church has final say.

“The vast majority of Egyptians would not accept turning matters concerning social status over to a centralized and secular body of law,” notes Rachel M. Scott. 83

“The (above) attitudes toward marriage, divorce, inheritance, and freedom of religion and speech indicate that while Copts oppose Egypt as an Islamic state they also see citizenship in terms that make it possible to preserve the centrality of the church. They are interested in maintaining the integrity of the Coptic community, and because the Christian family is the core of the Coptic community, the best way to do so is through the personal status law.” 84

An opinion poll carried out by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project suggests Egyptian views on religion and public life vary according to age. In early 2013, a survey showed that around two-thirds (68%) of those aged 50 and older thought laws should strictly follow the Qur'an, compared with 60% of 30-49 year-olds and just 54% of those under 30. 85

85    http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/01/24/the-tahrir-square-legacy-egyptians-want-democracy-a-better-economy-and-a-major-role-for-islam/
The Coptic leadership

At the heart of any debate about the future of Egypt's Copts is the role of their Church, and in particular the authority of its Patriarch. By tradition, the Church is a communal institution that nurtures Copts' spiritual wellbeing, education and employment through its social network, including an influential Sunday School movement. The Patriarch is the community's spiritual and temporal representative on the national stage.

Beneath this, though, are distinctive strands. “A Coptic political mainstream, willing to accommodate opposing opinions concerning constitutional articles; a Coptic left, calling for quick and fundamental change for the relationship of the Copts and the state; and a political right, calling for further restrictions on religious liberties to ensure the control of the Church over its own affairs.”

From 2012, as state structures became weakened and attacks on Copts intensified, the influence of the Coptic secular elite and internal criticism of the Church declined and many Copts sought unity behind the Patriarch, but not exclusively so. After the military suspended Morsi's constitution, the Church had its own representative on the committee to draft a replacement, Bishop Paul Tanta, an appointment that secular Copts strongly attacked.

The instinct by a section of the community to shelter behind a powerful, single institution has deep roots. For centuries, Patriarchs have played the role of interlocutor or protector of the Coptic community at large. One example, pointed out by O.F. A. Meinardus, was in 1855 when Copts became eligible for conscription members of the community sought out Pope Kyrillos IV to intervene, just as he had done during the 'millet' arrangement.

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Even once the 'millet' system of protection gave way to integration, Patriarchs retained their access to Egypt's leaders. To achieve this 'neo-millet partnership', Patriarchs typically refrained from intervening in national affairs in exchange for recognition of Copts' rights to worship and to own property, and for maintaining the Church's powers in communal matters. This was the case in the lengthy papacy of Shenouda III (1971-2012), whose tenure coincided with the 30 years in power of Hosni Mubārak.

Pope Shenouda, initially confrontational, changed to a more conciliatory approach after enduring three years of de-facto house arrest ordered by Sadat. Shenouda determined his relationship with Mubārak could be driven by mutual interest: churches could be built and maintained, and in return there would be no direct criticism of the government. In this delicate neo-millet-style balance, the Church was a representative of all Christians to the state, and Mubārak was their shield against Islamist groups. The risks of this relationship were exposed in early 2011, when Shenouda came out in support of the increasingly embattled Mubārak and called on Copts not to join protests against the regime.

Shenouda's successor, Tawadros II, took a sharply different approach. In April 2013, he publicly criticised Morsi for failing to prevent sectarian violence after an attack on Cairo's main cathedral. Two months later, Tawadros openly supported the millions of people protesting against the Morsi government.

Where this path leads is unclear. Will Tawadros seek an accommodation with Egypt's new rulers, or will he remain aloof from them?

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At the core of these questions lies a dilemma. The Church can use the mayhem of the post-revolutionary period to secure a special status for itself -- and by extension, reinforce its role as defender of the Coptic community. Or it can pursue a wider agenda, of promoting values of freedom, democracy and social justice as part of a civil society for all.

This debate has seethed within the Coptic Church for centuries. It burst into the national arena in the leadup to the Coptic Congress in Asyut in 1911 which dealt with numerous grievances, among them demands for greater political rights, equal access to state education and positions within the bureaucracy.

“The major difficulty for the Orthodox Copts under Muslim rule… was their responsibility and their obedience to two social orders, the Church and the state, and the superstructure within which the Church existed,” notes Otto F.A. Meinardus. 89

For Elizabeth Iskander and others, millet-style deal-making is self-defeating. A minority that is given special protection by the state in exchange for its religious freedom ends up having less presence in public life: it ends up marginalising itself. 90

CONCLUSION

As I have sought to illustrate, Egypt's Copts are facing a multitude of challenges, some of them with deep roots in history, and others that have more recent causes.

As 2014 nears, the situation for them is bleak: Egypt is in many respects a broken country, and the risk of sectarian strife there is now greater than it has been in centuries. After taking power, the military have set in motion a slew of laws restricting the Muslim Brotherhood from political and civic life. The danger is that this will further polarise the country, forcing radicalised members to meet in 'usra mugliqa' cells and resorting to acts of violence. Copts, whose religious leaders effectively aligned them with the army by supporting Morsi's ouster, will be an obvious target.

Beyond immediate day-to-day challenges, Egypt also faces the mighty long-term problems posed by economic collapse and population overload and, on the horizon, climate change. These are powerful stressors for any country, let alone one that is divided and lacking in resources. If unaddressed, they are bound to have a social impact and exacerbate sectarian tensions.

Put together, these factors mean that the chances of finding a swift and peaceful resolution to Egypt's crisis – and by extension, of anchoring the country in a new era of religious tolerance in which the Copts can thrive – look poor. Pessimism is well-founded when one contemplates the prospects for a constitutional outcome. A constitution that is strong, which not only defines human rights and civil liberties in a national charter but also provides the legal teeth to defend them, is remote indeed.

Firstly, a constitution would have to be negotiated and agreed by all the major groups, which hardly seems possible when an influential bloc, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been forced from power after winning the last elections and is operating underground.

91 usra = Arabic: family; mugliqa = Arabic: closed. System of groups and meetings devised by the Muslim Brotherhood to mobilise followers.
Secondly, for a secular constitution to emerge, Egypt would need a powerful middle ground, a group of moderates that commands widespread support or respect in the population, to drive the process. Yet the middle ground has been finding it harder and harder to have its voice heard; the Tamarrud movement of young people, whose mass petition against Morsi led to his downfall, has been sidelined. 92

Thirdly, a secular constitution would mean religious groups would have to forego, or reduce, powers and privileges they have enjoyed for decades, if not centuries. For the Coptic leadership, there is an obvious argument to offer as to why it should not make such concessions: the community would look weak at a time when the 'other side' are deemed a threat.

Even if moderates were stronger, it is unclear what notion of secularism they would be able to convey. The concept of secularism is a product of Western history (and even then, there are many different flavours and forms) and it has only shallow roots in the Middle East. In this region, there is confusion as to what secularism actually means when it relates to public displays of religious worship, affiliation or convictions. Radicals, meanwhile, tend to view secularism as a tool of foreign domination.

For secularism to make headway, Egypt's new leaders will not only need to understand the notion of a public arena where all have rights but where religion plays no official role. They would also have to embrace it and muster the skills, willingness and patience to explain to the public why it is so important: a tall order in a country undergoing its second revolution in less than three years. The goal should be a debate that leads to the definition of citizenship and identity - of all citizens as equal before the state and the laws, not underpinned by religious affiliation or ethnicity, and a nationality tied to the soil rather than to religion. A first step could be practical and visible, such as removing religious affiliation from identity cards, birth certificates, driver’s licenses and employment applications.

92 Tamarrud = Arabic : Rebellion
Faced with a present that is grim and a future that is even grimmer, the response of many Copts, as they seek guidance, may be to look into the past. Copts are steeped in the history of their religion and are intimately familiar with its treasure chest of tips showing how their religion survived in often-hostile circumstances over nearly two thousand years.

Seen through this prism, many Copts may be tempted to conclude that their cause has endured throughout the ages not by throwing down the gauntlet to those in power, but instead by cutting deals with them. Past accommodations have focussed on securing for Copts a special status that protects them or on gaining respect and status through niches that demand high-grade skills. The historical dealmakers have been the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has played the role of intermediary with Egypt's rulers.

Yet there are disadvantages as well as benefits in dwelling obsessively on the past. If the Church acts as interlocutor, this impedes the citizens from having a direct link with state institutions. The consequence is that the 'special' status becomes in reality the status of a second-class citizen. When a social division becomes enshrined by law and by religion, it also becomes formal, and thus more dangerous.

“The notions that a distinctly Coptic identity exists, that Copts share a consciousness of their ethnicity, and that referring to the Copts as a community is credible and meaningful, strike at the core of the Egyptian national identity and, in turn, at the security of the Egyptian state,” says Paul Sedra.

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If Copts are tempted to look to history to provide them with a compass, they also have some useful options in the XXIst century. These include grassroots work – charity work, awareness programmes, bridge-building exercises in sport, education and also religion – that promote awareness, tolerance and reconciliation. Civic education and dialogue are often overlooked, yet they are significant feeders into the process that allows societies to evolve.

Copts may also find themselves drawing on the support and resources of their members abroad. Organisations such as Coptic Orphans in the United States have been providing training for education and the Coptic Medical Society UK has been assisting in healthcare. Other organisations such as the U.S. Copts Association and the UK Copts have been vocalising the plight of Christians in Egypt to a wider audience and seeking to influence international opinion.

A further possibility is to internationalise the crisis in Egypt. As the case of Northern Ireland has shown, if religious conflicts become too entrenched for locals to deal with, it can make sense to bring in outsiders to act as intermediaries.

This is a strong option for encouraging dialogue, but only in situations where trust has failed disastrously and the rift between communities seems superable. It is be earnestly hoped that Egypt, with its rich tapestry of Coptic history and integration, never has to resort to this tool.
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