The Copts of Egypt
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2. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own autonomous institutions.

3. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to hold public meetings and public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public and private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.

4. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

5. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

6. States shall respect the autonomy of institutions belonging to minorities.

7. States shall respect and encourage the development of institutions and organizations, in conformity with the purpose and principles of the United Nations, including the principle of equal rights of men and women.

8. States shall take appropriate measures to ensure that persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

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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 Egyptians. The term ‘Copt’ was used by the early Egyptians, Arabs used the term ‘Copie’ and the early Arabs called Egypt the land of the Copt. Since Christianity was the religion of the Egyptians, Arabs used the terms ‘Copie’ and ‘Naazarene’ 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 ‘Copt’ 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 6 per cent of the total population, which was, at that time, 38.6 million. Certain Coptic circles dispute this percentage. Some sources, based on Church statistics, estimate the number of Christians in Egypt in 1976 to be 6.8 million, or 18 per cent of the total population. However, verification of these estimates is virtually impossible, as is the case with all minorities in the Arab world, therefore estimates are the only available data. Some estimate that the percentage of Christians in Egypt, including Copts, has been stable for the period 1960-76, amounting to between 6.3 and 8.3 per cent of the population. After the exodus of foreign residents from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Copts have retained their share of the population without any discernible changes. Therefore the current population estimate of 5 million remains.

Copts constitute 10.9 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 Copts, but 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 demography is 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 poorer classes constitute the majority of Copts in Egypt.

Copts follow three different denominations: the Orthodox, Anglican (Protestant), and Catholic. The minority, 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 Franciscan monks, according to some researchers, began their activities in Egypt in 1219, 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.

**Introduction**

The Copts of Egypt represent 10.8 per cent of the total population of Egypt, 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.

**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, and of a Coptic era and a Coptic civilisation. 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 rulers’ 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 Christianity to suit their own needs and beliefs. It may even be said that the more that Roman rule oppressed them, the more they went towards creating a new ideological concept, blending religion with a national consciousness. Perhaps that is why Egyptians decided to begin the Coptic dating system with the rule of Diocletian on 29 August 284 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 social-economic 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 desert, the workers abandoned their crafts. The fifth century witnessed an age where landowners tried to gain independence from Constantinople. Reformations failed tocontrol corruption in local administrations, because landowners were 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 Justinian 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’. The Patriarch of Alexandria 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. Hermogenes 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
Arab migration

Arabs were well known to Christian Egypt. In 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

Egyptians 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 citizens with Muslims on political and social levels.

Arabs had given the original landowners several promises to protect them and guarantee their freedom of belief in return for taxes. Some researchers claim that Omar Bin Al Khatib 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 introduction of Arabic

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 Arab language was a very slow process, especially when compared to Arabic’s spread in countries like Iraq and countries of the Levant.  

The Coptic language continued to be used in the minorit sectors of society, whether as traders, priests and bishops, peasants, service workers or skilled labourers. While most Copts belonged to the Coptic Church, the minority sector of the community, there were also Copts in the diwans 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 caused sharp contradictions in Memeluke society. The duty of Coptic employees was confined to increasing 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 ser- vants 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 persecution. This sometimes resulted in Coptic bureaucratisation and Muslim intellectuals, including ulamas (learned religious men), the Muslim clergy, students at Al Azhar University, and religious schools. These groups had grown steadily because of the flourishing of Islamic studies, and the increase in the number of schools teaching the Sunni denomination. From the middle classes came increasing numbers of educated writers and poets, all of whom aspired towards power and service in the state. Coptic bureaucratisation 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 Copts and Arab employees, especially in administering some of the diwans.

The Memeluke era had its fair share of mutual vio- lence between Muslims and Copts. Copts and Al Makrizeen’s writings include what we now call investigative reporting about sectarian strife during the times of Sultan Mohammed Bin Kalawoon.

The role of external influences on the status of Copts

The Crusader attacks awakened the dormant spirit of Egyptian Muslims, and fanaticism and bigotry against both Eastern and Western Christians flourished. Consequently, Islamic intolerance towards Copts also increased.  

The Crusaders treated Eastern Christians exactly the same as they treated the Khmer (out- siders), depriving them of the local rights that they enjoyed during Islamic rule.

The Coptic Church suffered severely from the Crusader endeavours to tempt Ethiopian rulers to unite with them in order to control the Egyptian Sultan. The Portuguese, after the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope, sought to con- vincing Ethiopian rulers to change the Nile route away from Egypt. The Egyptian Church found itself in an impasse which threatened national security. The straitened political-Egyptian-Ethiopian 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 as ‘‘Kharj,’’ and represented a relationship between the two peoples, ranged from periods of silent anger to outright instability and unrest. Since Nubians followed the Coptic Church, they occasionally sacked 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 seventeenth 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 1683. 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 (Arab or otherwise) into the arms of the Roman Church.

In 1644 the Franciscans, with the approval of the Ottoman rulers, sent a Catholic missionary to Upper Egypt, and the Jesuits 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. The most important articles in the decree would bring about stability.
- 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 rise of national consciousness, and the development of a national democratic movement opposing foreign control and tyrannical rule.

Mohammed Ali was from 1811 the absolute ruler of Egypt. 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 education system. He used foreign experts in that process, but was also careful to cultivate local expertise from both Copts and Muslims.

Mohammed Ali ruled with absolute power. He was aided by a High Council which excluded Copts. (Copts were present in other institutions after the rule of Khedive Ismail (1863-79)). In the second half of the nineteenth century there was support for the concept of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the year 1855 Copts were exempted from taxes, and in 1856 there was a decree enlisting Copts in the military (the Hamayouni Decree).

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 1854, however, Al Ezabi Pasha, Minister of the Interior issued a Minisiternal 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. Is the land on which the church is to be built close to Christian or Muslim settlements?
4. If it is 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 closest 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.

An official should see to that the church is not built on any 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

The Copts from 1800-1982

An historical overview

When the Nubians resisted paying the annual taxes to the sultans, Sultan Bethan (1290-77) and his successor Sultan Kalavun, 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.
In the early twentieth century, two Copts became prime minister, Boutros Ghandi Pasha (1900-1908) and Youssef Fahmi Pasha (1914-1917).

The 1919 Revolution

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Coptic participation in political life increased, as Copts became active in various political parties. A wealthy Copt, Dr Akhnoukh Fanous, founded the Egyptian Party on sectarian principles, advocating cooperation with the British colonists. It did not last long. Copts did not join it, staunchly believing that their fate was indivisible from that of all Egyptians.

Towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Copts owned large numbers of magazines and newspapers, and some social clubs and organizations that were mostly for charitable purposes. The intellectual trends that influenced the formation of Copts between 1919-51

British’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 its position, and as a continuation of its policy which aimed at portraying Egypt's population as being diverse and irreconcilable, the declaration of 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 interference.

For the first time, Saad Zaghloul appointed two Coptic ministers in his popular 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 Wassef 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 relationship between the state and the Church during that initial stage, nor between them and Islam. Copts were closer in their rituals, liturgy and prayers to the Orthodox Church than to the Church of Alexandria. They developed several Coptic organizations. They encouraged young people to participate in sports activities and entertainment in addition to charity work. Most importantly, he founded the Sunday School 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 Egypt at the same time, and supporting the conservatism of the Church's leadership. Hence, while Pope Cyril IV presented a reformulation of the religious policies proposed in the Egyptian constitution, he agreed on the reformulation 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:

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

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood, led by Sheikh Hassan Albanna, came into existence in the same year as the Zomier incident. The rise of this group at this time was no coincidence. Hassan Albanna was influenced by a Sufi group named Al Hasafa, which resisted missionary, evangelical, and socialist thought. In his first five years of activity, it succeeded in founding 15 branches throughout Egypt, most of which existed in places where missionaries were rare. Albanna sought to reform methods rather than ideologies or concepts. He began to publish a newspaper, prompting and inciting people to fight and resist the missionaries. The Brotherhood's attack on missionaries continued until the British capitulation in 1937.

Catholicism

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 1291 A.D., which is the date of the arrival of Francis Assisi, the Catholic monk, to Egypt.

At this time, there was a minority of Copts who had converted to Catholicism, and a group of mostly foreign residents who followed Catholicism. Catholic monks beg for social and religious activities directed primarily towards those foreign residents, and extended it to include the Catholic Coptic minority.

Francis Assisi was interested in converting peoples' spiritual lives, and he therefore established a mould that was solely directed towards spirituality rather than social work, the latter becoming an indelible mark of Catholicism in Egypt from the eighteenth century onwards.

There was no apparent conflict between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church during that initial stage, nor between them and Islam. Copts were closer in their rituals, liturgy and prayers to the Orthodox Church than the Church of Alexandria. They developed several Coptic organizations.
people converted to Catholicism as opposed to Protestantism. In Catholicism, Catholics found similar rituals, and there was no need to convert, whereas Protestantism gave a totally new presentation of religion, which was much simpler and easier for people to understand, hence their faster spread. The decline of Protestantism was largely due to the appearance of Islam.

Catholics focused on education as a means of propagating their beliefs. The Franciscans built many schools, and by the nineteenth century, they 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, but which they felt was not related to Christianity in any way. Thus, there was a need to convert the Orthodox community, which revealed a clear discrepancy between Western and Eastern Christianity, the latter having been influenced by Islam and Eastern 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 Asyut. 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 Evangelical Church were sown. In 1917 Father Tadros Yussef was appointed priest to the Egyptian Synod of the Presbyterian Church. He began writing the minutes of the Council in Arabic, which paved the way for a native Egyptian Coptic Evangelism.

The Church gained independence from the American Church in 1908, and its finance and administration was finally severed; it continued to be a member of the General American Presbyterian Council. In 1908 this relation was also severed, and the Anglican Synod replaced it. The change in government was then fully replaced by a national movement. The schools that had been appended to the Americans and the missionaries, came under the control of the Egyptian Synod.

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 Copts and the majority party, and the remaining parties who sought protection from the invaders and the king, in order to come to power without elections. The rise of the Brotherhood and the Al Fatah also indicated the beginning of the loss of Copticpopularity.

The clergy believed in the necessity of chastity, and the best schools providing superior education. The Evangelical movement was one of the most prominent in the early 1900s, advocating and spreading education. The Franciscans built many schools, and by the nineteenth century, they 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 foundion of the Lay Council

The Lay Council was originally founded in 1872, with the purpose of ensuring responsibility for it two years later, following the election of its members. Boutros Ghali was chosen deputy to the Council, while the presidency was retained for the Pope. Pope Cyril V felt the Council to be an incumbrance on his powers and he dissolved it in 1875, although it was this very Council that had just elected him Pope. Boutros Ghali sought state intervention, and a Royal Decree was issued on 13 March 1881 and the Council was re-established. Boutros Ghali was re-elected on 14 May 1881.

The Council’s by-laws and regulations stipulated that its duties included the supervision of Coptic internal affairs, church properties, monasteries, schools, and libraries; and the protection of monasteries and the Coptic Personal Status Court was responsible for looking into matters of marriage and divorce, etc.

All Bishops vehemently opposed this. They issued statements saying that the Council was against divine ordinance and all Biblical interpretations. Pope Cyril V announced his opposition to the by-laws in 1881.

When the Council attempted to re-elect its members in 1881 the Pope asked the Governor of Cairo to stop the meeting. The Council however carried out its meeting as scheduled, whereby Cyril V wrote to the government in 20 July 1881 accusing the Council of anti-governmental activities. Boutros Ghali called for a meeting and requested that the Pope intervene without consulting the new Pope John XIX.

The conflict with the clergy continued to intensify, particularly regarding the Council’s by-laws. In addition, a new government was elected, and it was opposed to the modernization of the Church and the rules for papal elections. This was especially prominent in the period following the death of Pope Cyril V in 1901.

The main points in the conflict between the modernizers and the clergy are:

**The election of Joseph II**

The most infamous of the popes was Pope Joseph II whose election process began during the government of Pope Cyril V. They elected him the right to appoint one third of the Council without elections.

Although the agreement was in the Pope’s favor, he reneged on the initial agreement, and the Council asked the government to banish or dismiss the Pope. The Pope was banished to Abu Moa monastery in Natroun Valley where he remained in exile for just over a year. With his return on 4 February 1893, his popularity increased despite being even more conservative than before. He decided that the Bishop of Thir was their leader, on condition that he had a Lay Committee working with him, instead of the elected Council. By achieving this, the Pope managed to totally disregard the influence of the by-laws. This situation continued for approximately 12 years.

After the 1919 Revolution, the national movement was all-powerful, and the reform and enlightenment aspects. In the first parliamentary rounds of the wars, Dr Soral Gerguis, a Coptic Member of Parliament (MP) presented draft laws in which the Pope had no say. The draft laws cancelled the amendments which Cyril V made in 1908 and 1912, and returned to the by-laws of 1881. Consequently, law no. 19 in 1927 was issued after making amendments concerning Church-owned properties, as requested by the Pope. The clergy opposed it and refused to apply the law. This led to a Council meeting in November 1928, based on a decree issued by Prime Minister Mahmoud Nahoum, stipulating that the Pope respected the right to appoint heads of monasteries and to form a committee regarding monastic properties. This committee would consist of the Pope, his deputy, six members of clergy, and four members of the Council. The Pope held out against this until there was a fire at the Al Moharrak monastery which underlined the Church’s poor management of its affairs. The Council intervened without consulting the new Pope John XIX.

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- The clergy believed in the necessity of chastity, while the modernizers called for this condition to be revised. Chastity was invalidated during the Pope John XIX’s elections conflict but was restored during the Macarius period and persists to this day.
- The formation of the elective council.
- Bishops nominating themselves for the position of Pope.
- All three Popes, Macarius III, John XIX and Joseph II approved, on the eve of their elections, the by-laws of 1881 or law no. 19 of 1927, and then immediately rejected them following their elections.

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In September 1955 the Holy See held a meeting in which they decided to remove the Pope from the papal headquarters. In his place, they established a three-person committee to administer the Church’s affairs. The See notified the Lay Council of its decision, who were in agreement, and the Pope was banished to the Al Moharrak monastery in September 1956. After the cancellation of the emergency laws, some clerics continued to lament, but the Lay Council convinced the government that his return would induce 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 police headquarters 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 nation- al and civil ties, this was not the case. 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 the school curricula. Whereas previously, as established by the Wafd in 1957, religion was a complementary subject in schools, to increase religious consciousness.
- He reformed the Al Azhar University to meet contemporary demands, but conflicted with 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 1961 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 minorities which Copts headed from 1952-70 were marginal, and no Copts were given important ministerial posts, or the right of representation in the new Law of Basic Freedoms. Generally, 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. Just 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 complexion. 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 electromy, yet most of the appointees were Copts.

### Coptic migration

Following 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 platform to express themselves, and there was the first wave of Coptic migration. It is estimated that the number of Egyptians who migrated to Canada between 1960-70 was 3,547, among them 4,599 Copts and 506 Muslims. During that same period, the number of Copts who migrated to Australia and the USA were 4,738 and 2,314 respectively. By the year 1977 the numbers reached 85,000 in Canada and the USA.

At the start of the 1950s 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 kickup of Pope Joseph II.

Migration abroad began during that time. It undoubtedly exerted itself on individuals. 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-founded 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 gathered together in communities and the Coptic Orthodox Church built Orthodox churches in those communities.

During the 1960s and 1970s, 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 merging 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 changes in the diaspora 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 continuously 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 political system.

Although most Copts in the diaspora are closely linked to the Church in Egypt, there are many opposition groups whose characteristics can be summarized 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 ethnic 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 July Revolution and the Lay Council

A law was issued in 1957 which replaced all the Church's tawfs with government stocks. Copts complained that the government remained indifferent to issue another law, limiting Church and monastic properties to 200 acres. Then a general body was founded to supervise the Coptic tawf, leaving the Lay Council without a role. The conflict about the by-laws continued for 84 years.

### The election of Cyril VI

There 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 pope candidates inside the temple. They declared the process anti-democratic.

It should be noted that there were three suggested candidates: Bishop Samuel, Bishop Samuel and Bishop Samuel. 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 monkhood. 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. Henceforth, the Copts in the Diaspora showed their disaffection with this group of younger popes, 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 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 deprive the Pope of the important political system.

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### The rise of religious groups

The from the outset, Sadat called himself the 'believer president'. He began giving his speeches on the day of the birth of the Prophet Mohammed instead of the tradi- tional Revolution Day speech, hence emphasizing reli- gious identity, calling his era the age of 'science and religion'. The report was written in such a way as to appear to be an official document. It claimed that the Pope made announcements that affected state security, and also outlined a conspiracy. He was supposed to have advocated an increase in the Coptic population, in order to equal the number of Muslims, so that Egypt would return to the Coptic tawf. Again, this report was used to provoke and incite people against the Copts.

When the permanent constitution was being formulat- ed after the movement of May 1971, there was a clear...
trend towards considering the Islamic sharia the sole source of legislation, in contradiction to Coptic demands of freedom of belief. As a result, Sadat aimed 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, appealing 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 an emergency meeting of the National Unity on 24 July 1972. He then asked for an emergency meeting with the National Assembly in August of the same year and then declared that the constitution stipulated for the freedom of belief and the respect of freedoms.

Despite that law, there were consecutive attacks on Orthodox churches and organizations such as the Nabala Organization in Sahloul, Beheira, on 8 September 1972, and the Bible Organization which the Copts of Khanka used as a church - this was burnt down on 6 November 1972. On 12 November, a large number of priests along with some 400 citizens went to this church to pray. In the evening, Muslim youths gathered in the mosque of Sultan Ashraf close by, and on a provocative demonstration to the police station saying ‘Allah Akbar’ (God is great)!

The Coptic Church itself was being targeted. In 1972, the government arrested 1,536 individuals from different political and religious groups which government perceived to be a threat. Among those arrested were 22 priests and bishops. The following day, Sadat announced the cancellation of the Presidential Decree of 1971 which appointed 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.

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The years 1981-85

This new presidential era made Pope Shenouda hesitate to go beyond the limits of compliance. When the Pope heard that Mubarak was visiting the USA for the first time after his election, he also heard that Copts in the USA were organizing demonstrations on his behalf, calling for his reinstatement. The Pope immediately sent a delegation to reassure the Copts, carrying the message from the Pope that they should welcome the new President in love and submission, and that they should also pray for him.

The Pope remained under house arrest for four years, while Mubarak's government gave sustenance to several institutions including the Muslim Brotherhood. However there were indications of unrest and widespread strikes. After the Jihadi group attacked a police station in Assiut in 1981, killing a number of officers, the then deputy Prime Minister, Dr Fouad Mobi Al Din gave instructions that the escaping police should be captured alive, which established the belief that the state was not seeking revenge. In addition, the government announced that security was taking full priority and that fighting the terrorism which had behind religion had to be accomplished not only through security, but also through political and intellectual means.

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 participation 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 charter. 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.

Copts and the 1984 elections

The government of Dr Fouad Mobi Al Din was preparing for its first legislative elections during the Nasserist 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 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 1976-79 (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, Coptic happiness was short lived, since the Wafd announced the end of its conflict with its old enemy the Muslim Brotherhood, and allowed them to enter under their umbrella in parliamentary elections. This led some secularists to withdraw from the Wafd.

The game of 'Coptic votes' intensified. There were two main players in this:

- The ruling party began spreading rumours that it would free the Pope immediately before the elections in order to win Coptic votes.
- The New Wafd, published a book about its Secretary General, including his political mentors and the relationship between the New Wafd and the Pope, insinuating that Copts had joined the Wafd Party.

Using Copts in such a manner had grave, long-term political and social consequences. There was likely to be retaliation and a search for 'Islamic voices', representing a return to the methods used by the British when they were in Egypt. Second, this manner of dealing with Copts as a sectarian group with their own demands and independent problems, was extremely dangerous. It was likely that there would be a reaction to this from Muslims.

The return of the Pope

The Pope was to be tried in front of the Court of Vahves 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 a 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.56

Copts between 1986-90

The President, throughout the first four years of his rule, had full support from the people, and there were no notable protests or violent incidents. During the middle of the fourth year, early signs of instability began to loom on the horizon. At the start of the summer of 1985, Shafik Salama Hafez tried to lead some religious groups in what he called the 'Green Demonstration'. There were also similar forms of demonstrations by the Muslim Brotherhood in factories in Helwan and Alexandria, among others. In autumn 1985, Egypt witnessed a series of strikes, riots, students' and professors' demonstrations. A series of violent incidents continued in 1986, followed by media campaigns which became increasingly bitter between the government and the opposition.57

Religious and sectarian violence between 1988-89

Violence against Copts and religious violence in general continued to rise. In March 1987, there was a sectarian conflict after Islamic groups accused Christian citizens of burning the Koth Mosque in Sohag and they incited citizens to burn the Church of the Virgin Mary which was nearby. In September 1987, there was a violent confrontation in Islamic groups against the security forces leading to the destruction of some shops owned by Copts. In Menya there was trouble between Islamic groups and Copts because of Islamic attacks on a

celebration organized by a wealthy Copt, followed by explosions in the Church of the Virgin Mary in Menya. In September 1988 there was a clash between a group of Copts and Muslims in Rode Al Farag, and in November of the same year, a bomb was thrown at the Virgin Mary Church in Masara during a wedding ceremony.

Several Coptic citizens in Menya and seized control of the Abu Haid district, south of Menya. In September and December 1989, these trends were followed by Islamic groups against Copts and security forces, particularly in Assiut.

In March 1990, the conflict continued in Abu Kerkis, Menya, with the burning of 48 shops owned by Copts, as well as the churches of the Virgin Mary and Saint Gregery. This led to the transfer of the head of security in Menya together with 14 officers, followed by the dismissal of the governor of Menya himself. In April 1990 a bomb was hurled at the Virgin Mary Church in Ein Shams, Cairo.

Sectarian conflict between 1991-93

On 5 February 1991, the trouble was renewed in Beni Suef. Three pharmacies and two shops owned by Copts were burnt down. On 5 April 1991, violence flared up again between Islamic groups and Copts in Menya. A shop belonging to a Copt was burnt and a Copt student attacked. Furthermore, there were robberies on jeweller shops and Coptic Sekh and Shobra. The most violent year was 1992 with 22 murdered. This represented 28 per cent of all victims of violence, and twice the number of Muslim victims.

In the same year, there were 37 attacks throughout Upper Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria including damage to three churches, and 14 shops. The most violent attack of those was in Sanabo, Assiut.

Current controversies and the opposition

I should note that the current Coptic community in Egypt is neither unanimous nor harmonious in its support of the Church and the Pope. Despite the fact that their supporters remain the overwhelming majority since conservative religion plays a pivotal, albeit sentimental, role in the lives of Egyptians, there are several opposition groups both internally and abroad, and there are broad concepts around which almost all opposition groups tend to agree.

- That the Lay Council has been deliberately weakened.
- Concern over the Pope's control over the elections and decisions of the Council.
- The banishment and disfranchising of many priests and bishops without proper and just clerical procedures.
- The Pope's direct involvement in politics.

The THE COPTS OF EGYPT THE COPTS OF EGYPT
The late Bishop Samuel called for greater sanctification of secularists and lay members of the Church, and the decentralization of power in the hands of the clergy. Father Gregorios, who calls for popes to be like ‘parents’ who gather the flock in love and not people who seek to divide. He also calls for confronting the opposition instead of opposing them. Various clergy members who call themselves the Clergy Group, and they seek internal reforms in the Church both spiritually and administratively. Father Aghathon, who has been asked to remain in retirement until further notice for his role in the renovation of the Church of Hebron without prior permission from the Pope. There are other individual priests who have been defrocked and banished from the Church for diverse reasons, regardless of the justification for their disrobement, some of whom voice their opposition to the Church’s administration and leadership.

The clergy groups

These are mainly priests or monks in opposition to the Pope, who have numerous followers. Father Matta Al Minna (Mukdra monastery) he differs with the Pope regarding the Church’s methodology, calling for the return of its spiritual and its pioneer spiritual role, objecting to its methodology and calling for the renovation of the Church of Helwan without prior permission from the Pope. 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 conservative groups, 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 Zaki Moura, 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 Shawkki Karras 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.

The lay groups

These are mainly priests or monks in opposition to the Pope. They have numerous followers: Father Matta Al Minna (Mukdra monastery) he differs with the Pope regarding the Church’s methodology, calling for the return of its spiritual and its pioneer spiritual role, objecting to its intervention in civil or political affairs - which was basically the methodology of the previous Pope Cyril VI.

Table to show religious violence and attacks on Copts 1951-93

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<tr>
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(Source: The authors)

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.

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 extremism 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 Muslims 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 or 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 that are Coptic. There are no Coptic deputy ministers, regional directors of education, or university presidents; and there are currently no Copts out of 186 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 a 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 1981 and December 1990 the Orthodox Church received only 10 permits to build new churches and 28 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 Coptic deputy ministers, regional directors of education, or university presidents, and there are currently no Copts out of 186 faculty deans.
The first demonstrations for women took place in 1950, long before other women in the region. Egyptian women have had 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 homemakers whose primary duty and ultimate goal of a woman's life is to produce and rear children. This is a discourse that has been strengthened over the past two decades with calls for women to go back to the home, forfeiting their gains, and acquiescing to their 'customary' roles of housekeepers. This has been especially enforced with the economic recession. 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 not all laws are responsible for gender discrimination, there are many laws that codify it. Women in rural areas where illiteracy levels are high.

FGM is also practiced among the inhabitants of rural areas. Women are not allowed to be judges, district attorneys, or hold military positions. This is due to tradition rather than specific laws, in direct contradiction with the constitution. Women 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. Recently, however, Pope Shenouda has added two women to his elections list.

The Orthodox Church preserves conservative in other matters concerning women as well. For example, men and women remain separated inside the Church during the liturgy. Furthermore, women are not allowed to become deacons or priests; they are confined solely to charity and voluntary charitable work, forming a whole history and legacy. Women have had a strong and notable role in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many women from the upper and upper-middle class 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 have taken over the movement, including ambassadress and ministerial roles.

Women have been employed in different jobs, but their numbers remain limited in the higher, decision-making positions, including ambassador and ministerial roles. (There are currently only two female ministers: Social Affairs, which has remained a female position for the past three decades, and the recently appointed, but currently female Minister of Education, which has a Coptic female Minister with recently been appointed). Women are not allowed to judge, district attorneys, or hold military positions. This is due to tradition rather than specific laws, in direct contradiction with the constitution. Women 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.

The first demonstrations for women's rights took place along with the 1919 Revolution. A feminist movement began to form and a national unification conference 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 homemakers whose primary duty and ultimate goal of a woman's life is to produce and rear children. This is a discourse that has been strengthened over the past two decades with calls for women to go back to the home, forfeiting their gains, and acquiescing to their 'customary' roles of housekeepers. This has been especially enforced with the economic recession. 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.

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Girls will not find husbands who will agree to
marry them if they know that the girls have not
undergone FGM.

Following the International Conference on Population
and Development which took place in Cairo in 1994, the
debate concerning FGM was brought sharply into focus as
one of the major themes in the conference documents.
This fuelled a debate concerning whether it was religious-
ly-based or not, with NGOs demanding that the harmful
custom be legally prohibited. This opinion was based on
the fact that all Muslim countries perform this pro-
dure, and that it was not mentioned in the Koran.

However, the more conservative religious powers in
Egypt, led by the Sheikh Al Azhar, have strictly con-
doned the procedure and oppose anyone who is against
FGM. This led the Ministry of Health to acquiesce to his
request and encourage the procedure in state hospitals,
penalizing anyone who performs it outside such hospitals.

Some feminists and human rights activists have initiated
legal action against both the Minister and Sheikh Al
Azhar. To date, the procedure continues to be performed
on young Christian and Muslim girls.

The image of Copts in the media and the press

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 newspa-
per, 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 strong-
ly infiltrated by Muslim extremists. Far fewer Copts were
employed in media positions, and there was an increase in
religious programmes attacking Coptic doctrines and
creed. This has been silently condoned by the govern-
ment 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
breakdowns on places selling such tapes and their con-
fusion, after their dangerous ideas and impact were felt by
the government.

Several Coptic Churches have recently produced films
that deal with the lives of saints. These films are acted, writ-
ten 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 dis-
cuss 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 consid-
er this a form of polarization, where Copts, due to govern-
mental negligence in the media, resort to having their own
media with their own subject matter.

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 tra-
ditions, and other joint factors of an anthropolog-
ical and ideological nature.

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

4. Despite the fact that these involved in sectarian
conflict always tried to highlight the Coptic iden-
tity 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 abol-
ished, and a new law issued that conforms to the contem-
porary 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.
About Minority Rights Group

Reports

Minority Rights Group began publishing in 1970. Over two decades and ninety titles later, MRG’s series of reports are widely recognized internationally as authoritative, accurate and objective documents on the rights of minorities worldwide.

Over the years, subscribers to the series have received a wealth of unique material on ethnic, religious, linguistic and social minorities. The reports are seen as an important reference by researchers, students, and campaigners and provide readers all over the world with valuable background data on many current affairs issues.

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If you have found this report informative and stimulating, and would like to learn more about minority issues, please do subscribe to our report series. It is only with the help of our supporters that we are able to pursue our aims and objectives – to secure justice for disadvantaged groups around the world.

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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.

Minority Rights Group

Minority Rights Group, an international human rights organization and registered educational charity, investigates the plights of minority (and majority) groups suffering discrimination and prejudice – and works to educate and alert public opinion.

We produce readable and accurate reports on the problems of oppressed groups around the world. We publish six new and revised reports a year. To date we have produced over 90 reports, a World Directory of Minorities, several books and education packs.

MRG works through the UN and elsewhere to increase the awareness of human rights issues and – with your help – is supporting minorities in the international arena.

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