The Coptic Christian Minority
in Contemporary Egypt since the Arab Spring

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Abstract
Despite their participation as citizens and patriots in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, Coptic Christians were subjected to mob violence and other hostile acts after Mubarak’s fall. Their situation further deteriorated under the short-lived presidency of Mohammad Morsi and during the chaotic period that followed his ouster by the military in July 2013. The continuation of sectarian hatred, discriminatory behavior, and anti-Christian violence under the current President, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, demonstrates that he has not taken sufficient action to confront violent Islamism and promote tolerance toward the country’s Christian minority. More needs to be done to protect non-Muslims from terrorism and extremism. Yet Sisi, like his predecessors, continues to avoid the “Coptic question” in the name of national unity, notwithstanding his more positive disposition and conciliatory rhetoric toward Christians.

Keywords: Egypt, Coptic Christians, Muslim Brotherhood, Terrorism, Revolution, Morsi, Sisi

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Introduction

Since the Revolution of January 2011, Egypt has been in the news on a virtually constant basis. Apart from the political and economic instability that has received extensive media coverage, sectarian violence is another important and persistent issue that has also been given considerable attention in the press. The purpose of this paper is to explore and explain the tension that characterizes Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt today. It begins with a brief critical appraisal of Hosni Mubarak’s record and legacy, with an emphasis on his government’s general orientation towards the Coptic Christian minority. It then discusses the 2011 Revolution and its aftermath to shed light on the participation of Copts as citizens and patriots in the revolution as well as the atrocities and abuses they suffered thereafter. This is followed by a discussion of the fraying of Egypt’s social cohesion under Mohammad Morsi, and the second popular uprising that led to his ouster by the military in July 2013.

The final part of the paper discusses the Coptic experience under the current president, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and the recent terrorist attacks against the Copts. The conclusions reached from this analysis are that Sisi’s government is failing to protect the safety and rights of the vulnerable Coptic community, and his leadership has yielded no measurable progress in Christian-Muslim relations despite his more progressive rhetoric. The central contention of the paper is that neither at this nor any other time has the Egyptian government done enough to confront violent Islamism and promote tolerance toward non-Muslims in society, but has continued to sweep the “religious issue” under the rug in the name of national unity. Consequently, the fundamental changes that would make a recognizable difference in the everyday life of Copts are not being implemented or even contemplated.
The Position of the Copts under Mubarak

When Hosni Mubarak came to power in October 1981 following the assassination of Anwar Sadat he tried to cast himself as a conciliator. Setting a moderate tone for his presidency, Mubarak released political prisoners, allowed opposition parties to organize, appointed two Coptic ministers, gave more freedom to the national media, and promised to lift the emergency martial law imposed after the murder of Sadat.¹ These symbolic gestures, which raised hopes for deeper reforms, were found to be self-serving attempts to build political capital and mollify a nation in flux. Despite his promising start, it later became obvious that Mubarak held a rather limited view of civil liberties and minority rights.²

Mubarak’s conservative disposition toward the perennial Coptic question was initially dubbed “gradualism”, that is, the policy of taking deliberate steps to bring about meaningful change.³ Those who gave Mubarak the benefit of the doubt were subsequently disillusioned by his inexplicable and protracted reluctance to recall the Coptic patriarch from a monastic exile imposed by Sadat. It was not until January 1985, in his fourth year in office, that Mubarak quietly reinstated Pope Shenouda.⁴ This was an inauspicious portent that prefigured how he would deal with the Copts throughout his presidency. Mubarak’s continual failure to support the Coptic issue is most pointedly evident in his deficient responses to the recurring mob violence and church attacks, which the government occasionally blamed on Christian provocations to justify its inaction and apathy.⁵

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⁴ Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, p. 113.
A memorably tragic example of the Mubarak government’s complacency about protecting Christian life and property was the Al-Kosheh incident that took place in early 2000. Sectarian tensions in Al-Kosheh, a predominantly Christian village about 300 miles south of Cairo, had been running high since August 1998 when two Christian men were found murdered and dumped in the Christian neighborhood. The all-Muslim local police responded by arresting about 1,000 Christians and torturing many of them to secure a confession that one of them had killed the two men. The following year, tensions gave way to violence after a financial dispute arose between a Muslim trader and a Christian merchant on December 31, 1999. On the morning of January 2, 2000, after Sunday church service, armed Muslim men went on a rampage attacking scores of Christian villagers and destroying their homes and shops. The security forces and fire brigades were agonizingly slow to intervene. Four days of bloody clashes left 22 Christians and one Muslim dead. It is pertinent to note that the delayed reaction by the authorities was not without precedent.

To contain the damage, the government paid out compensations to the affected families but justice was never served. Of the 96 Muslims charged with murder, looting, arson, and other serious crimes, only four were convicted, with the longest sentence being ten years in prison for just one man. On retrial, 94 defendants were acquitted and only two were convicted and given light sentences of 15 years and three and a half years, which the Prosecutor-General sought to have overturned in March 2003.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Police acted in precisely the same fashion in response to the Zawya Al-Hamra three- or four-day mayhem in June 1981; see: Hasan, Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt, p. 109.
Considering the fact that Mubarak ran uncontested and governed unopposed until his ouster, it is surprising how little he did to expand the rights and opportunities of Coptic Christians. During his nearly 30 years in office, discrimination continued to pervade virtually every aspect of society and Christians continued to be significantly underrepresented in positions of influence and leadership in government, business, and education.\textsuperscript{12} The construction of new churches was all but prohibited during his first ten years in office, reaching a record low of one per year.\textsuperscript{13} Until December 2005, presidential approval was required for building and repairing churches, and when Mubarak delegated this authority to provincial governors, they continued to arbitrarily stall and deny permits.\textsuperscript{14} Even the most basic of reform measures, such as the inclusion of the 600-year Christian period or Coptic art in public school curriculums, were not implemented.\textsuperscript{15}

In the final analysis, the Mubarak years were characterized by half-hearted reform initiatives and ostensible political transformations, but not real progress toward religious equality or social reconstruction. Antipathy toward Christianity continued to permeate Egyptian culture and the government’s pro-Muslim favoritism remained salient. Just as Mubarak maintained an indifferent attitude toward the welfare of Egyptians in general during his presidency, he was callous to the plight of Egyptian Christians. Regrettably, this would not change in any fundamental sense after Mubarak even as the government changed hands twice.


The Downfall of Mubarak

Muslim Egyptians, unlike the Copts, never had to endure or worry about discrimination in everyday life, yet many of them harbored ill-will toward their long-serving president, Hosni Mubarak, for obvious political and economic reasons. What with the increasing poverty, rampant inflation, low wages, housing shortage, high unemployment (and higher underemployment), transportation crisis, freedom deficit, police brutality, public sector corruption, and human rights violations, the country’s Muslim majority was also fed up with Mubarak. His unpopularity was evident not only in the stinging criticism expressed on social media, but also in the number of dissident and protest movements that preceded the mass uprising of 2011, such as April 6, Kefaya (Enough), Youth for Change, Tadamon (Solidarity), and We Are All Khaled Said (named after a young Egyptian man who was beaten to death by security forces in June 2010). By all measures, the country was ripe for a new leader, but to many Egyptians the notion of regime change was just an exercise in fanciful thinking because Arab leaders usually stay in office till they die.

Despite his dismal record of accomplishments, Mubarak managed to survive for almost three decades through the same tactics that despots have historically employed to stay in power: repression, propaganda, patronage, nepotism, electoral fraud, systemic corruption, and intimidation or elimination of potential political rivals. While these high- and heavy-handed tactics can only make an illegitimate ruler more vulnerable, an authoritarian regime will survive in spite of the rising discontent and even mass protests, so long as the state security apparatus remains loyal to the regime. Once the law enforcement and military forces step aside and give protesters a free rein, the embattled president will have little choice but to step down. This is how the Mubarak regime fell in February 2011.

Inspired by the ousting of Tunisia’s strongman Ben Ali, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets on January 25, 2011, the National Police Day, to protest police abuses and government corruption. To the surprise of the protesters, the security forces and the riot police withdrew from the streets after just four days of violent
clashes. The remote possibility of regime change suddenly became a realistic prospect. It was then that the anti-government protest escalated into a revolution as many more Egyptians poured into the streets demanding Mubarak’s resignation. After a tense eighteen-day standoff, during which some 800 lives were reportedly lost, Mubarak’s rule came to an end on February 11, 2011.16

Although the Copts were generally united in their grievances against Mubarak, they were not as united in their reaction to the early protests against his regime. Besides the specter of an Islamist takeover that gave some Copts pause for thought, the head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda, expressed support for Mubarak and urged his flock not to take part in the ongoing demonstrations. It is uncertain whether the Pope was being coerced by the government or whether he genuinely believed that Christians were better off living under Mubarak than a worse alternative like another Sadat.17 Nonetheless, it was a controversial call that divided the Coptic community. On the one hand, the Pope was revered as the head of the Coptic Church, while on the other his appeal came against the backdrop of a deadly car bomb attack on a Coptic Church in Alexandria in which Mubarak’s notorious interior minister, Habib El-Adly, was personally implicated, according to a British intelligence report.18

The reaction to the Pope’s message was mixed. Some Copts heeded his call and kept off the streets, while others, particularly young people, defied him and


17 The latter theory is more plausible since the Coptic Church had been loath to participate in anti-regime political activities or to support opposition candidates; see: Laure Guirguis, *Copts and the Security State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 94–95.

joined their Muslim compatriots in Cairo’s famed Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the Arab Spring. Unlike the Islamists who surveyed the uprising at a distance and remained on the sidelines until the regime tottered, many Copts participated in the uprising during its most critical time, fending off the assaults staged by a “hit squad” of plainclothes police officers and government thugs who tried to drive the protestors off the Square.

As Muslims and Christians stood by each other against the apparatus of state power, something noble and deeply human happened: trans-sectarian solidarity began to take hold of the crowd. Iconic images of national unity emerged, harkening back to the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 that bridged the religious divide. A particularly memorable image was that of Christians joining hands to encircle Muslim protesters as they prayed in Tahrir Square, to which Muslims reciprocated by standing guard when Christians prayed in the open air. It was the collective hope of the Coptic community that these images would signify a genuine shift in the social climate, away from the old sectarian distinctions and toward a new sense of national oneness, based on a more mature and modern view of Egyptian identity.


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The Post-Revolutionary Chaos

The military establishment, the only power center left in Egypt, announced that a group of generals would assume power on a temporary basis until presidential elections could be held and a civilian government put back in control. Accordingly, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was created and began operating in early April 2011. At about the same time, a new law was introduced easing the legal restrictions on the creation of new political parties. As many expected, the Islamists surged onto the national scene, forming their own political parties, framing their political agendas, and developing their mobilization strategies in preparation for a new era in the nation’s politics. No longer forced into an underground existence, the Muslim Brotherhood came into the open and established the Freedom and Justice Party. The more hard-line Islamist groups also started up their own parties: Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya established the Building and Development Party, while the Salafi Call established the Light Party and the Authenticity Party. Although several liberal parties were also formed, they were not as competitive as their Islamic counterparts that had substantial funding, well-organized activist cells, a strong base of grassroots support, and a functional mechanism of political mobilization, which could lead to greater electoral success.

The Copts monitored the unfolding political developments with a sense of fearful anticipation, as their utopian aspirations for national unity were quickly thwarted by a wave of violence that began as soon as Mubarak resigned. For the most part, the security forces turned a blind eye and let these attacks continue intermittently for years. This was precisely why some Copts did not participate in the revolution in the first place, while others did but kept a wary eye on the outcome. The future shape of the Egyptian political scene did not seem as promising as was originally hoped. The revolution had lifted the lid on all the rogue forces that had long been held at bay. Now anything seemed possible with the collapse of the ruling party, the breakdown of state authority, and the rising tide of violent extremism.

The first sectarian incident took place on March 4, 2011, barely a couple of weeks after Mubarak’s departure. It occurred in Atfeeh, a village 13 miles south of Cairo,
where a Muslim mob set fire to the Two Martyrs church because of an alleged love affair between a young Christian man and a Muslim girl. It should be noted for full context that similar claims had previously been made, and continued to be made, to justify attacks against Christian civilians and churches.\(^\text{23}\) Even assuming the veracity of that particular account, collective punishment is not a legitimate response to the social transgression of a single individual. The plain fact is that Coptic churches had long been targets of Islamist attacks absent any such claim.

Four days later, on March 8, violence ensued in the Cairo suburb of Mokattam between Christian demonstrators who gathered to decry the arson and Muslim counter-demonstrators. Twelve people died and several Christian homes and businesses were torched. On the same day, the predominantly Christian Cairo slum of Manshiyet Nasr was engulfed by violence when knife- and stick-wielding Muslims charged at the Christian residents rallying against the arson. Thirteen people died and another 140 were injured.\(^\text{24}\) Yet another high-profile attack took place in early May 2011, as hundreds of Salafi Muslims set three churches ablaze and destroyed many Christian homes and businesses in Imbaba, a working-class neighborhood in northern Giza. SCAF ordered the arrest of some 190 Salafis following the attacks, which left over a dozen people dead and scores wounded.\(^\text{25}\)

On October 9, 2011, in what had already become a familiar pattern, Christian


protesters were violently assaulted in front of the Maspero television building in Cairo, but this time by the military policemen who were supposed to ensure their safety. Thousands of Christians marched from the Shubra district to the heart of the Egyptian capital, demanding equal rights and protesting the destruction of a Church in Aswan on September 30th by Muslims who claimed that it had been built without a permit.26 They chose the State TV building as their final destination because of its institutionalized anti-Christian bias that was contributing to religious discord. Once in front of the Maspero building, the protesters were set upon by military-uniformed security personnel who used live ammunition to disperse the crowd. Video footage from the satellite channels showed the protesters being run over and crushed by armored vehicles. The state-run media, however, broadcast no such footage and instead blamed the carnage on the Christian protesters for attacking the army.27 Other media outlets blamed the violence on foreign agents and Mubarak regime holdovers (felul). While promising to carry out an investigation, SCAF categorically denied any wrongdoing by the military in the violence that claimed the lives of 24 protesters and injured 250.28

The Maspero massacre stands apart from prior incidents in that it was perpetrated by state authorities rather than by a lawless mob. As such, it unmistakably exposed the prejudicial and discriminatory mindset of the Egyptian establishment toward Christians who were not even allowed to protest peacefully. Even if, for argument’s sake, one were to accept that the security services acted without any authority from SCAF, how can SCAF’s blanket denial of wrongdoing or the state media’s slanted coverage be explained? By failing to hold the perpetrators of the carnage accountable, the transitional government sent a clear signal that anti-Christian violence would not be met with dire consequences.

The Islamists Rise to Power

Parliamentary elections were held in a number of stages between November 2011 and January 2012. As predicted, the Islamist political parties outperformed the secular and liberal parties by a significant margin. Collectively, they controlled the lower house of parliament (People’s Assembly) with a 75 percent majority and the upper house (Consultative Council) with an even larger majority. The initial public statements and subsequent parliamentary debates clearly showed that the Islamist bloc believed sharia law should be the law of the land, and was committed to taking the country in that direction through the legislative process. Despite the country’s pressing problems, legislative proposals focused on nonproductive issues such as banning scanty swimwear and alcohol, segregating beaches by gender, censoring “immoral” movies, and establishing new Islamic banks.29

The sorrows of the Coptic community were compounded by the death of Pope Shenouda on March 17, 2012. Besides serving as the spiritual leader of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda had also been an advocate for the rights of the Copts and a spokesman for their cause for over 40 years. In the larger Egyptian community, Pope Shenouda was recognized as a highly respected religious, moral, and intellectual figure. His funeral was attended by some of the country’s top dignitaries, government officials, and Muslim clerics who spoke fondly of him in their brief eulogies. Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the head of SCAF, declared a nationwide state of mourning on March 20th. The Muslim Brotherhood, keen on creating a good impression in the West in general and in the United States in particular, took the opportunity to praise the Pope’s life and legacy. Saad Katatni, the secretary general of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and

Justice Party and the speaker of the People’s Assembly, asked lawmakers to stand and observe a minute’s silence in tribute to the memory of the deceased Pope at the beginning of the session.\textsuperscript{30} Most of the Salafis, who often referred to the Pope disdainfully by using his preordination name “Nazeer Gayed”, left the chamber,\textsuperscript{31} and the few Salafis who did not walk out remained seated. This open hostility was concerning to many Copts because these were the same lawmakers who would soon be drafting a new constitution.

It seems appropriate here to explain how the Islamists bolstered their political fortunes but overplayed their hand and abused their power until they were pushed out of government by another round of mass protests that broke out in June 2013. This will set the context for the subsequent wave of anti-Christian violence. The account that follows also demonstrates that Islamists, once elected, cease to play by the rules and adopt any expedient means to stay in power. Those who stand to lose most in this familiar scenario are typically religious minorities that have no political influence, no allies in government, and no recourse to justice when wronged by state and non-state actors. Such was the case in Egypt when Christians became the targets of violence before and after the Islamists lost political control.

The Muslim Brotherhood envisioned the new constitution as a means of establishing an Islamic political order. The newly elected parliament formed a 100-member panel to draft a constitution, which would first be approved by lawmakers and then by the people in a public referendum. In April 2012, however, the Supreme Administrative Court suspended the panel for not being representative of the political, gender, and religious profile of the country.\textsuperscript{32} About two months later, when the presidential election was just days off, the Supreme Constitutional Court dissolved the parliament itself by ruling that one-third of the seats were invalid. More specifically, the court found that the allocation of seats violated the


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

principle of equality among political candidates because parties were allowed to
compete for seats designated for independents, but not vice versa.33

This ruling made the runoff presidential election all the more important
because, in the absence of a parliament, the new president would be governing
single-handedly by way of executive decree. However, on June 17, 2012, just
as the polls were about to close, SCAF issued a constitutional declaration
claiming sweeping powers for itself that included making new laws, preparing
the national budget, and controlling the process of constitution-writing, until a
new parliament was elected.34 SCAF’s declaration, which undercut executive
power, was roundly condemned by the Muslim Brotherhood and its candidate,
Mohammed Morsi, who had won the first round of the presidential elections
in May and was hoping to win the runoff election that was underway. Liberal-
leaning Egyptians and Copts, on the other hand, were relieved because they saw
the military as the only viable check on executive power in the event that the
Islamist candidate was elected.

Mohammad Morsi claimed a narrow victory over former Prime Minister
Ahmed Shafiq amid mutual allegations of fraud that delayed the official results
by a few days. He gave a victory speech on Egyptian television on June 25th, in
which he emphasized national unity and challenged all Egyptians, “Muslims and
Christians”, to partake in what he called a “renaissance project” to rebuild their
country.35 Although the speech was eloquent and progressive in its tone, it did not
alleviate concerns about the Islamists’ political agenda. The country was deeply
divided and unlikely to move back into some semblance of stability and unity
unless Morsi governed as a moderate, which was highly unlikely.

33 Ahmed Morsy, “The Egyptian Parliamentary Elections 101”, *Middle East Institute*,
January 26, 2015, www.mei.edu/content/article/egyptian-parliamentary-elections-101


35 Mohamed Morsi, “I Have Today Become the President of All Egyptians”, *The Guardian*,
June 25, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/25/president-egyptians-
As a formality, Morsi resigned from both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party before taking the oath of office on June 30, 2012. It was commonly thought that Morsi and SCAF were bound to clash because the latter’s declaration had the effect of relegating the president to a secondary role, but the clash occurred sooner than expected. On July 8th, Morsi performed his first act of defiance and reinstated the dissolved parliament in which the Freedom and Justice Party held a 47-percent majority. Although the presidential decree was in direct violation of a court order, it was hailed by Morsi’s supporters as a democratic move to free the civilian government from military control and interference. The rest of the country, especially the Copts who harbored an inherent distrust of Islamists, saw the decree not only as an ominous threat to the rule of law, but also as part of a broader scheme to consolidate power in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. The high court, however, would not budge and affirmed the parliament’s dissolution.

At the beginning of August 2012, Morsi granted pardons to 26 members of Islamist organizations, some of whom had been convicted of acts of terror and were on death row or serving life sentences. Later the same month, in another assertive move, Morsi fired Defense Minister Hussein Tantawi who headed SCAF, along with the chiefs of the military branches who served on the Council. He also annulled the constitutional declaration that preserved SCAF’s grip on power at the expense of the president. The military’s reaction was surprisingly agreeable and no backlash materialized. Having forced SCAF out of power, Morsi sought to neutralize the remaining checks on presidential authority. After a botched attempt

to replace the country’s top prosecutor," Morsi issued an emergency decree on November 22nd insulating all his executive actions from judicial review, from the time he took office until such a time when a new constitution could be adopted and a new People’s Assembly elected.40

Morsi’s supporters welcomed the decree as a pragmatic measure to shorten the critical transitional period, while opponents took it as yet more evidence of the Muslim Brotherhood’s contempt for the rule of law and intent to entrench itself in power.41 The body politic was split but not down the middle, as more Egyptians became concerned that Morsi was setting himself up as “a new pharaoh”, in the words of leading political dissident Mohamed El-Baradei.42 There was a growing consensus that Morsi had betrayed the goals of the revolution and must be resisted. In late November 2012, hundreds of thousands of people descended on Tahrir Square to protest against Morsi’s authoritarian policies and arbitrary exercise of power. Similar rallies were organized in other major Egyptian cities. The protesters shouted the same revolutionary chants that were used to oust Mubarak. More anti-Morsi protests were held on the first anniversary of the January 2011 Revolution. Another mass uprising was looming, if not already unfolding.

The Islamists Fall from Power

Morsi’s November 22nd declaration was flagrant in its disregard of democratic convention, but apparently “all things are possible in a country with neither a democratic tradition nor any history of civilian political authority”, as one reporter scathingly commented at the time. Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood defended the declaration and called for nationwide rallies in support of Morsi’s new powers but backed down in the face of vociferous public opposition. Only after sustained backlash did Morsi retract his declaration, which the Supreme Judicial Council denounced as an “unprecedented attack on the independence of the judicial branch”.

The Muslim Brotherhood exacerbated the widespread discontent with Morsi by bungling the constitutional drafting process. On June 12, 2012, two months after the judicial suspension of the constitutional panel, the parliament elected another 100-member panel that was also dominated by Islamists. Some of the liberal-minded and Christian members, who were already underrepresented on the panel, withdrew in protest of the Brotherhood-Salafi alliance that monopolized the discourse. This gave even more leverage to the Islamists who drafted a deeply divisive constitution that eroded free speech rights, diluted gender equality protections, and gave Muslim clerics an oversight role in the legislative process.

The 85 members of the People’s Assembly who hurriedly approved the document on November 30th included only four women and no Christians. The whole

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process was rushed through before the Supreme Constitutional Court had an opportunity to rule on a pending legal challenge against the second panel. The draft constitution was approved in a two-stage referendum in December gaining 63 percent of the vote in a low turnout of 32 percent, which signified popular disenchantment with the Islamist government.47

Morsi signed the new constitution on December 26, further dividing the country he had promised to unite in his victory speech. Large-scale anti-Morsi demonstrations broke out on the Revolution’s second anniversary in January 2013. Morsi resorted to violent measures to suppress what he saw as a burgeoning uprising, which resulted in the death of 50 people. He also declared a state of emergency and a curfew in the provinces where the protests were most virulent, thereby giving himself additional powers to deal with the protesters more forcefully.48

Morsi’s popularity deteriorated further in the wake of the crackdown on protests, as his brutal tactics and cavalier attitude were all too reminiscent of Mubarak. Many had hoped for change when they voted for Morsi, but they ended up with another president who engaged in acts of gross misconduct, regarded himself as above the law, and responded with repression when confronted with dissent. A March 2013 poll showed that a staggering 82 percent of Egyptians wanted the army to return to power,49 which indicated that the vast majority of Egyptians were now convinced that Morsi was unfit to govern. The list of grievances against Morsi was long and included his lack of commitment to democratic values, nepotism,50

economic mismanagement,\textsuperscript{51} and dual loyalty to his homeland and foreign governments that shared his pan-Islamist regional vision.\textsuperscript{52}

The growing political turmoil deepened the Islamists’ animosity toward secularists and Christians. Instead of holding the president accountable for his unfulfilled promises and failed policies, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood blamed what they called the “secular opposition” for his mounting political woes.\textsuperscript{53} With Cairo already on edge, a deadly sectarian incident provoked further violence in April 2013. As the funerals for the five Christian victims were being held in Cairo’s main Coptic Cathedral, a Muslim mob laid siege to the building and was joined by the security forces in attacking the mourners leaving the funeral service.\textsuperscript{54} The violence spread and continued for several days, leaving at least 6 people dead and 84 injured.\textsuperscript{55}


\textsuperscript{52} While Egyptians were experiencing severe fuel shortages and long gas lines, subsidized fuel was being shipped regularly to Gaza where Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, was in control. Morsi was also criticized for having too close ties with the Qatari government that supported him with funds and propaganda through its Al-Jazeera news network. Subsequent to his ouster, Morsi was convicted of leaking state secrets to Qatar; see: Dahlia Kholaif, “Morsi’s Downfall Hammers Hamas”, \textit{al-Jazeera}, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/07/2013710113757741999.html; Simeon Kerr, “Fall of Egypt’s Mohamed Morsi is Blow to Qatari Leadership”, \textit{Financial Times}, July 3, 2013, www.ft.com/content/af5d068a-e3ef-11e2-b35b-00144f3eabdc0; “What’s Become of Egypt’s Mohammed Morsi?”, \textit{BBC}, November 22, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24772806 (Accessed July 25, 2018).

\textsuperscript{53} In response, at least one Islamist group threatened to set up “vigilante militias” to defend Morsi’s government; see: Associated Press, “Mohammed Morsi Declares Curfew”.


Morsi called the new pope, Tawadros II, and assured him that any attack against the Copts was the same as an attack on him personally. He also pledged to protect both “Muslims and Christians,” but did not explain why the churches had been left without adequate protection in the first place. Nor did he visit the site of the attack – or any church for that matter – in a show of leadership and solidarity. What made Morsi’s sincerity more questionable was the statement issued by his Interior Ministry, which blamed the Christian mourners for starting the violence and attacking the riot police when they tried to intervene.

By the end of one year in office, Morsi was at least as unpopular as former president Mubarak. Calls for Morsi’s resignation had reached fever pitch, and nationwide protests were being planned for his first anniversary. A record turnout was expected as the opposition group Tamarod (Rebellion), which was leading the call for Morsi’s resignation, announced its collection of 22 million signatures from people who had lost faith in the president. On June 30th, millions of Egyptians filled the streets across the country in numbers that exceeded the turnout of any previous protest, including the 2011 Revolution. This revolution, however, was different because of the internal conflict among civilians. Egyptians were not fully united in this second uprising, as the Muslim Brotherhood organized its own counter-demonstration in Cairo’s Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square and was threatening to use violence in defense of Morsi’s presidency. The capital city was on the verge of descending into chaos, with sporadic clashes breaking out between pro-

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
and anti-Morsi protesters. The future was uncertain but one thing was clear: Morsi was no longer in control.

In an astounding turn of events, on July 1, 2013, the military issued a statement giving Morsi 48 hours “to respond to the people’s demands”, which the Muslim Brotherhood rejected as “a coup with two days’ notice”.\(^{62}\) On July 3rd, the military deposed Morsi when he failed to heed the ultimatum to step down. Flanked by the Coptic Pope, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, some Salafi leaders, and various prominent figures, the Defense Minister Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, addressed the nation that evening and announced the removal of Morsi, the suspension of the December 2012 constitution, and the appointment of the chief justice of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, as interim president.\(^{63}\) Morsi and the top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested and taken into military custody to stand trial for inciting violence.\(^{64}\) The security forces also cleared the two Cairo sit-in camps (at Nahda and Rabaa squares) of Morsi’s supporters at a considerable loss of life.

Morsi’s removal provided the Islamists with a handy opportunity to give vent to their deep-seated hatred of Copts. In the days and weeks that followed, scores of Churches and church-affiliated sites were torched, attacked, and looted by Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters seeking reprisal against the Copts for backing the uprising.\(^{65}\) The Copts incurred the brunt of their wrath even though Muslims and Christians alike participated in protest rallies calling for Morsi’s ouster, which was endorsed by both the Coptic Pope and the Grand Mufti.

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\(^{63}\) Trager, *Arab Fall*, p. 225.


Conspiracy theories quickly circulated, falsely accusing the Coptic Church – and Pope Tawadros personally – of having had a decisive hand in Morsi’s ouster. These malicious theories could be directly traced to the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) Facebook page, which was a repository of canards and falsehoods whose aim was to fuel hatred and incite violence against Christians.

Posts on FJP’s Facebook page alleged that: “The Pope of the Church is involved in the removal of the first elected Islamist president”, “The Pope of the Church sponsors Black Bloc groups to create chaos, pursue banditry and siege and storm mosques”, and “The Pope of the Church sends a memo to the current commission to cancel the articles of Sharia”, to mention but three of the many false and inflammatory statements. Moreover, Sheikh Yusif al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s spiritual leader, posted an online video in which he charged that the army had recruited Christians “to kill innocent Muslims”. So while dismissing church burnings and other acts of vandalism as the doings of “foolish boys” and “thugs contracted by the police”, the Muslim Brotherhood was actively instigating the violence by demonizing the Copts in its online postings, and even expressing puzzlement about how “[a]fter all this people ask why they burn the churches”. Conspiracy theories and unfounded allegations aside, it was ironic that the Brotherhood was accusing Christians of playing a central role in Morsi’s removal, though it had consistently minimized their numbers to justify their under-representation and under-utilization in leadership positions.

The Islamist calls for revenge were echoed nationwide in fiery sermons.
delivered from the loudspeakers of local mosques, exhorting the faithful to exact vengeance on the government and the Copts for Morsi’s ouster. News outlets were full of stories about angry mobs destroying churches after Friday prayers at the urging of agitating Imams. One such news story, for example, describes what happened following the call for violence and outrage by a hard-line cleric: “Hundreds of Islamists poured into the street, torching, looting and smashing the village’s two churches and a nearby monastery, lashing out so ferociously that marble altars were left in broken heaps on the floor”. The report goes on to state that similar scenes were repeated throughout the country: “Over the next few days, a wave of similar attacks on the Coptic Christian minority washed over the country as Islamists set upon homes and churches, shops and schools, youth clubs and at least one orphanage”.

Christian parishioners took it upon themselves to protect their own churches, as soldiers and police were instructed to guard public property and strategic facilities. They were authorized to use deadly force if necessary, but no special provisions were made to protect the potentially vulnerable Christian communities or to secure their churches. In towns and villages with no visible police presence, or where the police had fled, rioters armed with guns, sticks, and gasoline bombs roamed the streets with impunity. For instance, in Al-Nazla village, 55 miles south of Cairo, Christian homes and shops were marked with red graffiti in broad daylight for easy identification. Shortly thereafter, a gang of militant Muslims

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70 Ibid.


chanting “Allahu akbar” and “Islam is the solution” descended on the village church and Christian homes and wreaked the usual havoc.

The anti-Christian violence followed a familiar pattern: the assailants organized themselves immediately after prayers at local mosques and started their mayhem at the incitement of the Imams. According to the Christian residents of Al-Nazla, the Imam could be heard at a distance screaming through the loudspeaker “Your brothers in Rabaa El Adawiya are being killed by Jews and Christians”. The government knew of the ongoing retaliation campaign but neglected to protect churches and Christian neighborhoods in favor of other priorities. There were many reports that police did not respond when called and, when they did, it was hours after the perpetrators had left the scene.

The Country Comes Full Circle

Little by little, the military-backed civil authorities regained control of the country. Areas where state control was weak or absent were finally retaken, but not before dozens of churches and many Christian-owned properties were destroyed by fire in a series of relentless attacks. A particularly infamous case was that of Dalga, a town located 160 miles south of Cairo with a population of 120,000 that included 20,000 Christian residents. After driving out the town’s small police force on July 

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73 Ibid.
75 From 25 to 80 churches were burned, along with businesses, schools, and properties belonging to Christians across Egypt’s 27 provinces. There were also reports of Christian casualties; see: Andrea B. Rugh, Christians in Egypt: Strategies and Survival (New York: Plagrange Macmillan, 2016), p. 192.
3rd, the Islamists assumed full control of the town for over two months, during which they vandalized and ransacked Churches as well as Christian residences and businesses. About 1,000 Christian residents had to flee their homes, while those who remained were forced to pay the jizya to the Muslim Brotherhood that was now in charge. The security forces recaptured Dalga around mid-September after two abortive attempts due to the intensity of the gunfire they encountered.

Against this calamitous backdrop, it is not hard to see why the Copts threw their support behind the military chief General Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi when he announced his intention to run for president. Sisi also enjoyed broad-based support among Egyptians of all classes who yearned for some semblance of normalcy after three years of tenuous security, economic decline, and faltering leadership. Projecting himself as the strong leader the country needed, Al-Sisi clamped down on Islamist and secular agitators alike, and declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in December 2013. The imminent referendum on the new constitution was widely viewed as a litmus test of Sisi’s popularity and legitimacy in the eyes of the Egyptian public. When the new constitution was approved by 98 percent of the vote on January 18, 2014, it

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77 Ibid.


was all but a foregone conclusion that Sisi would seek the highest elected office in the country.

With the Islamist rebellion put down and the new constitution ratified, Sisi resigned from the military and announced his bid for the presidency. In a gesture of goodwill, all but one of the candidates who had been defeated in the 2012 presidential election said they would not run against the 59-year-old general. The only other candidate in the race was Hamdeen Sabahi, representing the Popular Current party. Compared to Sabahi, Sisi neither interacted much with the public during the short campaign, nor did he get into specific policy details. He simply put forward a nationalist message while stating quite clearly that grave economic challenges lay ahead and mass protests would not be tolerated.\textsuperscript{82} His realistic message, tough stance on law and order, and vow to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to resonate across the country.\textsuperscript{83} Aided in no small part by a wave of media adulation, Sisi appeared to be on course for a landslide victory.

The election was held on May 26–28, 2014. According to official government results, Sisi won nearly 97 percent of the vote on a turnout of 47.5 percent. Coming full circle in three years, Egypt was again to be ruled by a strong military man. Still, hopes ran high that the new president would bring the country out of the current crisis and move it forward. While all Egyptians who supported Sisi were hoping he would improve the overall economic and security conditions in the country, the majority of Copts had the additional expectation that he would take action to protect their basic rights and personal safety.

Besides keeping the Muslim Brotherhood in check, Sisi’s other major security challenge was defeating an Islamist insurgency in Sinai that seemed to have been


getting worse since Morsi’s ouster. The terrorists who were actively targeting tourists, Christians, and security posts in the region were affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In origin, they were Salafi jihadists who initially called themselves Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (Supporters of the Holy House) and focused on Israel, but subsequently identified as the Islamic State in the Sinai Province (IS-SP) and turned their attention to Egypt, particularly in the wake of Morsi’s ouster. This threat had to be neutralized if the tourism industry and business investment were to recover.

Sisi’s government launched a full-scale military offensive on militant strongholds in Sinai, and cooperated with Israel in destroying the tunnel network linking the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza to prevent the smuggling of weapons and supplies. However, it could neither keep ISIS from expanding its operations into the Egyptian mainland, nor curb the sectarian violence against Coptic Christians by Egyptian fanatics inspired or recruited by ISIS. The persistent attacks carried out on both Christian and non-Christian targets are too numerous to list or fully discuss here, but a report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information put the number of attacks at 87 in 2014 and at 400 in 2015, with the highest number of attacks occurring in Northern Sinai. Furthermore, Pope Tawadros said in July 2016 that there had been 37 sectarian attacks on the Copts in the preceding three years, which was an average of one per month.

Despite the exceptionally high number of anti-Christian incidents that had taken place under his watch, Sisi received a hero’s welcome when he made a surprise

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appearance at Cairo’s St. Mark’s Cathedral on January 6, 2016 during the Christmas Eve mass. Standing next to the Pope, Sisi projected a tone of unity and humility as he spoke reconciliatory words amid cheers and applause from a very hospitable audience: “We have taken too long to fix and renovate [churches] that were burned. This year everything will be fixed. Please accept our apologies for what happened. God willing, by next year there won’t be a single church or house that is not restored”.88 This marked the first time in Egyptian history that a president had personally gone to the Cathedral to wish Christians a Merry Christmas. Even the Copts who had so far been unimpressed with Sisi’s performance could not ignore the significance of his church visit and acknowledgement of the injustices that had befallen them.

During that and the following year, however, a number of violent and deadly attacks took place, which took their toll on Sisi’s popularity among the Copts due to the government’s weak and ineffective responses. The first anti-Christian incident was in May 2016 when a Muslim mob burned seven Christian homes in Minya in reaction to an unconfirmed rumor that a Christian man and a Muslim woman were having an extramarital affair. Before torching the man’s house, the mob dragged his 70-year-old mother along the street, tore off her clothes, and beat her.89 It took police two hours to respond, by which time the mob had already paraded her naked around the village while chanting “Allahu akbar”. Sisi vowed that justice would be done but, to the astonishment of the Coptic community, the government dropped the case against the Muslim suspects and instead filed charges against the Christian man for allegedly committing adultery.90

Another anti-Christian incident took place in December 2016 at Saint Peter’s Coptic Orthodox Church, near the main cathedral in Cairo, during the Sunday morning mass. A 12-kilogram TNT bomb exploded killing more than 25 people and injuring dozens more, most of whom were women and children. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and promised further attacks as part of its “war on polytheism”.

At the memorial service, the president identified the perpetrator as a suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt and announced the arrest of four suspects. As condolences were still being offered to the Coptic community from around the world, Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a blistering response to statements released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI) condemning the bomb attack. Though the two statements used standard language appropriate to the situation, the Egyptian MFA charged that HRW and AI “chose to spin the incident to suit a prejudiced and politically motivated narrative of sectarian tension in Egypt, and to portray a state of delinquency on the part of the government in protecting Coptic Egyptians, insinuating the Egyptian justice system is deficient, with no resemblance to the truth”.

Many Copts found the MFA’s indignation misplaced and misguided, as the government seemed more concerned about its international image than the incompetent security. While large numbers of security forces were usually dispatched and placed on alert after every church attack, the inadequate security personnel and ineffectual protocols were otherwise the norm, even when ISIS was threatening more attacks on Egypt’s Christians. In February 2017, ISIS issued a 20-minute video calling Coptic Christians a “favorite prey” and vowing to wipe

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them out because “God gave orders to kill every infidel”. The group also urged Muslims to keep away from Christian gatherings and Western embassies. After this chilling warning, ISIS-linked insurgents stepped up their terrorist campaign in Sinai, forcing hundreds of frightened Christian families to flee their homes, as it became increasingly clear that the government was ill-prepared and probably ill-disposed to protect them.

Expanding its terror campaign into the heartland of the country, ISIS claimed responsibility for bomb attacks on two Coptic churches in April 2017, which killed at least 47 people and wounded numerous others. The group deliberately picked Palm Sunday, one of the holiest days in the Christian calendar, to maximize the carnage. The first blast was caused by a bomb planted under a pew inside St. George’s Church in Tanta, a Nile Delta city about 55 miles north of Cairo. Less than half hour later, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the gate of St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria, Egypt’s second largest city. A statement issued by ISIS claimed that the operatives who carried out its mission were Egyptian nationals and warned of more attacks to come: “The Crusaders and their apostate followers must be aware that the bill between us and them is very large, and they will be paying it like a river of blood from their sons, if God is willing”.

After meeting with his national security chiefs, Sisi announced a three-month state of emergency, which was ineffective in preventing the next ISIS attack that took place the following month. In May 2017 a bus full of Christian families

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headed to the monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor in western Minya was
ambushed by a group of about 10 gunmen in military fatigues. According to the
survivors, the masked assailants stopped the bus and riddled it with bullets as it
was traveling at a low speed along an unpaved desert road. They then boarded the
bus and demanded that the passengers renounce their Christian faith and recite the
Islamic profession of faith, if they wished to live. When the passengers refused,
the gunmen shot them and their children, killing 30 and wounding 26. After
removing jewelry and other valuables from the bodies, the gunmen fled in their
SUVs.

The Egyptian military reacted the same day by conducting air strikes on
Islamist militia bases in Libya where the attackers were believed to have received
their training. Although no security measure could realistically prevent every
conceivable attack, the government conveniently chose to restrict organized
church activities rather than tighten the security around churches. Warning church
leaders of the possibility of more terrorist attacks, Interior Ministry officials
recommended the suspension of communal activities that involved travel and large
gatherings such as pilgrimages to monasteries, conferences, and summer camps. At
least two things are clear from the government’s warnings and instructions:
Egypt’s Christians are still vulnerable and President Sisi has both failed to contain
the spread of extremism and to fight terrorism. On every level, it is Christians who
are paying the highest price for the political failures of their government.

97 Heba Farouk Mahfouz, “Coptic Christians Describe Bus Attack in Egypt: ‘Even the Little
Children were Targets’”, *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/
news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/01/coptic-christians-describe-bus-attack-in-egypt-even-
the-little-children-were-targets (Accessed July 25, 2018).

98 Ishak Ibrahim, “Egypt’s Ban on Church Trips Sends Dangerous Message”, *The Tahrir
Conclusion

President Sisi’s time in office thus far has yielded a mixed bag of results that, for the most part, has left the Coptic community feeling more disappointed than gratified. The Copts were collectively elated to be rid of Morsi and will always be grateful to Sisi for his history-changing intervention, though they had hoped and continue to hope for better days under his regime. It is understandable that it takes time to restore security after several years of turmoil, but this cannot be used as a convenient excuse to explain away the upsurge in anti-Christian violence or to ignore the historical and cultural reasons behind it.

After every highly publicized attack, the Egyptian government typically makes a rhetorical appeal for national unity or dismisses it as another “failed attempt against our unity”. Commendable as these sentiments may be, they do not amount to a policy or strategy that can ameliorate the present status of Christians or promote their wider acceptance in society. Much has been said and written about the post-Morsi Islamist backlash against Christians, but the fact of the matter is that Christians faced tremendous difficulties long before Morsi’s removal from power. It is reasonable to assume that this is unlikely to change unless the underpinnings of the problem are understood, accepted, and addressed.

There are three root causes underlying the hatred and violence against Copts in Egypt. The first is the prevailing negative attitude toward Christianity – and by extension toward Christians – among many Egyptian Muslims today. Copts are regarded with hostility and disdain, perhaps more than any other time in modern Egyptian history, and are denounced as infidels, polytheists, and enemies of God by hate preachers who are abundant in number. For years, fanatical preachers have been indoctrinating a generation of Muslims who have now made it their mission

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99 On April 9, 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted the following message after the two church bombings: “As we grieve the tragic & heartbreaking loss of Egyptian lives, it is still a failed attempt against our unity”; see: Egypt MFA Spokesman, Twitter post, April 9, 2017, 2:37 p.m., https://twitter.com/mfaegypt/status/851006263232212992?lang=bg (Accessed July 25, 2018).
to subdue and root out the “unbelievers” among them. The government’s response so far has been insufficient and futile. On June 5, 2014, Adly Mansour, the interim president who temporarily replaced Morsi, issued a decree before leaving office to regulate religious speech in mosques. The decree prohibits anyone not appointed by the Azhar Islamic Institute or Endowments Ministry from preaching sermons and giving religious lessons in mosques. Violations are punishable by fines and imprisonment. Al-Ahram, which is considered Egypt’s newspaper of record, reported that the object of the decree was to “coordinate the sermons of Friday prayers and assign certified preachers” because “‘extremist ideas’ were believed to have spread through informal prayer venues not regulated by the state”.100 Unfortunately, this first step falls far short of what is needed because there are many “licensed” preachers who continue to spew hate-filled sermons every Friday under the government’s nose.

The second root cause is that Copts have long been relegated to second-class status through formal and informal mechanisms that perpetuate their degrading and prejudicial treatment in society. To use the words of Timothy Kaldas, there is a “widespread perception of Christian Egyptians as lesser citizens with lesser rights”, which “creates fertile ground for those who seek to incite violence against them”.101 One glaring example is the discriminatory church building laws. Instead of addressing this and other issues of inequality, the Egyptian government hides behind some hollow platitudes such as “national unity” and “one national fabric”. Another common response has been to blame “foreign influences” for many of the country’s ills. A case in point is the statement made in 2016 by MP Osama al-Abd, head of the Religious Affairs and Endowments Committee of the Egyptian Parliament in the wake of the multiple Islamist attacks on Copts. The


MP told Pope Tawadros that “Egyptians must remain one national fabric as they have always been […] We will not stand with our hands tied before those who incite sedition from inside or outside Egypt”.\textsuperscript{102} These high-sounding words are unhelpful and deceptive because they are used to mask the government’s failure to squarely confront the problem and its reluctance to acknowledge reality. Yet when disillusioned Christians dare to expose the uncomfortable truth that systemic discrimination exists in formal structures and informal practices, they are attacked “as deliberately trying to sow discord and unrest”.\textsuperscript{103}

This takes us to the third and perhaps most obvious reason behind the ever-increasing aggression toward the Copts: ignoring a problem makes it worse. No Egyptian official has ever admitted, either overtly or tacitly, that there is pervasive discrimination against the Copts, even when attacks on churches increased exponentially. Every Egyptian president has sustained and exacerbated the problem of discrimination by denying its very existence. This includes President Sisi who, in a 2014 interview, denied that there was any discrimination against Christians in the military, while dodging another question about the egregious law governing church construction that dates back to the Ottoman period.\textsuperscript{104} This explains why the Copts’ position has hardly changed since Sisi took office even though he speaks amicably to and of them. In the absence of an official admission of the true state of affairs, real reform measures will not be effectuated. There is truth to the old adage that a proper diagnosis is half the cure.


\textsuperscript{103} Kaldas, “Egyptians Mourn”.

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