

Activism in the Coptic Diaspora: A Brief Introduction

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With the breach of the US Embassy's walls in Cairo and the killing of US officials in Benghazi, the attention of the international media has returned again to the aftermath of the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings. In the former case, much of the media focus has settled upon Coptic Christians, and specifically Copts in the diaspora, given the links between the offensive film that provoked the breach and a particular, rather obscure Coptic activist by the name of Maurice Sadiq. As head of an organization advocating against Coptic persecution in Egypt, Sadiq had endorsed the film. At the time of writing, the background to the film and the purported involvement of diaspora Copts in its making were still unclear. This, however, was no deterrent to the use of inflammatory anti-Coptic rhetoric and images by the largely Salafist protesters who gathered at the walls of the embassy. The following image was circulated quite widely on social networks in a humorous vein:



[Egyptian Copts pray in Tahrir Square during the protests. Image originally posted to Wikimedia Commons.]



[Protester carrying a sign that reads, "I demand the expulsion of diaspora Copts from Egypt." Image from unknown archive.]

Aside from the comic irony of the sign, the image reveals how the protesters' rhetoric was targeted quite specifically at diaspora Copts (in the Arabic, *aqbat al-mahjar*). This consternation with the activism of Copts abroad has quite a long history in the Egyptian context – a history which, given the ignorance and misapprehension about Copts that pervade both Egyptian and international media, is worth exploring in the current circumstances.

One must emphasize from the outset that, not unlike Copts within Egypt, diaspora Copts constitute a diverse

community with nothing approaching a consensus view on political matters. There are, however, a range of reasonable arguments made to the effect that diaspora Copts are inclined towards sectarian activism to a greater extent than are Copts in Egypt.

The first such argument is that, in contrast to Copts within Egypt, diaspora Copts confront less pressure to embrace the state's rhetoric of national unity. That is, they are not compelled to censor themselves in line with the state and, indeed, popular taboo on sectarian rhetoric. The result is that diaspora Copts can, for instance, speak of experiences with discrimination in ways that Copts in Egypt cannot or simply will not. Further, they can publicize their views on these matters without the fear of state retribution that would follow them in Egypt.

The second such argument concerns the circumstances under which diaspora Copts left Egypt. Activists frequently allege that Copts choose to immigrate in numbers that exceed their share of the population in Egypt, given experiences with discrimination. These experiences are then shared within families and propel subsequent generations into activist politics.

The third argument relates to the social structure of Egyptian immigrant communities. Although there are important exceptions to the rule, these communities tend to organize themselves along lines of faith. Among Copts, churches and community centers become the principal venues for social life. As a result, Egyptian Muslims and Egyptian Christians tend to have few contacts transcending these lines of faith.

As is the case with most arguments regarding Coptic communities, whether in Egypt or in the diaspora, these arguments are largely unsubstantiated in quantitative terms, because reliable numbers are hard to find: Counting Copts, much less surveying them, as countless researchers have discovered, is a precariously political activity. To count Copts is immediately to intervene in longstanding debates about fair representation and equality before the law.

These were debates that animated the work of Dr. Shawky Karas, arguably the pioneer of Coptic activism in the diaspora, who founded the American Coptic Association in 1972. By his own account, Karas had witnessed the sectarian strife that had plagued the Delta village of Khanka in November of that year, when a church unauthorized by state officials was set on fire. This became the inspiration behind the establishment of the Association, whose insistence upon equality of citizenship for Copts before Egyptian law was much in line with the activist spirit adopted by Pope Shenouda III at this time, just following his ascent to the Papal seat. Indeed, through the 1970s, Shenouda actively and repeatedly confronted what he perceived as Anwar al-Sadat's policy of "Islamization" of public space in Egypt.

When Pope Shenouda was placed under house arrest by Sadat in 1981, the work of Karas and the Association took on a particular urgency. Concerted effort was made to lobby US lawmakers to exert pressure on Egypt to secure the Coptic Patriarch's release, and the Congressional Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations addressed former President Hosni Mubarak directly on the subject. That which attracted greatest media attention, however, was the White House demonstration routinely organized by Karas and fellow activists for each visit Mubarak made to Washington – demonstrations announced in large advertisements the association would purchase in major newspapers.

In covering these activities at home, Egyptian media would frequently reference the embarrassment suffered by President Mubarak at the hands of diaspora Copts, who were cast as unpatriotic troublemakers. For his part, Karas would regard his dedication to the cause as vindicated when Pope Shenouda was finally released from house arrest in January 1985. Although Shenouda stepped away from his activist commitments of the 1970s, Karas proceeded in unabashed fashion to condemn the Egyptian government for discrimination against Copts through the 1980s and 1990s. These condemnations would attract indignation from particular Coptic circles in Egypt, which suggested that Karas and the Association were out of touch – that they simply no longer understood the situation Copts faced in Egypt.

As the sophistication of information technology has grown, so too has the reach of diaspora activism. This has permitted a wider range of activists to engage with a wider range of Coptic concerns. But one example is the organization Coptic Orphans, founded in 1988, engaged in relief and development activities throughout Egypt, and led by a board with members from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Coptic Orphans functions across the Coptic diaspora with a transnational scope unheard of only a generation ago.

However, this broadening scope of Coptic activism has likewise opened the way for particular extremist elements

within the diaspora to give voice to Islamophobic rhetoric. This is the context within which to grasp the position of Maurice Sadiq and his National American Coptic Assembly. Sadiq may claim to represent a particular constituency of diaspora Copts, but this is not a constituency he could muster for a White House demonstration, as Karas had in the 1980s. This is an electronic constituency, and a largely ephemeral one, at that.

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"this broadening scope of Coptic activism has likewise opened the way for particular extremist elements within the diaspora to give voice to Islamophobic rhetoric. This is the context within which to grasp the position of Maurice Sadiq and his National American Coptic Assembly." One can argue that the use of labels such as extremist and Islamophobic suggests an ad-hominem argument, possibly an illegitimately pejorative evaluation of certain open and debatable perspectives and a Coptic movement that tends to poke fun at Islamic belief and tradition. Possibly similar to Jesus Christ superstar from the perspective of some. The real issues include, respect for faith traditions, freedom of speech, and the need for a legitimate critique by Islamic clerics and scholars of Islamic tradition and the Qur'an itself. Just as the West le...[See More](#)

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