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Europe

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Politics

Revolutions

Security

Culture & Society

Economy

Religion

Gender

Science & Tech

All content

Date range

Exclusive

Pope Tawadros II and the Question of Egyptian Sectarianism

14th March, 2013

By Paul Sedra

During the six decades of the military dictatorship in Egypt, there were usually two contexts in which Egyptians encountered the question of Coptic-Muslim relations in the media. The first was on national, Muslim, or Christian holidays, during which the President of the Republic and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar would offer their congratulations to the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, or vice versa, together with a few carefully worded remarks affirming the national unity of the Egyptian people across lines of faith. The second was on instances of sectarian violence, most often distant from the capital and involving either the purportedly unlicensed renovation of a church or a purportedly forced conversion, during which the Grand Imam and the Patriarch would denounce violence and refuse the very possibility of sectarian division within Egypt.



One of the great hopes of the 25 January revolution, in particular quarters of both the Coptic and Muslim communities of Egypt, was that the period of transition away from authoritarianism would offer an opportunity to rework the well worn patterns of sectarian relations in the country, in such a way as to confront problems in Coptic-Muslim relations in a serious and sustained way. Yet now, only two years after the revolution, the old patterns have reemerged with precious little alteration from the days of the dictatorship. The Grand Imam, Ahmad al-Tayyib, recently remarked that "Islam and Christianity are both religions of love, peace and forgiveness that don't result in the making of extremists." Roughly 50 km from Aswan, in the town of Kom Ombo, rumors about the conversion of a Muslim woman to Christianity prompted attacks on the Church of Mari Girgis with stones and Molotov cocktails, forcing the clergy to cancel all Christian gatherings apart from mass. And in the last week of February, the Shubra al-Khaima Church of Abu Maqar, in Qalyubiya Governorate, was the site of a siege undertaken by Islamists, who sought to halt renovation work on the church's annex – work that had all the necessary permissions from state officials.

At least part of the challenge in undertaking the paradigm shift in sectarian relations that Coptic and Muslim activists have sought is that this is a particularly sensitive time for the central institution within the Coptic community, the Coptic Orthodox Church. Beyond the upheaval that all Egyptians have faced in the past two years with the political reverberations of the 25 January revolution, the Coptic Orthodox have witnessed a major leadership transition within the Church, given the passing of Pope Shenouda III and the ordination, in November of this past year, of his successor, Pope Tawadros II. There are both Coptic commentators within Egypt, and human rights activists beyond Egypt's borders, who have spoken of the particular sense of insecurity that this confluence of transitions – in Church and nation – has occasioned within the Coptic community. Emigration of Copts from Egypt has become a great concern in these circles, with numbers ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of emigrant Copts frequently cited with minimal substantiation.

One could, of course, view this confluence of transitions as an opportunity rather than a threat – and the proliferation of Coptic civil society organizations since the revolution would appear to suggest that countless Copts have indeed seized upon an opportunity in the past two years, to represent their concerns in Egyptian public life independently from both the state and the Church. However, given the influence of the Coptic Orthodox Church within the Coptic community – an influence that grew particularly quickly under the leadership of Pope Shenouda, and for which he will remain long remembered – the question of Church leadership is one that will significantly impact Coptic-Muslim relations for the foreseeable future. This has occasioned much, often frenzied, speculation about what approach

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Shenouda's successor, Tawadros, will adopt in stewarding the Church as an institution.

Given that Tawadros has occupied the Patriarchal seat for only a matter of months, my thoughts on his approach are necessarily preliminary and highly speculative. Nonetheless, in light of several of the steps he has taken thus far in the post, one can safely say that he is paying close attention to the example set by his predecessor, Shenouda. For instance, Tawadros has embraced the practice that Shenouda initially developed when he served as Bishop of Education, and leads a discussion directed largely at young people in the Cathedral each week, intended to help guide his flock in applying Christian principles to their everyday lives. To my mind, this bespeaks a commitment to Shenouda's notion that the Church should have an expansive role in the everyday lives of Coptic Orthodox parishioners. Accordingly, Shenouda's program of developing and enlarging Church institutions, both within Egypt and in the Coptic diaspora, looks set to continue through the leadership of Tawadros.

Further, much like his predecessor, Tawadros appears committed to taking on a visible and rather outspoken approach to the leadership of the Church. Shortly after his rise to the Patriarchal seat, he gave an extensive series of interviews to the Egyptian media, several of which were featured in the major talk shows of Egypt's burgeoning private television landscape. And again upon Coptic Christmas, Pope Tawadros was not reticent or retiring in his approach to the media: Notably, on 6 January 2013, he gave an [interview to Al-Jazeera English](#) in which he called for an end to street protests as a means by which to restore stability to the country. This degree of visibility and outspokenness has provoked active concern in those quarters of the Coptic community seeking a less politicized Patriarchate. On 20 February 2013, a contingent of Coptic youth ventured so far as to confront Tawadros after his weekly discussion at the Cathedral in Cairo, insisting that he withdraw from politics and focus on the realm of the spiritual. This was a response to statements attributed to – and subsequently denied by – the Pope, to the effect that the civil disobedience campaigns ongoing in various parts of the country were futile.

Whatever the Patriarch's particular position on civil disobedience, his previous interview with Al-Jazeera English clearly signaled that he intends to engage in explicitly political debates, and will not withdraw to the spiritual realm demanded by the protesters of 20 February. Indeed, Tawadros has left little room for doubt as to his position on the constitutional question that has so convulsed Egypt over the past several months, [describing](#) the document as “discriminatory” and inconsistent with the notion of equal citizenship for Copts. One might venture to suggest that the Patriarch is developing a coalition of Christians to support his view in the matter, having convened the United Council for Egyptian Churches – embracing the Evangelical, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox rites – in an inaugural meeting on 18 February 2013.

What might this visible and outspoken approach to leadership on the part of Pope Tawadros II mean for Coptic-Muslim relations in Egypt? It is far too soon to say. In the wake of the 25 January revolution, Tawadros faces an almost unprecedented level of expectation among his flock in the Coptic community. With the ascendancy of Islamists in Egyptian politics, Copts are facing uncertain times – and there are profound divisions within the community about how best to approach these uncertain times. As a result, the Patriarch faces a struggle not simply with the Muslim Brotherhood rulers of Egypt, but with his own people as well. While Tawadros seems prepared to emulate his predecessor, Shenouda, and intervene in the political realm, there are Copts who would prefer that the Church steer clear of controversy and leave politics to Coptic laypeople. The outcome of this intra-communal struggle will have an enormous impact not simply on the Copts, but on Egypt as a whole.

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