Egypt's Copts view election with concern

Marginalised for years, Coptic Christians struggle to define their status as a new government takes shape.

The fight for equal rights and political legitimacy has been a long one for Egypt's Coptic Christians. Their plight has become all the more complicated with recent developments in the country, and parliamentary elections scheduled for Monday might not be the solution they had in mind.

The status of the Copts' status in Egyptian society is tricky. Making up roughly 10 per cent of the country's 80 million citizens, they are the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

For many years, the Copts received public support from Hosni Mubarak, the former president who was driven from power in February. In late January, when the streets were filled with protesters calling for Mubarak to step down, Coptic Orthodox church leader Pope Shenouda III expressed support for the leader who had controlled Egypt for 30 years.

Even so, many Copts supported the revolution and were present in anti-Mubarak demonstrations. In one incident, they formed a human chain around a group of Muslim Egyptians so they could pray amid the chaos. The event became one of the most iconic images from January's protests at Tahrir Square.

Still, the Egyptian Federation of Human Rights has reported that approximately 93,000 Copts have left Egypt since March. The NGO has estimated that number could reach 250,000 by 2012, with the departures linked to fears that a hardline, Islamist government might make life harder for Copts in Egypt.

Uncertain future

Mourad Shenouda, a consultant at a Cairo-based engineering firm, said that two years ago Egypt was a "steady state" with little hope for change for the country's Coptic Christians.
"We had our problem as Copts. We had our problems as liberals. However, after the revolution, there is a chance for change. And this change it may be in favour of liberals, it may be in favour of Copts, it may be in favour of Islamists; but where this change will lead, I doubt anyone will predict," Shenouda said.

State policies that discriminated against the Copts have in large part defined the community. Among these policies were the requirement of a presidential permit to repair churches and a lack of representation in government.

The community is still reeling from the Maspero incident on October 9, in which security forces clashed with Copts who were protesting an attack on a church in Aswan. At least 26 Copts were killed in the violence and more than 300 were wounded.

"The Maspero massacre left Copts profoundly traumatised in a way that is quite unprecedented," said Paul Sedra, an expert in Egyptian history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.

"They wonder, now that 'Pandora's Box' has apparently opened, what more they can expect," Sedra said.

Sedra continued: "This flew in the face of so much of the rhetoric of the current military rulers and former regimes; that national institutions like the military were dedicated to preserving national unity, of Copts and Muslims, in Egypt."

The ruling military party, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), refused to take responsibility for the use of violence. The refusal brought protests from Coptic and Muslim Egyptian who called for a swift and fair investigation of the Maspero killings.

Election impact

Experts have said many members of Egypt's Coptic population are pessimistic that their lives will improve with the election of a new parliament.

"My sense is that there is a profound scepticism within most quarters of the Coptic community that parliamentary elections would enhance their situation at all," said Sedra.

"I suspect the feeling is quite the opposite; that Islamist and Salafi forces, whose agendas are seen to be injurious to Copts, are bound to gain from the elections," he added.

Sedra said most Copts are "deeply sceptical" about what liberal and secular politicians will do for them.

"I think you can count on one hand the number of Copts who support the Muslim Brotherhood... I don't see them voting for the [Muslim] Brotherhood or the Salafis," said Timothy Kaldas, a 27-year-old photographer in Cairo, referring to Egypt's main Islamist parties.

'Civil state'

The dialogue surrounding Egypt's elections has for months centered on inclusion, fairness and the logistics of conducting the first poll in the post-Mubarak era. Such discussion has mostly been put on hold with the return of violence and mass protests in Tahrir Square, but some hope for the elections remains.

"I'm a Copt. I'm more a liberal than a Copt, so I'm looking for a civil state in Egypt, and this civil state will give rights to everyone; Copts, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist or whatever," said Shenouda, 40.

Thirty-three protesters have been killed across Egypt since November 18 and many more people have been injured. In response, Copts and Muslims alike have intensified calls for the immediate end of military rule. Yet, there are some who fear what may happen if the SCAF were to immediately step down.

"Some people want [the SCAF] to stay just to maintain some stability. Because if they leave, and there is no proper handover to someone who is good enough or strong enough, I believe it will become mass chaos," said Shenouda.

Sedra said that after the Maspero killings, many Copts are apprehensive of what might come next.

"They wonder, now that 'Pandora's Box' has apparently opened, what more they can expect to befall the community. So there is certainly no rush to create a situation of still greater instability," Sedra said.

For some Copts, however, the fear of the unknown is not enough to stop the push for change in Egypt.

"I'm going to protest, because, even beyond the issue of nationalism, 85 million people right now are subject to the rule of a military junta that is leftover from an extremely repressive regime and they're fighting to remove that junta and to establish an actually free and democratic country," said Kaldas.

"No one is left to excuse what's going on. At this point, every group has reason to establish an actually free and democratic country," said Kaldas.

In response, Copts and Muslims alike have intensified calls for the immediate end of military rule. Such discussion has mostly been put on hold with the return of violence and mass protests in Tahrir Square, but some hope for the elections remains.

"I'm going to protest, because, even beyond the issue of nationalism, 85 million people right now are subject to the rule of a military junta that is leftover from an extremely repressive regime and they're fighting to remove that junta and to establish an actually free and democratic country," said Kaldas.

"No one is left to excuse what's going on. At this point, every group has reason to establish an actually free and democratic country," said Kaldas.

Experts have said many members of Egypt's Coptic population are pessimistic that their lives will improve with the election of a new parliament.

"My sense is that there is a profound scepticism within most quarters of the Coptic community that parliamentary elections would enhance their situation at all," said Sedra.

"I suspect the feeling is quite the opposite; that Islamist and Salafi forces, whose agendas are seen to be injurious to Copts, are bound to gain from the elections," he added.

Sedra said most Copts are "deeply sceptical" about what liberal and secular politicians will do for them.

"I think you can count on one hand the number of Copts who support the Muslim Brotherhood... I don't see them voting for the [Muslim] Brotherhood or the Salafis," said Timothy Kaldas, a 27-year-old photographer in Cairo, referring to Egypt's main Islamist parties.

'Civil state'

The dialogue surrounding Egypt's elections has for months centered on inclusion, fairness and the logistics of conducting the first poll in the post-Mubarak era. Such discussion has mostly been put on hold with the return of violence and mass protests in Tahrir Square, but some hope for the elections remains.

"I'm a Copt. I'm more a liberal than a Copt, so I'm looking for a civil state in Egypt, and this civil state will give rights to everyone; Copts, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist or whatever," said Shenouda, 40.

Thirty-three protesters have been killed across Egypt since November 18 and many more people have been injured. In response, Copts and Muslims alike have intensified calls for the immediate end of military rule. Yet, there are some who fear what may happen if the SCAF were to immediately step down.

"Some people want [the SCAF] to stay just to maintain some stability. Because if they leave, and there is no proper handover to someone who is good enough or strong enough, I believe it will become mass chaos," said Shenouda.

Sedra said that after the Maspero killings, many Copts are apprehensive of what might come next.

"They wonder, now that 'Pandora's Box' has apparently opened, what more they can expect to befall the community. So there is certainly no rush to create a situation of still greater instability," Sedra said.

For some Copts, however, the fear of the unknown is not enough to stop the push for change in Egypt.

"I'm going to protest, because, even beyond the issue of nationalism, 85 million people right now are subject to the rule of a military junta that is leftover from an extremely repressive regime and they're fighting to remove that junta and to establish an actually free and democratic country," said Kaldas.

"No one is left to excuse what's going on. At this point, every group has reason to be extremely disappointed with the ruling military junta. There's no one left untouched."
Bahrain: Shouting in the dark
The story of the Arab revolution that was abandoned by the Arabs, forsaken by the West and forgotten by the world.

Herman Cain and the conservative victimology
Herman Cain’s claim that he’s the real victim reflects a wide-ranging conservative belief with profound consequences.

Arab revolts - past and present
Arabs have historically revolted every decade against rulers and the west has counter-revolted most attempts.

The contradictions of the Arab Spring
The spirit of 1968 flows through Arab Spring and Occupy movement - as its counter-current attempts to suppress uprising.

Recent activity
- Laleh Khalili and Sinan Antoon shared Prison terms for UAE activists over ‘insult’, - about an hour ago
- Ted Ows Swedenburg and Sarah Carr shared In pictures: Violence follows Bahrain funeral, - on Saturday
- Hind Mahmoud shared Q&A: Syria’s daring actress - on Friday
- Adel Iskandar shared Egypt: Revolution revisited - on Saturday
- Frances Hasso shared Heavy fighting erupts in Yemeni capital - on Friday

Join Our Mailing List
Email Address
Subscribe

Facebook social plugin

Egypt's Copts view election with concern - Features - Al Jazeera... http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/11/201111227...
Portugal decriminalized all drug use in 2000. Since then, contrary to expectations, drug use hasn't risen significantly - and use among adolescents decreased.

Pope Benedict XVI backtracks, says AIDS is an ethical problem that needs medical solution, and NOT spread by condoms.

Latest update on Egypt unrest: 22 dead and 1500 injured

In Mississippi, uninsured women have to wait over three months to get checked for cervical cancer. Partly as a result, women in Mississippi die from cervical cancer at twice the rate as the average American woman.

Slavery thrives in Chinese prisons, selling products to the West.