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Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian communities in modern Egyptian politics

PAUL SEDRA

ABSTRACT Whereas the political claims of Egyptian Islamists have attracted much attention in Western media and scholarly circles, only rarely have such circles acknowledged the role played by ethno-religious consciousness among Coptic Christians in Egyptian political life. This article analyzes the development of this consciousness through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the socio-economic roots of 'Coptist' political action. Accorded particular attention is the emergence of an explicitly sectarian political discourse among groups of middle-class Copts in the 1970s, and the related spread of ethnic consciousness through the Coptic community at large since that time.

Although the largest Christian community in the Middle East, the Coptic community of Egypt has received scanty attention from sociologists and political scientists. Given the political context, such a dearth of analysis is hardly surprising. To identify a Coptic Christian community in Egypt today—one distinct from the Egyptian national community—is to enter into an intensely political debate. The notions that a distinctly Coptic identity exists, that Copts share a consciousness of their ethnicity, and that referring to the Copts as a community is credible and meaningful, strike at the core of Egyptian national identity and, in turn, at the security of the Egyptian state. Government officials insist that 'Egyptian Christians are not a “minority” in the sense in which this concept is commonly used,' and hasten to add, 'Applying the term minority even from a strictly numerical viewpoint to describe Christians in Egypt, has negative connotations which we resent' (Human Rights Watch 1994, 37). The current Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt himself declares, 'We are not a minority in Egypt. We do not like to consider ourselves a minority and do not like others to call us a minority' (Human Rights Watch 1994, 5).

In this long-standing debate over the nature of Coptic identity, Egyptian state officials and their Islamist opponents have seized upon ethnicity as a site of 'symbolic politics', of contestation for 'symbolic power'. Dale Eickelman and James Piscator have explained that 'Muslim politics involves the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them' (Eickelman & Piscator 1996, 5). Perhaps the best-known site of such 'symbolic politics' is gender; the best-known symbol, the veil. As Eickelman and Piscator note, 'Veiling is not inherently a political act, but rather it becomes one when it is transformed into a public symbol' (Eickelman & Piscator 1996, 4). As soon as such a 'public symbol' emerges, the potential for explosive contestation develops. The resonance of the symbol with the people develops into a means to power. As the state and the Islamists enter into a frenzy of interpretation as to the 'meaning' of the veil—as if there existed, or could exist, one such 'meaning,' one all-encompassing

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‘reason’ why women don the veil—control of the symbol becomes inextricably tied with control of the state, in particular with the legitimacy of government power. It is thus that the circumstances under which a woman dons the veil—or a man chooses to grow a beard, for that matter—become issues for public scrutiny. In the realm of symbols, whether the veil or the beard, there is little private room for individual choice beyond that public scrutiny: choice of time, place, and style are all, in the end, viewed by the state, by the Islamists and, ultimately, by the public, as political (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996, 4–5).

On the rare occasions when sociologists and political scientists have discussed the Coptic community, they have seized upon this framework and cast the Copts as a ‘symbol’ in the struggle between Egyptian state officials and their Islamist opponents. In his *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, Gilles Kepel notes, ‘For the Islamicist movement, to assault the Copts is to assault the state’ (Kepel 1993, 240). Kepel points to the words of Shaykh Kishk, words that resonated through the streets of Cairo during the sectarian violence of 1981: ‘Nowhere on earth is there any minority that has been accorded the rights enjoyed by the Christians of Egypt, who occupy so many important posts: ministers, chairmen of the boards of directors of banks, generals, and their Pope, who sits on the throne of the Church with all its authority’ (Kepel 1993, 238). This argument is common to most accounts of the Copts’ role in Egyptian political life: that the Islamists conceptualize Copts as privileged guests in a Muslim home, enjoying the unwarranted indulgence of state secularism at the hands of their host, the Egyptian President (Ansari 1984; Bahr 1984; Brodin 1978; McDermott 1988). The image of Copts as trapped between the hammer of the Islamists and the anvil of the government has developed into the standard journalistic shorthand to describe their ‘plight’ (Cofsky 1993; Fisk 1995; Gauch 1995; Ghalwash 1996; Hedges 1992; Hundley 1992; Ibrahim 1993; Jenkins 1996; Mallet 1990; Struck 1994).

Given the overriding concern of both scholars and journalists with the ‘Islamist phenomenon,’ this narrow focus of analysis—on symbolic politics, contestation for symbolic power—is, again, hardly surprising. The unfortunate result, however, is that the Copts have figured only as a ‘symbol’, most often as an inert ‘victim’, in the story the scholars and the journalists have sought to tell—that of the struggle of the government and the Islamists for control of the state. Rarely does the Coptic community figure as an actor in that story; and when the story-tellers grant the Copts such agency, they acknowledge only the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, as representative of Copts’ interests (Pennington 1982). The near-total absence of reliable statistical data on the Coptic community and the government-imposed obstacles to research in the field, both born of the political sensitivities surrounding the topic, have scarcely helped researchers develop a more nuanced view of the community, of its internal dynamics, and of the great cleavages that divide it (Samaan & Sukkary 1978).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty facing the analyst of the Copts, however, is their status as an unranked ethnic group. As Donald Horowitz explains, ‘The distinction [between ranked and unranked ethnic groups] rests upon the coincidence or noncoincidence of social class with ethnic origins. When the two coincide, it is possible to speak of ranked ethnic groups; where groups are cross-class, it is possible to speak of unranked ethnic groups’ (Horowitz 1985, 22). Indeed, Copts are well represented among the wealthiest and the poorest Egyptians. Whereas scholars and journalists often refer to the Coptic community—an undifferentiated, undivided mass—there in fact exist Coptic communities spread across the social spectrum of Egyptian society.
ethnic group renders analysis of their status within Egyptian society complex, but far from impracticable.

The aim of this paper is, thus, corrective: to describe the agency and complexity of interests among Copts that analysts of symbolic politics in Egypt have long ignored. In order to understand Copts' relations with Muslims and the state, one must step beyond conceptions of the Copts as 'symbol' or 'victim'. One must grasp the current intellectual cleavages within the community, their social roots, and the shifts in such cleavages that have occurred during the past century. These cleavages have had, and will continue to have, a decisive impact on Copts' relations with Muslims and the state.

**National Unity or Persecution?**

There exist among the Copts two principal strands of thought on their status within Egyptian society. In the name of a fierce Egyptian nationalism, the 'national unity' strand insists, 'The Copts—as an integral part of Egypt—have all the characteristics of the Egyptians' (Hanna 1994, 46). Advocates of this 'national unity discourse' deny the existence of a Coptic minority within Egyptian borders, conceiving of Copts as so fully and harmoniously integrated into Egyptian society as to be indistinguishable from Muslims. In stark contrast, casting the Copts as distinct from Muslims not merely in religion, but in history, culture, and often race, the 'persecution' strand insists, 'When two Egyptians or more meet the first thing they learn about each other is who is a Christian and who is a Muslim. Their future interactions and relationships will be founded on this knowledge' (Karas 1985, 97–98).

The rhetoric of national unity is supported by powerful imagery. President Anwar Sadat spoke of Egypt as a 'land of tolerance, love and fraternity'; Pope Shenouda speaks of Egyptians as 'sons of a single homeland' (Sadat 1977, 17). William Soliman Kelada, a prominent Coptic intellectual, seizes upon the national 'triumph' of the 1973 War, and paints a portrait of Christian soldiers observing the Ramadan fast in respect for their Muslim peers, with commanders quoting the Qurʾan and the Bible in one breath (Kelada 1987, 258). Mīlad Hanna, a Coptic newspaper columnist and former member of the People's Assembly, recounts that the father of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Muḥammad Saʿīd Ṭanṭāwī, 'had a Copt as his partner in farming and their two families lived in neighboring houses. Their wives were close friends and their children played together' (Hanna 1994, 59). One writer has argued that Pope Kirollos VI, Shenouda's predecessor and the modern embodiment of spirituality for the Copts, studied the Bible at the hands of the shaykh of his village mosque (Fawzi 1993).

However, perhaps the most compelling image of national unity—a recurrent one—is that of the Coptic clergyman nursing the sick child of the Egyptian leader back to health. Iris Habib al-Masri, in her *Story of the Copts*, describes how Serapamon, the Bishop of Menoufeya, cured Zuhra, the daughter of Muḥammad ‘Ali: 'Making the sign of the Cross over a glass of water, he sprinkled her face, and gave her a drink. The princess suddenly calmed down, heaved a long sigh of relief and sat up, looking normal and healthy' (Masri 1978, 38). Pope Kirollos VI is widely believed to have restored, through prayer, the health of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's son, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm, over a century later (Fawzi 1993).

Throughout their writings, William Soliman Kelada and Mīlad Ḥanna consistently emphasize the distinctiveness of Egyptian identity—one tied not to religion but to soil. According to Kelada, 'Despite Egypt's varied religious history of Pharaonism, Christianity and Islam, the sense of belonging to the land of Egypt is a unifying bond that
guarantees the continuation of a unique Egyptian world view’ (Kelada 1987, 248). Hanna identifies seven ‘pillars’ of Egyptian identity—the Pharaonic, Greco–Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean and African—and argues that all Egyptians, whether educated or illiterate, whether rich or poor, whether Coptic or Muslim, carry within them each of the pillars, ‘the richness of the history of Egypt’ (Hanna 1994, 16). Hanna claims that even the boundary of religious obligations is permeable—that there exists a distinctively Egyptian brand of Islam with ‘a Sunni face, Shi’ite blood, Coptic heart, and Pharaonic bones.’ He points to the Egyptian tradition of consuming sugar horses and dolls, known as ‘arūsas, in celebration of the Prophet’s birthday: the horse may represent that of Saint George, and the doll, the Virgin Mary (Hanna 1994, 13).

In the eyes of persecution discourse advocates, however, the gulf between Copts and Muslims is wide indeed. According to this view, Copts are the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians, the most Egyptian of all the Egyptians, yet have remained since the Arab invasion, according to the title of one book, Strangers in Their Land. Images of a hostile Islamic monolith pervade such writings: ‘In December of the year 641, Egypt passed under the Moslem yoke from which she has never been able to free herself, and under which her civilization, her learning, and her religion have been slowly crushed out’ (Karas 1985, 7). Shawky Karas, the author of Strangers (and President of the American Coptic Association) argues that conflict between Copts and Muslims is inevitable and intractable, given the injunctions of the Qur’an—among them, that ‘Muslims are forbidden to take Jews or Christians as friends’. The injunctions of the Qur’an, in his view, constitute no less than a comprehensive blueprint for society (Karas 1985, 93).

The oppression Copts currently suffer ‘under the Moslem yoke’ is, for persecution discourse advocates, manifold, embracing religious belief and practice, civil service appointments, political representation, personal status law, education, the media, and security. All church repair and construction must receive approval from the President himself; the state funds Muslim proselytism among Christians, yet prohibits Christian proselytism among Muslims (Human Rights Watch 1994, 39; Eibner 1993, 32–36). Copts have virtually no representation in the upper echelons of public-sector companies; Copts are scarce both in senior military, police, judiciary, intelligence, and diplomatic posts, and through the ranks in the Ministries of Education, Foreign Affairs, Information, and the Interior (al-Gawhary 1996, 22; Shafiq 1996). The government National Democratic Party failed to nominate Coptic candidates in the 1995 elections to the People’s Assembly; Coptic participation in political life is widely viewed as a privilege accorded by the President, as most Coptic representatives in the People’s Assembly secure their seats through Presidential appointments (Shafiq 1996). In personal status disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims, Islamic law prevails (Human Rights Watch 1994, 3; Eibner 1993, 15). Whereas the Qur’an is central to the study of Arabic in Egyptian schools, curricula scarcely acknowledge the Coptic period in Egyptian history (Eibner 1993, 37; Shafiq 1996). Shaykhs commonly employ fiercely anti-Christian rhetoric in programs broadcast on state-controlled radio and television (Shafiq 1996). Finally, in Upper Egypt, government security forces stand accused of failing to offer sufficient protection to Copts since the upsurge of sectarian violence that has stricken the region from the late 1980s (Eibner 1993, 20).

The national unity and persecution discourses are rooted in widely divergent accounts of Egyptian history. Kelada emphasizes that, in the wake of the Arab invasion, ‘the conquerors were absorbed within the vast ocean of the Egyptian people and civilization’ (Kelada 1987, 249). Hanna insists that the Copts ‘rejected withdrawing
into enclaves for centuries—even during periods of persecution' (Hanna 1994, 59).

However, persecution discourse advocates point to the Pact of 'Umar, an eighth-century document that regulated the status of Christians and Jews in Muslim lands, under which all relations between Muslims and Copts were discouraged; Copts were not permitted to assemble, to hold weapons, or to exercise authority over Muslims; the construction and restoration of churches was forbidden; Copts' use of bells, banners, books and crosses was curtailed; Copts were enjoined to remain standing in the presence of Muslims and to address Muslims with humility; and, finally, Copts faced inordinate taxation. Ultimately, claim persecution discourse advocates, the provisions of the Pact forced Copts to segregate themselves out of fear for their security (Masriya 1976, 81–83).

Copts' interaction with foreigners is a source of particular concern in both the national unity and the persecution discourses. According to the former, Egyptian Christians and Muslims have remained united for centuries against all foreign encroachment on their homeland. Despite the temptation to throw their support behind the Crusaders, the Copts stood with Muslims in defense of Egypt and were labeled unbelievers by co-religionists; centuries later, the Muslim–Christian partnership persisted, as Copts refused Russian offers of protection from Ottoman rule and met French and British invaders with the slogan, 'Egypt for the Egyptians' (Hanna 1994, 126). For Coptic persecution discourse advocates, however, that Arab Muslims are the foreigners on Egyptian soil. According to such Copts, their history has remained, since Arab Muslims' arrival, 'a lengthy tale of persecutions, massacres, forced conversions, of devastated and burned churches'. Caliph ʿAbū al-ʿAlāʾ and the Mamlukes are allotted particular reproach for discrimination and violence against Copts (Masriya 1976, 84).

Of greatest interest in this fierce, long-standing debate about the nature of Copts' relations with Muslims and the state is not the accuracy of the substance. To grasp the shifting tides of sectarianism in Egypt, one must scrutinize not the accuracy of the historiography, but the history of the historiography—that is, the social roots of the national unity and persecution discourses through the past century. The two discourses emerged in particular contexts and within particular sectors of the Coptic community. As they emerged, however, the discourses themselves came to shape the sectarian climate. The original advocates of 'persecution notions', in particular, could not control the manipulation of their ideas—a predicament ultimately faced by most leaders of reform movements. The persecution discourse is thus expanding, in virulence, scope and support, both in Egypt and abroad—a consequence that has had, and will continue to have, dire implications for intercommunal relations in Egypt.

The Nineteenth-Century Landowning Elite

The roots of the national unity and persecution discourses extend back to the nineteenth century. By mid-century, an élite of titled, land-owning Copts had emerged in Egypt—descendants of administrators, merchants and advisers who had served under Muhammad ʿAli and reaped the rewards of the economic and social upheaval he had engineered. Their education in missionary schools and European universities had convinced them that only with reform could their community thrive and their church survive. In the December 1855 abolition of the jizya—a tax directed at religious minorities in accordance with Islamic law—the élite saw movement towards this goal. As the notion of Egyptian citizenship gradually emerged, members of the élite reasoned that the Ottoman millet system, under which Muslims viewed Copts as a 'protected
minority’, would never suffice to meet their aspirations. They argued that Copts had to integrate themselves into Egyptian society—to strive for a position of prominence therein, not as members of a protected community, but as individuals. They spoke with pride of the careers of their forbears—such men as Girgis al-Gawharl, Muḥammad ‘Ali’s Finance Secretary—who had, in their view, thrived not as Copts, but as Egyptian citizens, not due to the benevolence of the Patriarch, but due to the meritocracy installed by Muḥammad ‘Ali and his successors (Masri 1978, 500).

Nevertheless, the Coptic Orthodox Church clung to the millet system, under which the Patriarch retained responsibility for administering communal affairs, and for relaying communal concerns to Ottoman officials. The advent of the notion of citizenship was a source of uncertainty and discomfort for the Coptic religious establishment and the community at large, as the control the millet system afforded the Patriarch had long ensured communal security and stability (Seikaly 1970). When Copts throughout the land discovered that their traditional bargain with the state was void—that, though no longer required to pay the jizya, they faced conscription—they bombarded Pope Kirollos IV with requests for intervention, as was customary in such circumstances under the millet arrangement (Meinardus 1970, 19).

Faced with a threat to his power, Kirollos sought to challenge the dismantling of the millet system. From 1854 to 1861, at the peak of the shift from ‘protection’ to ‘integration’, he initiated far-reaching reforms within the church. Property, marriage, birth and death registers were established; book-keeping methods were standardized. Further, the Patriarch revitalized education efforts, both through the ranks of the clergy and within the community at large. He not only founded the Coptic Patriarchal College to train future priests, but required the established clergy of Cairo to return to the Patriarchate for Saturday classes. A new school attached to the Cathedral of Saint Mark trained the Coptic youth of Cairo in Coptic, Arabic, English, French, Italian, calligraphy, history, geography and arithmetic. The institutions were supplied with printed materials by the first private Arabic press in Egypt, which Kirollos had purchased from Austria for church use (Masri 1978, 516-517).

For élite Copts, however, the reforms were insufficient. Their indictment of the church was stinging: they saw the clergy as incompetent, unable to meet the challenges of the modern era. They were disgusted by the fact that most clergy were still drawn from the ranks of the fallāḥīn—by the anachronistic image of peasants ‘working daily barefoot in the fields, opening up on Sundays one room in their house to conduct the ritual of a service which they had learned by heart in a language which they did not understand’ (Heikal 1983, 146). The clergy, deeply offended by the suggestion that they were incapable of sound management, reverted to a defensive position with the death of Kirollos IV. The ambitious schemes of the Patriarch were, for the most part, set aside as they fought élite attempts to wrest control of church finances away from them.7

The Rise of ‘Coptism’

The activism of élite Copts in the nineteenth century set the stage for the rise of ‘Coptism’ in the twentieth. Through the Sunday School Movement, Coptic youth became increasingly aware of their religion’s foundation, their church’s roots, and their community’s heritage. Such knowledge led them to think of themselves, their identity, in a new light. In short, they had rediscovered a glorious past and sought to revive it (Assad 1972). By the 1930s Coptic undergraduates at Fuad I University were gathering
for a Thursday discussion group, as many as fifty at a time. Although originally intended to foster theological exploration, the discussions gradually took on a more activist tenor. One participant has explained, 'We wanted to study the old Church in order to revive the modern Church. The priests weren't preaching, they didn't visit the people, they didn't keep any records' (Wakin 1963, 142). Milad Hanna recounts that priests 'disgusted us with the gold crosses and chains they were able to buy because of their control of the finances and waqfs of the Church' (Pennington 1982, 162).

Swept up in such 'Coptism', young, educated Copts, often professionals, entered the Patriarchal College. Among them was Naṣīr Gayyid—a student of history who had both served as a military officer and contemplated a career in journalism prior to his graduation from the College in 1949. Among his contemporaries, Naṣīr was marked by striking charisma and radical views. Acutely aware of a lack of leadership in communal affairs, he spoke of the need to rally the Coptic community around the Church (Hanna 1996a). With his appointment as Bishop of Education in 1962, Naṣīr—known thenceforth as Shenouda—was afforded a matchless opportunity to mobilize the community at large behind his vision. Each Friday, he delivered a 'lesson' in the Cathedral on such matters as dating, studying, family planning and class relations, issues central to the daily lives of Copts. Coptic youths were particularly drawn to his 'lessons'; Shenouda could attract 10,000 each Friday (Heikal 1983, 160).

The Patriarch of the time, Kirollos VI, was disturbed by the apparent politicization of the Sunday School Movement under Shenouda's stewardship. Although a church reformer himself, Kirollos had nevertheless modeled his interaction with the state on that of his predecessors from the millet era. The Patriarch had developed a 'millet partnership' with President Gamal Abdel Nasser, under which he presented the concerns of the community directly to the President and promoted loyalty to the régime among the Copts. In return, Nasser ensured the security of the community and the status of the Patriarch as the Copts' legitimate representative and spokesperson. The President had not only vested responsibility for the administration of Coptic religious endowments in the Coptic Orthodox Waqfs Organization—a body appointed by the Patriarch—but had dissolved the Lay Council as well, and thus eliminated the perennial threat of elite encroachment on clerical control of church finances (Wakin 1963, 151; Heikal 1983, 157–158). Throughout the 1960s, the Patriarch attacked the remaining vestiges of colonialism in Africa, condemned Lyndon Johnson and American involvement in Vietnam, and voiced his support for the American civil rights movement—all strictly in line with state policy (Fawzî 1993).

Shenouda threatened to lead the church in a direction Kirollos had vowed not to pursue. Whereas Kirollos was an unabashed advocate of the national unity discourse, the activist tenor of Shenouda's lessons hinted at criticism of the régime. Kirollos would join hands with Nasser in laying the cornerstone of the Cathedral of Saint Mark and proudly echo Nasser's declaration, 'Christians and Muslims have always lived as brothers' (Meinardus 1970, 49). Further, in the wake of the 1967 War, Kirollos would send church representatives to Washington, London, Paris, the Vatican and the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, to spread the Arab perspective of the conflict (Fawzî 1993). Given his concern about Shenouda's political tendencies, Kirollos asked the Bishop of Education to withdraw to a monastery at Wādī Naṭrūn. Nevertheless, the public outcry the move spawned, particularly among Coptic youths, forced the Pope to retract the decision (Heikal 1983, 160).

The election of Bishop Shenouda as the 117th Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox
Church in October 1971 marked the end of the ‘millet partnership’. Shenouda refused to pledge his loyalty to the régime—particularly one that declared, ‘the principles of Islamic law constitute a major source for legislation’. In July 1972, the Assembly of Christian Churches in Egypt called for an end to discrimination in personal status cases and government appointments, and for the elimination of restrictions on church construction. That November, an unauthorized church in the Delta village of Khanka was set ablaze; Shenouda sent 100 priests and 400 laymen to pray at the site of the arson. The incident displayed the resolve of the Patriarch and, according to Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, infuriated President Sadat (Heikal 1983, 162–63).

As Sadat revived Islam as political idiom in Egypt—in an effort to destroy the roots of Nasserism in government and among Egyptians—Shenouda insisted upon the preservation of Copts’ rights of citizenship. Through a series of conferences in 1976 and 1977, the Patriarch publicly opposed régime-sponsored religiosity. The conferences demanded government protection of Christians and their property; freedom of belief and worship; an end to the seizure of church property by the Ministry of Waqfs; freedom from harassment to convert to Islam; freedom to disseminate information on Christian beliefs; the abandonment of all efforts to apply Islamic law to non-Muslims; and greater Coptic representation in labor unions, professional associations, local and regional councils, and the People’s Assembly (Samaan & Sukkary 1978, 149).

Vital to Shenouda’s success in his defiance of the state was his mobilization of the Coptic community—the Coptic middle class, in particular—behind him. In 1974, the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services had created a network of Community Development Centers in rural and urban slums throughout the country. The Centers not only organized religious education and literacy programs, but provided women with training in needlework and dressmaking, such that they could augment their families’ incomes. In 1976, the Bishopric had created two centers to provide high-school dropouts with vocational training—in carpentry, plumbing, auto and television repair—and a family planning program. By 1978, a series of language centers had begun to advance the skills of disadvantaged Copts in English (Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical, and Social Services 1987).

The network of social services Shenouda developed enabled middle-class Copts to survive in the midst of a rapid contraction of economic opportunity and of social mobility. The policy of economic liberalization, or infitāḥ, heralded by Sadat in 1974 as vital to a prosperous future for Egypt, had failed to attract foreign capital to the degree the President had expected and only a select class of Egyptians, labeled ‘dollarized Egypt’ by Milâd Hanna, benefited from the capital that entered the country, contractors, land speculators, and private industrialists foremost among them (Hanna 1994, 65–66). In a matter of five years, from 1971 to 1976, the income share of the wealthiest 5% of Egyptians climbed from 22 to 34% (Farah 1986, 30). In contrast, the rural poor, industrial labor and civil service employees—both Copts and Muslims—fared miserably under infitāḥ, ravaged by the rampant inflation the policy spawned. In urban areas, the official rate of inflation averaged 17% per annum between 1974 and 1978; in rural areas, 21% (Farah 1986, 31–32). Strikes afflicted Egypt’s textile plants in March 1975 and August 1976, and Cairo’s public transportation system in September 1976. When the government withdrew subsidies on rice, flour, sugar, and cigarettes in January 1977, the violent response, known as the Revolution of the Hungry, left 79 dead and 800 injured (Ibrahim 1980, 450).

Nadia Ramsis Farah captures the frustration infitāḥ prompted among middle-class Egyptians:
Mechanics and plumbers are riding Mercedes and residing in beautiful and expensive houses, while PhDs are scrambling for an existence, living in slums and trying to keep some kind of dignity while fighting to get on the public bus. The middle class was suddenly faced with the collapse of what they believed in most: the importance of education, upward mobility and a state which put them at the apex of the system as professionals and technocrats during the Nasserist period. (Farah 1986, 34)

As Sa’ad al-Din Ibrahim has recounted, Nasser had promised Egyptians an education, a job and, in turn, a measure of dignity. Sadat could scarcely provide the education and could not provide the job. Middle-class Egyptians turned to kinship networks—for Copts, the Community Development Centres Shenouda had developed—for the reinforcement of their dignity, as the state had failed them. Such were the circumstances under which, in 1980, at the peak of sectarian tensions, Copts chanted, ‘Shenouda is our President’ and ‘We will sacrifice ourselves for you’ (Pennington 1982, 174).

The Mubarak-Shenouda Millet Partnership

Analysis of class dynamics within the Coptic community during the past century reveals a stark reversal of roles. At the turn of the century, elite Copts led the struggle for reform of church and community, and fiercely defended their rights of citizenship within Egyptian society. Currently, middle-class Copts lead that struggle and fiercely defend such rights. Elite Copts have come to reject the language of the persecution discourse—language that resonates for the Coptic middle class. Further, elite Copts have come to endorse a millet partnership between Pope Shenouda and President Mubarak characterized by conservatism and quiescence—a partnership that serves as a barrier to the fulfillment of the aspirations of the Coptic middle class.

As Shenouda languished under house arrest at the Monastery of Saint Bishoy—a punishment imposed by Sadat just prior to his October 1981 assassination—he reconsidered his approach to leadership of the Coptic community. In the words of Milad Hanna, the Patriarch came to the difficult realization that, ‘In the end, he is on the lap of the government’ (Hanna 1996a). The Patriarch looked back to the millet partnership his predecessor, Kirollos, had developed with Nasser, and decided to model his relationship with Egypt’s new leader—Sadat’s Vice-President, Husnî Mubarak—thereon. He would adopt a low profile, cooperate with the régime, embrace the rhetoric of national unity, negotiate with the government behind the scenes, avoid public confrontation at all costs, and consolidate his power within the church.

Within months of his detention, the Patriarch, in the effort to foster this millet partnership with the new President, dispatched Bishops Gregorius and Moussa to the United States—their objective, to convince Copts in the diaspora, enraged by their Patriarch’s lack of freedom, to greet Mubarak with prayers, not demonstrations, upon the President’s first visit to America. In his 24 January 1982 message, Shenouda explained, ‘President Mubarak has come to power at a difficult and complex time,’ and insisted, ‘We all pray for him continuously from the depths of our hearts, for the Lord to help him, to give him the power to lead the country to peace, stability, and the fulfillment of national ambitions’ (Sâdiq 1996).

According to Milad Hanna, since his release from house arrest in January 1985, ‘Shenouda has kept the Copts in his pocket, and Mubarak has kept Shenouda in his pocket.’ Under the millet partnership, Mubarak furnishes the Patriarch with re-
sources—among them, church construction permits—which Shenouda then distributes among dioceses according to the loyalties of their bishops. Shenouda is dependent upon Mubarak, the church hierarchy is dependent upon Shenouda, and the Coptic community is dependent upon the hierarchy for social services and political leadership (Hanna 1996a). This partnership denies Coptic laymen a role in both communal and national affairs, and has thus driven a wedge between clergy and laity. Although such a wedge has existed since the struggles over church finances of the nineteenth century, there is an important difference between the current struggle and that of years past. The laity the nineteenth-century clergy alienated differs starkly in social origins from the laity Shenouda has alienated. Middle-class Copts have embraced the aggressive stance élite Copts developed and advocated through the turn of the century.

The Coptic élite has traded political aspirations for success in business, argue middle-class Copts, as agitation for rights and success in business are incompatible. Coptic journalist Magid ‘Atiya points to his failure to gather 750,000 Egyptian pounds from élite Copts for the development of a newspaper page devoted to discussion of Coptic participation in political affairs. With much bitterness, ‘Atiya recalls that one Coptic entrepreneur, ‘worth 200 to 300 million Egyptian pounds’, offered him but one 100-pound note in a meeting about the project. Notably, the Patriarch himself vigorously opposed the project (‘Atiya 1996). Milad Hanna has requested the support of the élite for a non-governmental organization designed to promote research on the Coptic community, but the idea generates little enthusiasm (Hanna 1996b). Mona Makram Ebeid, of the prominent Ebeid family, recalls the élite resistance she faced as she entered politics: ‘Copts do not enter politics, but remain on the sidelines,’ she was told (Ebeid 1996).

In contrast, the political awareness and aspirations of middle-class Copts were vastly broadened by Shenouda in the sectarian fervor of the Sadat era. The Patriarch rallied the Coptic middle class behind him during the 1970s, and relied upon middle-class support in his confrontation with Sadat. Of late, however, that middle class has come to the conclusion that Shenouda, in developing a millet partnership with Mubarak, has abandoned the struggle for their rights of citizenship. Further, the Patriarch’s iron grip over church affairs has prevented the Coptic middle class—the Copts Shenouda himself galvanized in his Friday lessons and propelled into church participation—from reforming the religious organizations at the center of their lives, in accordance with their shifting needs.

**Struggle for Control of the Church**

The Coptic Orthodox Lay Council is the principal official means by which the laity can influence clerical decisions in church administrative matters; Council committees address such issues as the religious endowments, legal affairs, and construction (Galeb 1996). However, the by-laws of the Lay Council, issued in 1883, prescribe strict voter eligibility requirements. Copts seeking to vote in Council elections must possess a secondary school certificate and land, or a business, or a civil service position with a salary of 120 Egyptian pounds. Only 1200 Copts registered to vote in the 1990 Council elections, 750 of whom in fact voted; 4000 registered to vote in the 1995 elections, and under 3000 in fact voted (Shaftiq 1996). The interference of church officials in the latter elections was manifest. The Bishops of the Dioceses of Banha and Qisna issued lists of the candidates purportedly sanctioned for election by the church. Although Shenouda disavowed all knowledge of such lists, one was published in the newspaper, Watani, five
days prior to the elections. Superimposed on the list was photograph of the Patriarch. Further, on election day, priests gathered in front of the Shubra and Heliopolis polling stations in Cairo—stations in which 3300 of the 4000 Copts registered to vote were expected to cast their ballots—and distributed revised editions of that list. They reportedly threatened voters with excommunication if they failed to vote as the church wished. All 24 candidates specified on the list were elected to Council posts. The conduct of the elections prompted church public relations chief, Ṭal'at Gadallah, to resign in protest (Shaflq 1996).

Allegations of corruption in the church, emanating from middle-class Copts, have reached fever pitch in recent years. ‘Āṭiya contends that bishops have employed three secretaries at a time, and questions the motives behind the Patriarch’s assumption of responsibility for the affairs and revenues of seventeen Cairo churches—revenues that amount to one million Egyptian pounds each month (‘Āṭiya 1996). Perhaps the most damning allegation was that launched against the Patriarch in 1994 by members of the Mari Morcos Opposition Front, an association of disgruntled laymen. The Front questioned the appointment of 'Adil Ruflayl Gayyid, nephew of the Patriarch, as General Manager of the Cathedral and Patriarchate Chief of Staff. Shenouda was accused of seeking, through his nephew, to misappropriate church funds (Shafiq 1996).

Although Shenouda endures the accusations of laymen, he refuses to accept criticism of his administration from within the church. In 1994, the Patriarch excommunicated Father Aghāthon of Old Cairo, reportedly due to differences between the two men on the conduct and financing of church renovations. When Shenouda ventured to lead Abū Sayfayn Day services in Old Cairo in Aghāthon’s absence, he soon found himself in the midst of a brawl and was forced to leave the church through a back door. Later, at a meeting in the Cathedral, Shenouda was confronted with placards bearing the slogans, ‘The People of Old Cairo Request the Return of Father Aghāthon’ and ‘Aghāthon is Loved by Widows and Orphans’ (Shaflq 1996). Father Aghāthon himself explained in a 4 August 1994 interview with Western journalists, ‘The crisis in the Coptic Church lies in the character of the Pope. He is a human, he is liable to make mistakes and when we point out these mistakes, he regards it as treachery’ (Reuters). Father Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Sayyid of Ma’ādī expanded on the point: ‘The Pope is acting like a pharaoh who has absolute rule over the people. He does not consult anyone before making his decisions. We are experiencing a return to the darkness of the Middle Ages’ (Reuters). The ‘darkness of the Middle Ages’ to which Father Ibrāhīm refers is the millet partnership between Patriarch and President, currently embraced by Shenouda.

Struggle for Control of the Community

Through the millet partnership, Shenouda has sought to consolidate not merely his position as head of the church, but also his position as head of the community. His voice is cast by church and state as the only legitimate voice of the Coptic community in political affairs. Given the Mubārak–Shenouda partnership and the authoritarian structure of government bequeathed by Nasser and Sadat, there exists no secular leadership of the Coptic community untainted by complicity with the government—no independent voice willing and able to voice Copts’ grievances. In all People’s Assembly sessions since 1964, the number of Coptic members of the Assembly appointed by the President has, with one exception, exceeded the number of Coptic members elected by
the people.\textsuperscript{12} Hence, most Coptic Assembly members have remained beholden to the
government for their presence in the Assembly.\textsuperscript{13}

Coptic appointees—whether to the cabinet, the Assembly, or the Shūra Council—are
scarcely the most militant members of the community. Aida Nussair described her
mission as a member of the Shura Council in 1996: ‘When you are doing something
you believe in, you never think of being a Copt or Muslim. You are an Egyptian. We
are Egyptians. We all live under the same sky, under the same conditions’ (Nussair
1996). Such appointees consistently attribute the poor representation of Copts in
government to the community’s ‘negative attitude’ or ‘apathy’ in political matters.
According to Angèle Boutros Samaan, a Coptic appointee to the Assembly, ‘We must
show that we serve Egypt, that we are not strangers, not foreigners, not always trying
to leave the country’ (Samaan 1996). In that vein, Coptic appointee Yousriya Loza
Sawirous has explained to Western journalists: ‘Why have we become weak? I person-
ally feel we have made ourselves a second-class community. Most of our young men
have gone abroad’ (Reuters).

The absence of vigorous communal leadership has motivated Copts in the diaspora
to struggle for their Egyptian co-religionists’ rights of citizenship.\textsuperscript{14} In contrast to
Shenouda, Shawky Karas refuses to forsake public confrontation as a tool to exert
pressure on the régime. Karas founded the American Coptic Association in 1972, upon
his return to the United States from a journey through his native Egypt. He had
witnessed the sectarian strife that had plagued Khanka that year and, inspired by the
determination of the activist Patriarch, committed himself to the struggle for Coptic
rights. Since the Patriarch’s abandonment of activism, the Association has played the
foremost role in raising awareness of the plight of Egyptian Christians, principally
through a magazine entitled \textit{The Copts}. The magazine, 15,000 copies of which are
regularly distributed to heads of state, ambassadors, journalists, and human rights
activists, has particularly intensified the persecution discourse. Printed in capital letters
throughout issues of \textit{The Copts} is the claim, ‘The objective of the Muslim Arab
countries is to crush the Christians socially, politically, and educationally; or convert
them by force to Islam.’ Each edition is replete with strikingly alarmist articles under
the headings, ‘A recent conspiracy to annihilate the Copts in Egypt’, ‘The collaboration
Between the Muslim Fundamentalists and Communists against Western civilization’,
‘Documents of the Christian Holocaust in the Middle East carried out by the Muslim
Arabs’, and ‘The parallelism between the Nazi scheme against the Jews and that of the
Egyptian Government against the Christian Egyptians’ (\textit{The Copts} 1974, 1985, 1986,
1996).

Karas argues that Association’s efforts led to the January 1985 release of Pope
Shenouda. From 1982 to 1984, diaspora Copts had successfully convinced the Con-
gressional Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations, the Na-
tional Council of Churches and former President Jimmy Carter to demand Shenouda’s
release through letters to President Mubarak. Further, the Association had purchased
$35,000 in newspaper advertisements to rally American public opinion behind the
cause. Since then, the activism of the Association has scarcely waned. Karas maintains
that, in recent years, he has convinced German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, former
American Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Vice-President Al Gore to raise
the issue of Copts’ rights in meetings with Mubarak. In a recent letter to Congress and
President Clinton, the Association asked, ‘Is the blood of the Copts in Egypt cheaper
than the blood of the Muslims in Bosnia?’ (Salama 1996).

Elite Copts have condemned such rhetoric of persecution. They view Karas as a
foreigner, and his activism as foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs—anathema to the advocates of the national unity discourse. Youssef Sidhom, Editor-in-Chief of *Watani*, has warned Coptic activists in the diaspora, 'You will always represent your foreign Coptic concerns; we will never endorse you as representatives of our concerns. We will put our local Coptic problems on the Egyptian table' (Sidhom 1996). Elite Copts hold that the extremism of diaspora Copts only serves to damage the credibility of Copts' legitimate claim to rights of citizenship. In the words of prominent geologist Rushdie Sayyid, the activism of diaspora Copts 'is harmful to the Copts in Egypt, because it makes the people of Egypt think of us as disloyal' (Salama 1996). Sensationalism, not fact, has enabled Karas to secure the attention of the international community, claim the élite critics, for the diaspora activists do not live in Egypt and, thus, cannot understand the plight of Copts resident in Egypt. Further, they cannot accurately describe that plight before the world—particularly given that diaspora Copts often left Egypt due to bitter encounters with discrimination, the memories of which lead them to segregate themselves from Muslim Egyptians abroad.15

Middle-class Copts approach élite criticism of Karas with skepticism. Perhaps Karas cannot claim to understand the plight of Copts resident in Egypt, they argue, but can the élite claim to possess a superior understanding of that plight? In a 1996 interview, a prominent Copt with middle-class roots, resident in Egypt, confessed, 'There is an unwritten agreement between the two sides of the Atlantic. We are playing our role here perfectly. They are playing their role there perfectly. We do not communicate.' The activism of the diaspora Copts is justified, according to this source, by their aim of ensuring 'continuity of life for the Copts in Egypt, preventing Egypt from falling into the hands of the fundamentalists'.16

The Spread of the Persecution Discourse

In the mid-1980s, dialogue about the role of Coptic Christians in modern Egyptian politics at last emerged within Egyptian borders. Opposition parties, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to the New Wafd to the left-wing Tagammu', were vigorously contesting People's Assembly elections; their newspapers were offering Egyptians an opportunity to debate issues as never before. In that relatively liberal atmosphere, 80 Egyptians came together to establish the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. EOHR was to foster respect among Egyptians for the principles enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Further, at the time, Egyptian intellectuals—among them, William Soliman Kelada, Tāriq al-Bishrī, Muṣṭafā al-Fiqī, and Abū Seif Youssef—began to explore notions of citizenship and potential strategies to reinforce rights of citizenship in their writings (Kelada 1996).

Elite Copts ranked among the eighty founders of EOHR in 1985. With time, however, the élite has grown estranged from the human rights movement. That movement, under the influence of activists drawn principally from the middle class, has embraced the persecution discourse, whereas élite Copts have committed themselves to the national unity discourse. In September 1992, an EOHR report pointed to Islamist 'extermination' efforts; the next March, the Organization charged the Mubārak régime with 'abdicating its responsibility to protect Christians in the face of attacks by members of radical Islamist groups' (Cofsky 1993; Sherry 1993).

The Coptic élite has rejected such rhetoric and endorsed the moderate dialogue on citizenship fostered by Kelada and al-Bishrī. Mona Makram Ebeid argues that, although the Organization once focused on broad democratic reform, EOHR has since
developed into a distinctly political instrument. Human rights ‘entrepreneurs’ have radicalized the movement in their quest for support from the international donor community (Ebeid 1996). EOHR has grown dependent on funds from Human Rights Watch, from the Netherlands, and from the Scandinavian countries—facts which have prompted accusations of foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs. As Mlād Hanna insists, ‘We do not want to be played with by foreign forces’ (Hanna 1996b).

Hanna was instrumental in the establishment of the Center of Egyptian Human Rights for the Consolidation of National Unity—an effort to ‘Egyptianize’ the human rights movement, to harmonize the principles of human rights and the national unity discourse. Nevertheless, under the stewardship of Coptic lawyer Maurice Sādiq, the Center has developed into a vigorous advocate of the persecution discourse as well, referring to the Copts as a minority and pointing to tacit government support for Islamist attacks on Copts (Deutsche Presse-Agentur).

The ideological polarization of the Coptic community came to the forefront of Egyptian political debate in April 1994. As the Ibn Khaldūn Center for Development Studies prepared to mount the Conference on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities and Peoples of the Arab World and the Middle East from 12 to 15 May in Cairo, a Conference agenda item was brought to the attention of Muhammad Has-sanein Heikal, former Editor-in-Chief of Al-Ahrām and adviser to Egyptian leaders. Among the ‘minorities’ Conference participants were to discuss was the Coptic Christian community. Heikal wrote a fierce attack on the Conference, published in Al-Ahrām on 22 April 1994 under the title, ‘Citizens or Protected Minority’. In the spirit of the national unity discourse, Heikal declared the Copts ‘part of Egypt’s unbreakable fabric’. He pointed to the collaboration of the Ibn Khaldūn Center with the British Minority Rights Group and to European Union funding for the Conference as indications of foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs, and offered the ominous warning, ‘Intervention begins with the dictating of political conditions. It ends with military interventions’ (al-Gawhary 1996, 21).

That month, through the press, nearly 300 Egyptian intellectuals entered the uproar, then judged by Sa‘ad al-Dīn Ibrāhīm as the greatest in the Arab world since the Gulf Crisis. Coptic champions of the national unity discourse, William Soliman Kelada foremost among them, vehemently denounced the Conference: ‘The Copts are not a minority. They are one of the components of the Egyptian community.’ According to Kelada, the Copts, as a community, are unique, and do not face the predicament the Kurds, the southern Sudanese, or the Berbers face (Kelada 1996).

Although the government never forbade the scheduling of Conference sessions on Egyptian soil, statements from Mustafā Kamāl Hilmī, head of the Shūra Council, revealed that the state scarcely approved of the sessions. The Ibn Khaldūn Center shifted the Conference venue from Cairo to Limassol, Cyprus, and resolved to replace the term ‘minority’ with that of ‘sect’ in Conference materials. Ultimately, a meager fifteen Egyptians attended the Conference, most of whom were Center researchers and activist diaspora Copts. Center researcher Soliman Shaﬁq declared, ‘It seems that intellectual terrorism is much more powerful than armed terrorism’ (Shaﬁq 1996).

A Radical ‘Coptist’ Movement?

The frustration the Conference episode spawned caused the influence of the persecution discourse to mount. Since that time, rampant, often brutal sectarian violence in Upper Egypt and a government National Democratic Party refusal to nominate
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Coptic candidates in People’s Assembly elections have only lent further credence to the persecution discourse in Copts’ eyes.17 Revealingly, Watani, a staunch, long-standing advocate of the national unity discourse, recently declared after a spate of sectarian violence, ‘The reaction of official departments to this disaster—traditional slogans about national unity and strength of ties between the nation’s two groups—is nauseating’ (Deutsche Presse-Agentur).

Shenouda has discovered that he cannot reverse the political mobilization of the Coptic middle class. Middle-class Copts have come to expect a role in church, community and national affairs—a role denied them by the hegemonic control of political life Shenouda and, ultimately, Mubarak maintain through their millet partnership. If Shenouda continues to prevent middle-class participation in such affairs, the Coptic community may face the predicament all Arab states have faced during the past half-century—the radicalization of the excluded, the emergence of not an Islamist, but a ‘Coptist’, resistance and, worst of all, the hardening of the sectarian divide. Analysts of ‘symbolic politics’ in Egypt can scarcely afford to neglect this question further, for ‘symbol’, in the case of the Copts, has become substance—the ‘victim’ has become an actor.

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NOTES

1. The size of the Coptic Christian population of Egypt is a persistent source of debate. In 1996, the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo put the figure at five million—four times the number of Christians in Lebanon, twice the number in the Sudan. For discussion of the demographic issues, refer to Ibrahim et al., 1996; Chitham 1986; and Betts 1978.
2. Among the exceptions to the rule are Farah 1986; el-Khawaga 1993; and Shafiq 1996.
3. Although widely confirmed anecdotally, there exists little current statistical evidence to demonstrate this point, given the obstacles to research in the field. For the little data that exist, refer to Farah 1986 and Shafiq 1996.
4. Zeidan 1999, the most recent contribution to the sparse scholarship on the political role of the Copts, is a case in point. The article offers a lengthy analysis of ‘Coptic perceptions’ of sectarian conflict in Egypt, yet rarely differentiates such perceptions as to social strata. Zeidan refers to ‘the Copts’ as a unit of analysis throughout the article, and thus fails to speak to the complexity of individual Copts’ identities, to the existence of multiple Coptic communities with distinctive interests.
5. The ensuing discussion of the ‘national unity’ and ‘persecution’ discourses is intended only to sketch current trends of thought. One must keep in mind that such trends are fluid, and that most Copts find elements of both discourses convincing.
6. For details of the emergence of this élite, refer to Baer 1962; el-Masri 1978; Meinardus 1970; and Seilaly 1970.
7. For details of the lengthy struggle that ensued, refer to Seikal 1970; Tamura 1985; and Carter 1986.
8. For further biographical details, refer to Heikal 1983 and Shenouda III 1990.
9. The People’s Assembly approved a new constitution with such language in 1971.
10. Sadat’s strategy is described at length in Kepel 1993 and Farah 1986.
12. The exception was the 1987–90 session. Six Copts, an unprecedented number, were elected to the Assembly in 1987. However, the system of proportional representation instituted in 1983 then in place was scrapped by the government shortly thereafter.
13. Critics of the millet partnership argue that the Patriarch wields significant influence in the appointments of Copts to the cabinet and the Assembly. According to Shafiq 1996, election to the Lay Council is a stepping-stone to government appointments. Kamal Ramzi Estino, Albert Barsoon Salama, and William Neguib Sefein all served on the Council prior to or during their tenures as cabinet ministers.


16. Name withheld upon request.

17. For details of the violence and elections, refer to Shafiq 1996 and Ibrahim et al. 1996.

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