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The Copts and the Egyptian State: The Economic and Political Marginalization of the Coptic Christians of Egypt from Muhammad Ali to the Present

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In looking for a research project, Samantha Leveugle wanted to find something she was passionate about. Having been involved in her church community and studied the Middle East as part of her International Studies major, she was drawn to the debate on the persecution of the Christians in Egypt. She was particularly appreciative of the opportunities it gave her to work closely with her mentor and the unique insights he had to offer throughout the research process. After graduation, Samantha plans to continue her education, pursuing a Master's degree in Theology.

Abstract

Western media has reported a recent increase in sectarian violence between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt. Emphasis is often given to the injustice of these violent acts while the causes of sectarian divide are rarely discussed, but understanding these causes is important in addressing the sectarian divide. In this essay, I answer two questions: first, what has the role and place of the Copts been in the fabric of Egyptian society for the past 200 years? Second, what policies have contributed to the economic and political marginalization of the Copts? To answer these questions, I look at the history of the Copts from the Muhammad Ali dynasty to the thirty-year reign of Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt. A review of these major events has shown that the economic policies and political ideologies pursued under the reign of Muhammad Ali greatly benefited the Coptic Christians, who became national economic and political leaders in Egypt until the 1952 Free Officers Revolution. After the revolution, the Nasser administration pursued policies that kept the Coptic community from fully participating in Egyptian national life. Such marginalization was maintained by the policies enacted by Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, upon which the Copts became dependent for the guarantee of their rights as citizens of Egypt and for the protection of the community from persecution.

Faculty Mentor



Samantha Leveugle's essay is an important attempt to uncover the deeper historical roots of one of the most telling and in hindsight foreboding moments of the Arab Uprisings: the murder of two dozen Coptic Christian Egyptians by the military in October, 2011. Leveugle understood that whatever the immediate causes of the massacre, the reasons underlying not just the killings but how they proceeded, were defended and justified by the government, and accepted by the mass of Egyptians, can only be determined by looking at the formative period for post-independence rule in Egypt. Her research reminds even those who are familiar with Egypt's history that the nuances of state-society interactions remain quite important to study, and often lead to (re)discovering important facts about the past that help us better piece together the present.

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Key Terms

- ◆ Coptic Christians
- ◆ Khedive
- ◆ Marginalization
- ◆ Pan Arabism
- ◆ Pan Islamism
- ◆ Wafd

Introduction

On January 1, 2011, one of the worst sectarian clashes between Muslim and Coptic Christians in recent years occurred in the port city of Alexandria. Twenty-one people died and 96 were wounded as a result of a blast that occurred outside of Saints Church as the faithful were exiting from Mass. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, which monitors sectarian violence in Egypt, recognized this event as the culmination of increasing sectarian violence in recent times. The clash drew significant international attention and was swiftly denounced by a number of international human rights organizations and state leaders, including President Barack Obama, who called the attack “barbaric and heinous” (New York Times). This event, which shocked the Western world, was followed with numerous media reports on the gravity of sectarian violence between the Coptic Christian minority and the Muslim majority in Egypt.

As a result of these reports, Westerners have become familiar with headlines such as “Coptic Christian latest target of blasphemy frenzy under Islamist-ruled Egypt” (Washington Post), whose diction leads readers to imagine an Egypt where there exists a ruthless persecution of the Copts under the constant threat of political Islam. Such rhetoric strikes a chord with Westerners, who find these headlines’ claims to be supported by governmental and non-governmental organizations’ reports on the status of sectarian violence in Egypt. For example, in April 2013, Human Rights Watch published a press release in which they stated that “For years people have been getting away with sectarian murder... [President Mohamed Morsy] should reform laws that discriminate against Christians’ right to worship.” This statement supports the media reports in painting the picture of an Egypt where Coptic Christian minorities are unfairly being denied religious freedoms and are defenseless in the face of increasing violence against them.

While it is undeniable that Egyptian Copts and their Muslim compatriots are increasingly clashing, the persecution rhetoric that is observable in Western media seems to focus on and amplify the extent of religious violence in Egypt while failing to analyze the processes that led to the current marginalization of the Coptic Christians. However, it is by recognizing and analyzing the ways in which the Coptic community was ostracized from Egyptian national life that we can understand where the sectarian divide was created, thus getting a more accurate view of their current situation in Egyptian society. A better understanding of their place in Egyptian society can help us to find a common ground between the Copts and the rest of Egyptian society where

concerns from both parties can peacefully be addressed and harmony between the two camps can be restored. Throughout this essay, I answer two questions: first, what has the role and place of the Copts been in the fabric of Egyptian society for the past 200 years? Second, which policies have contributed to the economic and political marginalization of the Copts? In order to answer these questions, I look at the history of the Copts from the Muhammad Ali dynasty to the thirty-year reign of Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt. A review of these major events shows that the economic policies and political ideologies pursued under the reign of Muhammad Ali greatly benefited the Coptic Christians, who became national economic and political leaders in Egypt until the 1952 Free Officers Revolution. The economic and political policies undertaken by the Nasser regime following the 1952 revolution ostracized the Coptic community from national life. Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak continued the cycle of marginalization of the Copts during their presidencies, and often caught the Copts in the middle of their political debacles. With no voice of their own, the Copts became entirely dependent on the presidents of Egypt for the guarantee of their rights as Egyptian citizens and for the protection of their community from sectarian violence.

The Coptic Christians of Egypt: An Overview

In order to get a full understanding of the role and the place of the Coptic Christians in Egypt, it is important to look at who they are historically and demographically. St. Mark the Evangelist is said to have brought Christianity to Egypt, particularly to Alexandria, between 43 AD and 48 AD (Cannuyer 16), which makes the Coptic Church one of the oldest churches in the Christian world. Christianity remained in the Greek elite circles of Alexandria until the reign of Patriarch Dionysius in 248 AD, during which a policy of evangelizing the native people in their native tongue was undertaken (Hasan 25). That expansion of Christianity in Egypt coincided with the beginning of a “wave of empire-wide Christian persecution in 249 AD, under the newly instated Roman emperor Decius” (Hasan 25), which continued and intensified under emperor Diocletan. The suffering and martyrdom experienced in the early church marks the humble beginnings of the Coptic Community in Egypt. The era of Roman persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletan, which is now known as the Era of the Martyrs, was such a defining time for the Coptic Church that they began their calendar with the year 284 AD, the year that Diocletan took control of the Roman Empire (Hasan 25). The Era of the Martyrs has profoundly affected

“Coptic spirituality and identity [which is] imbued with the memory of the men and women who died for their faith in the ancient world” (Cannuyer 26). These painful and memorable beginnings remain significant for the Church today, and they play a role in the way that the Church has come deal with the modern persecution and marginalization of their community. The history of the community is closely tied to their current situation.

After decades of persecution under Roman rule, the Copts grew to make up a large percentage of Egyptian society, and its influence over the country and the rest of the Christian world was noteworthy. In 313 AD, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which allowed the Copts to worship freely and Christianity to flourish in Egypt. The influence of the Church of Egypt upon the rest of Christianity was such that Bishop Alexander of Alexandria presided over the Council of Nicea, which established the Church’s beliefs on the consubstantiality of Christ with God and produced the Nicene Creed (Cannuyer 31). The Egyptian Church continued to be involved in the great Christian theological debates that took place throughout the fourth and the fifth centuries. It held a certain influence over Egypt and the rest of the Christian world that remains unrepeated in their history. That influence would end with the Great Schism between the Egyptian Church and the rest of Christianity over the question of the nature of Christ in the fifth century (Hasan 28–29). The Great Schism isolated the Church to Egypt and reduced its authority significantly. In 641, Egypt was conquered and became a part of the Islamic empire, after which it took roughly 200 years of conversions for the Copts to become a minority in Egypt (Purcell 434). The Church lost its authority over Egyptian society after the Islamic conquests; nonetheless, the influence and the size of the Coptic Church at the time attests to the importance that Christianity bears on Egyptian history, and to the deep roots and ties that the Coptic Christians have with Egypt itself.

Today, Copts comprise 6–10% of the Egyptian population and they are the largest Christian minority in the Middle East. Although Copts are known to live mostly in southern Egypt, there are dense communities of Copts in the Upper Egyptian cities of Assyut, Sohag, and Minya (Zeidan 54). Copts are not easily distinguishable from their Muslim counterparts, aside from visible religious symbols, as they both speak Arabic and have Egyptian and Arabic ancestry. Copts are part of all socio-economic levels, although they tend to be better educated and thus are well represented in the Egyptian upper class. They are also well known in the lower classes; for example, the majority of Cairo’s garbage

collectors, the *zabaleen*, are Copts. Copts are thoroughly present and interwoven into the fabric of Egypt’s society. They are a part of the Egyptian nation. Copts have lived side by side with their Muslim counterparts for more than 1,300 years and have come into great contact with that community, having converted and inter-married into it. They consider themselves entirely Egyptian, and are often vocal about their Egyptian heritage and the integral role they play in Egyptian society. As a result, they deny the title of minority that is often given to them. As Pope Shenouda III said, “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” (Sedra 219). Although the Coptic Church dislikes the label of “minority,” various economic and political ideologies and policies over the years have come to marginalize their economic status and political participation, and have come to place them at the center of a power struggle between the state and other political factions, thus setting them apart from the rest of the Egyptian nation.

The Prosperity of the Copts under the Khedive (1806–1882)

The Copts had lived in a *dhimmi*, a grouping of non-Muslims protected under Islamic law in the Ottoman Empire, since the sixteenth century. The French invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century challenged Ottoman rule and left a power vacuum in Egypt. The Ottoman sultan sent Muhammad Ali in 1806 with troops from the Caucasus to reclaim authority over Egypt. He was successful in reclaiming that authority; however, Muhammad Ali sought to establish his own authority over Egypt, independent of Ottoman control. In 1811, he declared himself sole ruler of Egypt and began to alter Egyptian history in such a way that he would become known as the father of the modern Egyptian state.

In order to establish his dynasty and set it apart from the rest of the Ottoman Empire, Muhammad Ali focused on the modernization and centralization of the Egyptian state. His primary focus was the military, which he believed needed to be Europeanized in order to defend Egypt effectively from European and Ottoman threats. To fund the military and the bureaucracy needed for the centralization of the state, Muhammad Ali ordered a reform of the ineffective and complicated Mamluk tax system and improvement of agriculture in Egypt. An effective tax system and efficient agricultural production would create enough revenues to fund the military and the growing bureaucracy. Land surveyors, financiers, and tax collectors were needed to carry out this effort, and “...Muhammad Ali sought out talent,

regardless of religious persuasion, for his administration...” (Hasan 33) His indifference to religious background in terms of civil service helped the Copts challenge the restrictions of *dhimmi* status and gave them an equal opportunity to participate in government. They took advantage of this opportunity and came to be of great service to Ali’s administration as they were specialists in the disciplines that were essential to the development of the modern Egyptian state.

Copts had skills that were unlike those of Egyptian Muslims due to the unique Coptic education they received as children. They were taught:

...the basic knowledge of reading, writing, geometry and mathematics. The latter two were felt to be particularly important...the proportion of fields and harvests that would be lost to the Nile’s annual flood could be calculated using basic geometry and mathematics coupled with the knowledge imparted to young Coptic boys from their fathers. (Ibrahim 18–19)

The father-son education that had been handed down for centuries gave the Copts expertise in the fields of land surveying, which was necessary in the reform of agricultural production in Egypt. It also made them experts in tax collection, as they had a tax recording system that was “...considerably different from those of the Muslims in terms of style and content” (Ibrahim 19). By being able to meet the needs of the administration with their expertise in land surveying, accounting and tax collection, the Copts found a niche in Ali’s new government that allowed them to thrive. They quickly grew to represent 45% of all civil servants in Egypt (Zeidan 56). The fact that they represented nearly half of all civil servants while comprising less than 10% of the population is remarkable. That attests to the critical role the Copts played in the development not only of Muhammad Ali’s state, but also the modern Egyptian state. Their service greatly benefited their community, as the Copts grew considerably in wealth over the rest of the nineteenth century. As Paul Sedra mentioned,

By mid-century, an elite of titled, land-owning Copts had emerged in Egypt—descendants of administrators, merchants, and advisers who had served under Muhammad Ali and reaped the rewards of the economic and social upheaval he had engineered. (223)

They grew to hold 25% of Egypt’s wealth by the end of the nineteenth century (Zeidan 56), which was disproportionate to the small section of the population that they represented.

The formation of the Coptic landed elite under Muhammad Ali granted them significant economic power in Egypt.

Muhammad Ali also granted them a greater role in Egyptian national politics, which increased their political power. For the first time in Egyptian history, Copts were appointed as provincial governors, a position that was regarded as a high level of political office. His trust of the Copts was such that “...Basilious Ghali...chief of the Coptic guild responsible for the collection of taxes throughout the country...co-operated closely with Muhammad Ali and was thereafter considered to be his right-hand man” (Ibrahim 19). The Copts were not only civil servants, but they played a critical role as the political elite of Egypt, thus making them represented in all levels of government. Therefore, the Copts gathered significant political influence over the Egyptian state, which, coupled with their exponential growth in wealth, placed them in the midst of Egyptian national life.

Muhammad Ali’s successor, Khedive Said, continued to grant the Copts greater freedoms and opportunities as he removed the restrictions that were imposed by their *dhimmi* status. In 1855, he repealed the *jizya* tax that was compulsory for non-Muslims and, in 1856, he granted them the right to serve in the military. Although the Coptic Patriarch demanded that the freedom to serve in the military be rescinded, the Copts continued to play a significant role in Egyptian society as civil servants and as part of the land-owning elite. That influence gave them a voice to demand more rights for the Coptic community. They began to demand:

...equality in appointments to and promotions within the civil service, the appointment of more Copts to Egypt’s representative bodies, Sunday as the day of rest for Christians, and Bible instruction to match Muslim religious instruction in public schools. (Hasan 34)

While the khedivate did not meet these demands, the fact that the Copts, as individual citizens aside from the leadership of the Patriarch, demanded complete equality with their Muslim compatriots in all aspects of Egyptian society attests to the unprecedented freedoms and status they experienced under khedive rule in nineteenth century Egyptian society.

The British Protectorate and the Copts' Involvement in the Nationalist Movement

In 1882, the British crushed a revolution against the khedive that threatened their access to the Suez Canal. They became involved in the affairs of the khedivate to maintain the stability of the state, which was critical for the protection of their trade routes to India. Their involvement was such that they could not leave Egypt without re-establishing a bureaucracy that could run the affairs of the state after their departure. As such, the British undertook reforms of the bureaucracy and finances of the state, which was bankrupt as a result of unpaid debts incurred during the construction of the Suez Canal. Since the Copts were such a large part of the bureaucracy and the managing of the state's finances, they participated in these reforms.

While, it was expected that the British would grant favor to the Copts due to their common religious affiliation, the British relied on the Copts solely due to their advanced education. In fact, the British looked down upon Coptic Christianity, which they thought "...lacked 'the true and spiritual part of Christianity,' and therefore bore no resemblance to European Christianity" (Carter 58). It was the Copts' advanced education in missionary schools and secondary schools that made them favored candidates for the British bureaucracy. Copts:

...made up approximately 7 per cent of the population at the turn of the twentieth century, [and] they produced 21 per cent of the law graduates; 19 per cent of graduates from the school of engineering; 15 per cent of graduates from the medical school...and 12 per cent of the teaching graduates. (Ibrahim 44–45)

They were proportionately more educated than the rest of Egyptians, giving them skills that were useful for the British. They continued to participate in the affairs of the state, and thus were not marginalized under British occupation. Indeed, the Egyptian prime minister appointed in 1908 was Boutros Ghali, a Copt. Copts steadily held nearly 50% of all civil service positions and were represented in all government ministries (Ibrahim 45). Although they were at the height of their involvement in Egyptian national life, they grew increasingly dissatisfied with the British, whom they felt were discriminating against them by not granting them seniority and more elevated positions in the Egyptian government. They felt that their demands were being ignored by their fellow Christians in favor of Muslim demands (Carter 59), and they grew increasingly resentful. Copts, in

Egypt and abroad, led "the engagement of the press and the proliferation of pamphlets, books and public meetings in both Egypt and Britain [which] meant that...the 'Coptic Question'...became public domain" (Ibrahim 48). The Copts not only took action on their dissatisfaction with the British occupation through the media, but also politically through their involvement in Egypt's rising nationalist movement.

In 1919, Saad Zaghlul, the leader of the *Wafd*, Egypt's nationalist political party, invited three Copts to join the *Wafd's* nationalist efforts. Sinut Hanna, George Khayyat and Wasif Ghali, the son of Prime Minister Boutros Ghali (who was assassinated in 1910), were all from the wealthy landowning Coptic elite, and they were all highly educated and involved in national politics. Their involvement in the *Wafd* was not only financially and politically beneficial to the movement, but also allowed for the party to create a national unity rhetoric which defined the nationalist movement as being about Egypt for Egyptians, not about religious divides. All Egyptians were to come together as a united front against the British invader. That rhetoric led to one of the greatest demonstrations of unity between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, one that strongly remains in the collective memory of Egyptians, where "priests and sheikhs visited one another and attended each other's religious services" (Carter 62). In sight of that unity, Copts' involvement in the revolution "...was highly visible and substantial, and Copts were involved in all its facets: demonstrations, strikes, propaganda terrorism, organization and policymaking" (Carter 62). They staunchly defended the nationalist movement, not only by their involvement in the *Wafd* leadership but also as individual Egyptian citizens. For example, they were quick to condemn the appointment of Yusuf Wahbah, a Copt, as prime minister for fear of not being seen as supportive of the nationalist movement (Carter 68). The nationalist movement was important to the Copts who saw its secular liberal agenda as the opportunity for them to be granted equality (Zeidan 56). As such, their efforts were important for their future as a minority in Egypt.

The movement was successful; in 1922, Britain declared Egypt's independence, although they continued to have a hand in Egyptian affairs by setting aside certain conditions that allowed for their involvement in state affairs. One of the clauses was the protection of minorities clause that stated that the British could intervene in Egyptian affairs at any time to guarantee the protection of Christian minorities. Copts were quick to fight for the repeal of that clause which they feared would "destroy national unity and serve as a ready excuse for British interference in Egyptian affairs"

(Carter 72). Britain agreed to drop the clause if Egypt could assert that it was able and willing to protect its minorities. The Copts were getting protection from the constitution which was formed in 1923 and which was heavily influenced by the secular minded *Wafd*. For example, when drafting the constitution's directions for parliamentary elections, the *Wafd* opposed the apportionment of parliamentary seats to the Copts, as they argued that it would divide Egyptians along religious lines instead of uniting them under the Egyptian state (Ibrahim 74). Under the 1923 constitution, Copts were treated as Egyptians, and their rights reflected that citizenship, instead of giving them protective clauses that set them apart from the rest of Egyptian society.

Copts actually won more parliamentary seats in the 1924 election than they would have had the seats been pre-assigned to them (Ibrahim 74). By 1936, the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty made no mention made of a minority protective clause. The Copts appeared to have finally achieved economic and political equality with their Muslim compatriots.

The Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and Pan Arabism –The Road to Nasser's Presidency (1930s–1950s)

In the midst of a fight for complete national independence from Britain, various political ideologies arose in Egypt that threatened the involvement of Copts in national politics. The *Wafd*, which led the country until 1936, had focused on national unity against the British to the detriment of rising domestic issues such as unemployment (Ibrahim 70). Over time, public opinion felt that the weight of those issues became greater than the need to focus on national unity. As such, arising political parties like the Muslim Brotherhood and the political ideology of Pan Arabism, which addressed those issues, attracted the attention of a number of Egyptians away from the *Wafd*.

In 1928, Hasan Al-Banna, who believed that the cure to society's political, economic, and social strife was through Islam, created the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Banna saw the state apparatus as a way to reassert Muslim values to fix societal problems (Petrovic). While the Muslim Brotherhood was not immediately politically active, it was socially active: the Brotherhood provided social services for Egyptians at a time of high unemployment (Petrovic). They fulfilled the social needs that Egyptians were experiencing at a time when the state and the *Wafd* were not addressing it. As a result, membership grew rapidly, and the Muslim Brotherhood started to move politically. They were banned in 1948 for violence attributed to their organization, and

would continue to be marginalized from national politics under the Nasser regime.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was rising and quickly gaining public support, it was not as sweepingly popular as Pan-Arabism. Pan Arabism tried to unite people of the Arabian Peninsula economically and politically based on the idea that they all shared the same language and ethnic history. The movement came about as Middle Eastern nations were trying to overcome the weight of colonialism on their nations. While the Copts do speak Arabic and have ethnic Arabic ties, they felt threatened by Pan Arab rhetoric because it is difficult to remove Islam from Arab history and Arab language (Carter 104). They saw Pan Arabism as:

“...a doctrine, which even in its secular guise could be used to exclude them from national life. Being a minority in Egypt was uncomfortable enough; the prospect of being an even smaller minority in a greater Arab state did not bear contemplation.” (Carter 107)

They feared that it could foster religious fanaticism and amplify religious divides in Egyptian society, which would lead to sectarian tension and a removal of Copts from national life. Yet the *Wafd* and King Farouk's government, which had brought equality for the Copts, favored Pan Arabism when they realized that “...the states in the region gained or were approaching independence and became active in inter-Arab affairs” (Carter 105). They began to see Pan Arabism as a possibly effective solution against the British occupation of Egypt. The situation of Arabs in Palestine further drew the attention of Egyptians in the 1930s to Pan Arabism (Carter 105). They invested in the defense of Arabs in Palestine, a common goal with other Arabs to rid the Middle East of colonial presence. The *Wafd* publicly became supportive of Pan Arabism:

...in a speech to the Senate in 1936, [where] al-Nahhas made the first official party statement supporting the Arabs in Palestine. That same year, Wasif Ghali [a Copt] opposed the Palestine partition plan in the League of Nations. From this time, statements backing Palestinian Arab demands and condemning British policy became frequent. (Carter 106)

The partition of Palestine into a Jewish state after the war drew anger from the rest of the Arab countries, which were already attempting to end the colonial powers' hold on their own nations. At this point, Arabism was in full swing and had a lot of political leverage. Pan Arab rhetoric mixed with pre-existing nationalism fueled Egyptians into joint action

with fellow Arab countries against Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

While most Copts were skeptical, and even anxious at the thought of pan Arabism, once the war began:

The church...never differed publicly with the government in foreign policy matters; and it had, in any case, a real concern about the fate of its wealthy Jerusalem endowments. The church preferred that the endowments not be under the jurisdiction of a country with whom Egypt was at war. (Carter 109)

The Copts feared the effects that Pan Arabism could have on their status in Egyptian society; however, in defense of their interests at the time, they came to support Pan Arabism. Their situation would change in the future. After Egypt's loss at the hand of Israelis in the 1948 Arab Israeli War, Egyptians were upset at their government, and the *Wafd* and the monarchy's ability to run the country were discredited. That public outrage against the current administration gave momentum to the conditions that led to the 1952 Free Officers Revolution.

The Marginalization of the Copts under President Nasser (1952–1970)

In 1952, the Free Officers Club, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, took control of major government buildings in a swift *coup d'état* that ended King Farouk's rule and established the Republic of Egypt. Unlike their participation in the Revolution of 1919, the Copts were uninvolved in this revolution, which was led by military officers who were primarily Muslim. As swiftly as the revolution happened, Nasser negotiated the removal of British troops from the Suez Canal in 1953 and achieved what the *Wafd* had attempted to do for over 20 years in just a few months. The Free Officers reformed into the Egyptian Revolutionary Command Council, which worked with the government in running the new republic. Nasser assumed control of the Revolutionary Command Council in 1954, with great popular support. After the new constitution was established in 1956 and a single party system was set in Egypt, Nasser was elected to the presidency of Egypt and the Revolutionary Command Council was disbanded. He was not only a brilliant and convincing orator, but also a strong leader who made many reforms that dramatically affected Egypt in the twentieth century. While his presidency made pronouncements favorable to the Coptic cause, such as the abolition of religious courts and the permission to build 25

churches a year, including the Cathedral of St Mark in Cairo (Zeidan 57), other economic policies and political ideologies supported by his administration greatly outweighed those favorable policies by effectively ousting Copts from economic and political life at the national level.

The Nasser administration's support of a single party system in Egypt, the reformation of the bureaucracy and the focus on establishing Egypt as a leader in Pan Arab unification silenced the voice that Copts had had in Egyptian politics as Egyptian citizens. The Revolution of 1952 "led to the elimination of political parties, primarily the *Wafd*, through which Muslims and Christians had tried to consolidate inter-religious cooperation" (Nisan 144). With no leftist or secular liberal political party to defend their interests, the Copts were left with no political outlet through which they could participate in politics and represent their community. That marginalization continued through Nasser's presidency and was amplified with the reformation of his bureaucracy. Under Nasser, the percentage of Copts in the civil service, which was nearly 50% under the Khedivate and the British protectorate, was dramatically reduced:

In Cairo, some three-quarters of the pharmacists and about a third of the doctors were Copts in the 1970s. Yet in official Egypt, the Copts were hardly represented...Of the 127 ambassadors, just one (in Nepal) was a Copt. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only 2.5 percent of the employees were Copts. (Nisan 145)

Copts who were once well represented in Egyptian bureaucracy and governmental leadership positions were given a minimal place in Nasser's government. He "traditionally appointed one or two Coptic ministers to the cabinet" (Nisan 144) in order to maintain peaceful ties with the Copts, and to marginalize the opposition. Although Nasser claimed that "we in our republic don't even acknowledge the existence of discrimination. We look at everyone in our society as a citizen having rights and duties...we give each citizen a chance to work and we do not distribute jobs on the basis of discrimination" (Wakin 70), it appears that Copts were not given as many governmental jobs and leadership positions as Muslim Egyptians. The fears that Copts had with regards to Pan Arabism, that "Copts had become foreigners in their own country at a time when every foreign Muslim was considered a citizen," (Carter 110) were realized as Nasser focused on the unification of the Arab peoples under the United Arab Republic, to the detriment of the Egyptian Copts in the country he was leading. The Copts found themselves politically marginalized from the greater Arab state that Nasser was building.

The political marginalization of the Copts led to their economic marginalization, which they were in no position to prevent as they lacked political representation. Part of their lack of political representation was that out “of 160 heads of state-owned companies, a mere ten were Copts” (Nisan 145). Since Copts were being kept at bay from national politics, they were also minimally involved in the management of Egyptian companies, which were nationalized under Nasser’s new economic policies. Among the most important aspects of Nasser’s economic reforms were the land reforms of 1953, which erased the power of the landowning elite class in Egypt, of which the Copts had become a large majority over the previous 150 years. The Agrarian Reform Laws of 1953 “broke up large estates as units of ownership while retaining fairly large areas as units of production” (Richards 305). Small estates were gathered into tenancies. The maximum allowable ownership of land was reduced to 200 feddans in 1954, then to 100 feddans in 1961. It was further reduced in 1969 to fifty feddans (Richards 305). Managerial duties, which were fulfilled by landowners in the past, were now assigned to government employees. Not only did Nasser’s land reforms redistribute the landowning elite’s properties, but also the church’s *waqf* lands, which were “...distributed exclusively to Muslim peasants” (Zeidan 58). The large landowning that the Copts had inherited from their forebears in the nineteenth century and that the church had acquired over centuries became illegal for them to hold. As such, Nasser’s land reforms removed a great part of Coptic wealth, which was a determinant of their societal status, away from them. Nasser’s new economic policy marginalized the Copts from substantial participation in the Egyptian economy.

Being economically and politically marginalized, the Copts now fully depended upon the Patriarch and church leadership for their protection and representation in the Egyptian government:

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 regime 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. (Sedra 225)

Egyptian Copts were no longer individual citizens with an active role and voice in the government, but rather, they were all grouped under a single representative—the patriarch—who presented their requests to the president; he became the only official voice for the Copts in the Egyptian

government. The economic and political status that the Copts had enjoyed, by virtue of being Egyptian citizens capable of serving the country in specific areas, had been eliminated, and the emphasis on Copts as a sect divided from the rest of Egyptian society was revived.

Sadat’s Presidency and the Rise of Pan Islamism (1970–1981)

After Gamal Abdel Nasser’s sudden death in 1970, Nasser’s former prime minister and vice-president, Anwar Sadat, took over the presidency of Egypt. He was expected to maintain the status quo established under Nasser. However, Sadat’s political and economic policies varied considerably. He moved away from the socialist policies that were enacted under Nasser by removing the strongest Nasserists from the government and by granting more freedoms to political groups that had been outlawed under Nasser—principally Islamist political groups. This decision provided him with great popularity amongst Egyptians; however, by legalizing Islamist political groups, Sadat paved the way for Pan Islamist rhetoric to spread throughout Egypt. It is that same rhetoric that became detrimental to the political representation of Copts in political parties and in the government. As Randall P. Henderson notes,

Sadat loosened the government’s hold on groups that seemed on the fence in terms of fanaticism...New preachers began to advocate that the Coptic community was often responsible for keeping Egypt from becoming a strong Islamic state. They advocated the destruction of all institutions that stood between the citizen and Islam. (158)

The spread of Pan Islamism, which sought to unify Egyptians under the banner of Islam, and the resurgence of Islamist political groups led the Copts to fear the loss of their constitutional freedoms. That fear was amplified with Sadat’s amendments to the Egyptian constitution, which made Shari’a law into the main source of legislation in Egypt. Copts feared “that their constitutional guarantees of equality would disappear as Shari’a law took priority over law incongruent with it, leaving their legal state ambiguous” (Zeidan 58). Copts, who had nominal representation in government and little economic power, were powerless against the implementation of this law. The Coptic patriarch, who was the only representation the Copts had with the Sadat administration, became vocal about these concerns. He “...insisted upon the preservation of Copts’ rights of citizenship” (Sedra 226). Despite his efforts, the Patriarch was not influential in his demands for the preservation of the rights of Copts. The Copts no longer could rely on the guarantee

of their freedoms as citizens of Egypt, and tension between the Sadat administration and their community and the use of shari'a law in government kept them from having a voice in government.

In addition to political isolation, the Copts also suffered economic losses under Sadat's economic policies. While Egyptian society was experiencing a renewal of Islamic values, Sadat tried to make Egypt an international economic power by making it competitive. In order to attract foreign business and grow the Egyptian economy, Sadat implemented *intifab*, the open-door policy. All nationalized businesses, including agriculture, were privatized. The privatization of businesses and agriculture would have been an opportunity for Copts to gain economic ground once more; however, Sadat "...refused to return Coptic *waqf* lands to the Coptic Trust Land Committee. Indeed, additional Church Trust land was seized and given to the Ministry of Islamic affairs" (Zeidan 58). Property that could have been essential to their economic growth was never returned to them. Therefore, Copts were not able to regain their previous control of the agricultural business in Egypt. In addition, "*intifab*...had failed to attract foreign capital to the degree the president had expected and only a select class of Egyptians...benefited from the capital that entered the country" (Sedra 226). The inability to salvage agricultural lands combined with the failure of *intifab* to attract foreign business kept the Copts economically crippled. They were unable to benefit from *intifab* and had to rely increasingly on the Church for support and services. Patriarch Shenouda developed a "...network of social services...[that] enabled middle-class Copts to survive in the midst of a rapid contraction of economic opportunity and of social mobility" (Sedra 226). The fact that Copts could no longer take their demands to the government and that the economic policies in Egypt prevented them from reaping the benefits of agricultural lands and foreign investments forced them to rely on the Church more than on the state for their basic needs. By turning to their community and the Church instead of turning to the state for aid, the Copts became increasingly detached from the rest of Egyptian society.

The lack of economic resources coupled with a growing anxiety due to the rise of Islamic fundamentalists created tension between Sadat and Shenouda III, who was extremely critical of the regime. Sadat's relationship with Islamic political groups also became strained due to the 1978 peace agreement with Israel. In an attempt to appease the Islamists' dissatisfaction with his policies in Israel, Sadat began publicly attacking the Copts "...in his speeches—using traditional stereotypes—for causing sectarian strife as

well as harbouring separatist ambitions and collaborating with Egypt's enemies" (Zeidan 57). The Copts became "...a 'symbol' in the struggle between the Egyptian state officials and their Islamist opponents" (Sedra 220). Sadat went as far as exiling Patriarch Shenouda III in a symbolic gesture that marked the superiority of his regime to the leadership of the patriarch over the Coptic Church. Instead of becoming one of the constituencies helping Egypt's political and economic life to thrive, the Copts became an object of blame and distraction from Sadat's unpopular policies with Israel.

Despite anti-Copt rhetoric, Sadat was unable to appease Islamist groups, and "...soon disbanded some of the groups, [taking] away printing presses, and began arresting many" (Henderson 159). His efforts to crack down on Islamist groups were unsuccessful, and the same groups he originally sought support from led to his downfall. Anwar Sadat was assassinated in October 1981, leaving the Copts marginalized and only able to rely on themselves in the face of increasing sectarian strife.

The Retraction of Copts and the Power of the Coptic Diaspora under Mubarak (1981–2011)

Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's vice president, assumed the presidency immediately following Sadat's assassination. He would hold it for thirty years. Mubarak pursued the capitalist economic approach of his predecessor, but concentrated on the consolidation of his power over Egypt. While Mubarak was more lenient and open to some opposing political parties—such as the Muslim Brotherhood—than Sadat was at the end of his presidency, and while he granted them limited freedoms, Mubarak held tight control over their activities. He took "an indulgent approach to press freedom and civil society organization...combined with arbitrary control over any activity that threaten[ed] to challenge the established mastery of the governing party and the president" (Rowe 111). In order to protect his rule and consolidate his power, Mubarak consistently renewed Egypt's emergency laws, which extended his executive powers and suspended the rights of the people, including the Copts. With no rights to represent themselves fully in the media and in politics, the Copts had no other way of voicing their concerns but to go through the Church and its patriarch, who went to the president himself.

The Copts became significantly reliant on the Church domestically and abroad, and on the Mubarak administration for protection over the next thirty years. Upon his return from exile, Shenouda III developed close ties with

the Mubarak administration and "...Consistently supported the Mubarak regime even when he has criticized it for its lack of attention to Coptic issues" (Rowe 124). Patriarch Shenouda III changed his approach towards governing powers from one of insubordination towards Sadat to one of collaboration with Mubarak. As such, the church "... became the official organ dealing directly with the state in matters thought to be of particular importance to the Copts" (Rowe 114). Given that the patriarch now was their representative to the government, Copts had to make their demands and concerns known to him if they wanted the government to be aware of them. Since the patriarch and the church had a monopoly on the Copts' dialogue with the state, the patriarch gained considerable power over the community. Shenouda III focused on the centralization of his own authority over the Copts, and attempted to unite them all under his leadership. In order to achieve that goal, Shenouda III quadrupled the number of bishops leading the Coptic Church throughout his pontificate (Rowe 117). This expansion of church leadership not only created a substantial support system for his leadership, but it also "...provided new opportunities for individual priests and bishops to create social service projects that address key community concerns that the government is largely unable to take care of" (Rowe 119). Egyptian Copts' involvement in Egyptian society became dependent upon their participation in church activities, where they found the political voice and social services that they were unable to obtain from the Egyptian government. In the face of a "...restrictive political environment, they managed to create a strong and vibrant set of civil society institutions through a combination of communal solidarity, political maneuvering, foreign pressure" (Rowe 112). The Copts' community involvement was focused on the Coptic community, upon which they were reliant, and less on the Egyptian community at large.

The Copts of Egypt became dependent upon the population of Copts abroad that continued to support and defend the church. The church indirectly received significant support from the Coptic Diaspora, formed by those who had emigrated to first world countries in the last three decades. For example, the social services and institutions created by the bishops under Shenouda III were financially supported by foreign aid and donations made from the Coptic Diaspora to their home church in Egypt (Rowe 122). Foreign Coptic organizations such as the US Coptic Association also helped put pressure on the Mubarak regime for the protection of the Coptic community in Egypt by holding "...public demonstrations and concerted lobbying efforts [that] brought the status of Egypt's Copts to the front burner of discussions of foreign relations" (Rowe 116). As a result of

this political pressure placed on foreign governments by the Copts, most particularly upon first world countries, Egypt's dealings with those countries began to be influenced by the status of the Coptic community at home. As Edward Wakin commented:

...by making contact with the mainstream of Christianity and by developing international affiliations, the Copts have made it more difficult for any Egyptian regime to attack the Coptic Church without repercussions. (Wakin 172)

For example, the release of Patriarch Shenouda III had been a result of significant pressure placed upon Mubarak by the Reagan administration, which was responding to lobbying efforts made by the Coptic community in the United States. The church in Egypt, although reluctant to allow Copts abroad to represent the church without patriarchal approval, financially and politically benefited from the support of the Coptic Diaspora, which guaranteed the development of the church's social services and the protection of the community under Mubarak.

While the Copts thrived under new church leadership and the support of the Coptic Diaspora, they became increasingly withdrawn from involvement in Egyptian national life. They became confined to the walls of their Church and had little role to play in the political and economic life of the country. In addition, the support that the church was receiving from the Mubarak administration and from the Coptic Diaspora created significant tension with the rest of the Egyptian community, who felt that they were collaborating with the West and with a regime that was oppressive to them. That tension would be the cause of increasing sectarian violence throughout the Mubarak administration and the Egyptian revolution.

Conclusion

Egyptian Copts have been interwoven within the fabric of Egyptian history since the first century A.D. They performed an important role in the formation of the modern Egyptian state and in the fight against colonial rule. They were participants and leaders in the economic and political life of the state as they thrived from the Khedivate to the Free Officers Revolution of 1952. Following that revolution, the impact of Socialism, Pan Arabism, Pan Islamism, and *intifab* on Egypt effectively marginalized the Copts and led them to rely on themselves, the Egyptian president, and their community abroad for survival.

The overthrow of President Mubarak in 2011 took away a major source of protection and security for the Coptic community in Egypt. With no president to protect them, and with a history of collaborating with one who had oppressed Egyptians for thirty years, the Copts faced the destruction of their places of worship and the deaths of many of their members in sectarian conflict. The instability and the constant threat facing the Copts left them desolate in a nation in transition. In March 2014, the pope of the Coptic Church, Pope Tawadros II officially endorsed Field Marshall Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in the upcoming presidential elections ("Egyptian pope urges" 2014). Shortly thereafter, El-Sisi stepped down from his role as Field Marshall to officially become a presidential candidate in Egypt's May elections. If elected, El-Sisi, who is supported by the military and a great number of Egyptians, would become the fourth military leader to lead Egypt since the 1952 Free Officers Revolution. With the Copts' endorsement of El Sisi in the upcoming presidential election, it will be interesting to see if the Church's relationship with the new state will be similar to its previous relationship with the Mubarak administration. Will the Copts come to participate more fully in the new Egyptian government, or will they come to rely on El-Sisi for protection from sectarian violence? The next few months will reveal whether or not the Egyptian revolution changed the relationship of the Copts with the Egyptian state, or if it further marginalized the Copts from Egyptian national life.

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