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It seems so long ago that the eyes of the world were fixed on Tahrir Square, where a broad cross-section of Egyptians peacefully asserted their fundamental right to self govern and took a stand for their human dignity. Recent events, however, serve as a reminder that as broad as the political consensus was, it was admittedly rather thin—the unifying platform was the simple conviction that the time had come for the illegitimate Mubarak regime to bow to a wholesale democratic alternative. Images of religious unity were many as the revolution progressed: Muslims and Copts (Christians of Egypt) protecting each other during prayers, Imams and Priests hand in hand, and signs hailing the union of crescent and cross. These images struck a note of hope that punctuated a far less savory spate of sectarian fissure. But the religious consensus in the revolution's formative period was as thin as the political one was, and now, as Egypt struggles through its post revolutionary stage, a period of both religious and political tenuousness is once more apparent.

The kind of inter-religious consensus demonstrated in Tahrir Square had been manifested at least once before in Egypt's recent history, during the Revolution of 1919. At that time, the presence of the British occupation as a common enemy of all Egyptians perhaps bestowed upon this consensus more durability. However, that too was short lived. The status of Copts during the twentieth century gradually declined, especially after the Free Officers' coup d'état
of Egypt’s constitutional monarchy in 1952 and Nasser’s land reforms, which redistributed much of the wealth accrued by the prosperous Coptic minority. Apart from the fleeting consensus by Muslims and Copts that buoyed popular revolution, sectarian violence in Egypt remains a latent problem.

This disturbing reality has been most evident in street riots between Muslims and Copts and church burnings by mobs of angry Muslims. Recent sectarian violence includes episodes before and after January 25, 2011 that have mainly disadvantaged the Coptic community—which, as the minority, always stands to lose the most. Prior to the revolution, such episodes included the Kosheh massacre of January 2, 2001 in which 21 Copts and one Muslim were killed in riots; the Nag Hammadi massacre on January 7, 2010 in which Muslim gunmen opened fire and murdered eight Copts leaving Christmas midnight mass; and the Alexandria church bombing just before the revolution, on the New Year’s Eve of 2011, in which 23 Copts were killed (and Mubarak’s Department of the Interior was suspected of complicity). After the revolution came the Sole Church arson of March 5, and deadly riots on April 15 and May 7.

In addition to street riots and church burnings, church demolitions undertaken by the government, under pretense of illegality according to outdated laws, keeps the conflict alive and establishes the authority of the government as the sole arbitrator. The latest incident of this kind was the Maspero massacre on October 9, 2011, in which security forces killed 27 peacefully demonstrating civilians, most of whom were Copts protesting recent church burnings.

The massacre at Maspero—the neighborhood where Egypt’s state-run media headquarters are located—could have been avoided. Throngs of unarmed Copts were joined by Muslim sympathizers in order to protest the recent demolition of several churches in Upper Egypt (which is Egypt’s south). State-run television channels reported that the Copts were armed and killed three members of the military guard. The report was false. Not only were there no military fatalities, but more than two dozen peaceful protesters were mowed down by armored military vehicles. The armed men in the crowd were thugs who assailed the peaceful protesters and military guard alike, some of whom were incited against the Copts by fallacious TV coverage. This horrific incident underscores the continued role of the federal government—now controlled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—to manipulate the religious sensibilities of Egyptians in order to fan the flames of sectarian violence, while cementing its own hold on political power. It also brings to light growing Islamic militancy in the municipalities of Upper Egypt and the challenges it poses for the Coptic community. The Coptic Pope Shenouda III as well as a number of Egyptian political parties condemned the Maspero massacre; and Ahmed al-Tayyib, the Imam of al-Azhar University, called for emergency talks between Muslims and Christians.

The mistrust between the Muslim and Coptic community has probably been heightened in the wake of a costly revolution and subsequent economic hardship. Even after Mubarak and his regime were toppled, Copts remain skeptical that re-drafting the Egyptian constitution will bring about real change; they are alarmed by the recent wave of church demolitions and subsequent incitement against them; they are also wary that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood—or any other political Islamic group—will not bode well for them. Furthermore, the Coptic community wonders what equal citizenship will mean under a constitution that makes no mention of them and yet leaves Article II intact, stating that “Islam is the religion of the state and... Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation.” This article was exempted from the referendum at the demand of the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, in spite of its controversial nature for both Copts and many other Egyptians.
In a country whose government speaks in such religious terms—let alone uses religion as a tool to manipulate its people—it is natural for the Coptic community to feel that its identity is threatened. The Muslim majority, furthermore, saturated in the discourse of Islamic groups (including Salafis), sees its identity emboldened. This explains why nowadays the catalyst behind most of the sectarian strife in Egypt stem from issues which delineate the identity of each faith community: conversion, intermarriage and divorce. It also explains why the impact of such personal choices has fueled sectarian violence.

The real crucible for Egypt is whether the democratic values that captured the eyes of the world in February are powerful enough to overcome the ruptures of recent sectarian violence and abuses of power by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

References


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