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Egypt's Copts and Politics: Determinants and Developments

Dr. Mamdouh Almuneir

Although Egypt's Copts are considered an important component of the Egyptian society, however, many problems have often surfaced regarding the status of the Copts within the State and even within the Egyptian society itself.

These problematics are usually viewed from three angles according to the understanding of observers of the Egyptian Coptic file:

The first angle, representing the position adopted by most Egyptian Coptic leaders and prominent figures, relates to the "injustice" issue, where they see that Copts are exposed to persecution by both the regime and society in Egypt, citing several examples to support their view, including the Church Construction Law, the number of Copts hired by the State's sensitive institutions, and incidents of sectarian strife that occur from time to time.

The second angle, representing the position of some Egyptians, relates to a conviction that the Egyptian Church, specifically the Orthodox Church, acts as if it were a "State" within the Egyptian State, and even above the State in some situations, thanks to the exceptional privileges that it enjoys, including the fact that the Church and its institutions as well as monasteries and monks are not subject to supervision of the State. This, according to this view, has encouraged the Coptic Church to challenge the power of the State, whether in building churches without obtaining a license or in forcing the government to hand over Copts who had officially declared their conversion to Islam, as happened with Wafaa Constantine and others, to name only a few.

The third and final angle relates to a conviction that Copts are sometimes subject to injustice and persecution, but at the same time the Coptic Church appears to act as a State within the Egyptian State in some activities and practices.

This report will briefly review the history of Copts with the modern Egyptian State and explore the features and dimensions of this relationship between the two parties.

The concept of "Copts":

There is disagreement over the definition of the word "Copt". Although most opinions agree that the word "Copt" means "Egyptian citizen", whether this was during the Roman era or at the time of the Islamic conquest¹, this word is currently used exclusively to refer to Christians in Egypt.

In other words, the old meaning of the word "Copt" was not related to a specific religion at the time, rather it meant "everyone who lives in Egypt regardless of his religion" where most Egyptians at that time were pharaonic pagan, while part of Egypt's population were Christians and another part were Jewish; however, everyone was then dubbed "Copt", meaning "Egyptian"².

This issue is considered a major point of contention between leaders of the Coptic Church in the modern era and those who adopt a different opinion, especially Egyptian Muslims. The leaders of the Orthodox Church consider that the word "Copt" in ancient times meant "Egyptian Christian" in an attempt to reinforce their hypothesis that all Egyptians were Christians before the Islamic conquest of Egypt, and accordingly they are the indigenous population of Egypt, but Muslims later imposed their religion on them by the sword, as they claim³.

In fact, after reviewing many sources⁴, including Western references, to verify this issue, it turned out that this claim is groundless both scientifically and historically. Therefore, we can confirm what we have mentioned above that the word "Copt" used to refer to everyone born and living in Egypt during the Roman era – starting in the year 30 BC – and at the time of the Islamic conquest of Egypt whatever their religion or belief was⁵.

¹ Dr. Ali Wanees, Meaning of the Word 'Coptic', Alukah Network, Retrieved 3 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

² Egypt Was not Coptic in Any Era, al-Omah website, Retrieved 2 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

³ History of the Coptic Church through the ages, St. Takla website, Retrieved 5 May 2020 ([URL](#))

⁴ Dr. Zainab Abdel Aziz addressed this issue and documented it in many articles she published, including the article mentioned ref. (2) above, which included several sources on the topic.

⁵ There were 3 (religious) beliefs in Egypt during the reign of the Roman Empire, that is the Pharaonic, as the religion of the majority of population; Judaism, mostly in Alexandria, where they had fled from Palestine after the Romans persecuted them there; and Christianity, mostly in Thebes.

To be clearer, the use of the word “Copts” in this report mostly focuses on the Egyptian Orthodox Church, whose followers represent more than 95% of Egyptian Christians, while the rest is distributed among the Catholic and Protestant sects⁶.

Census of Copts in Egypt:

The number of Copts in Egypt is a major controversial issue as well. While the church leaders say that Copts in Egypt are estimated at about 15 million according to the records of each church, however, they have failed to provide a single proof to support their claim; and therefore, these numbers remain groundless media statements⁷.

The reason behind the church’s attempts to exaggerate the number of Copts in Egypt is understandable, of course; given that the higher the number of Copts is, the greater and stronger their political, economic, and social demands as well as their political position in negotiations with the State or any other parties will be.

On the other hand, a large number of observers concerned with the Coptic issue see that the number of Copts recurrently announced by church leaders is not true and that the last official population census in Egypt, where the number of Copts was explicitly mentioned, stated that Copts represented about 5% of the population, although the Church objected to this rate at the time. In the 1996 and 2006 censuses, the State refrained from announcing the number of Copts so that they would not be irritated again⁸.

However, the last official announcement of the number of Copts came from Major General Abu Bakr El-Gindi, head of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), in September

⁶ Copts of Egypt bet. Citizenship Umbrella and Church Umbrella, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Retrieved 6 May 2020, from ([URL](#))

⁷ What Is the Secret behind the Mystery of Number of Christians in Egypt? Al Jazeera Net, Retrieved 6 May 2020 ([URL](#)).

⁸ Tariq Al-Bishri, The State and the Church, Copts in Egypt, al-ShorouK Publishing House 2011.

2012, where he confirmed that the number of Copts in Egypt then amounted to five million and 130 thousand people⁹.

History of the relationship between the church and the Egyptian State

We can say that the history of Copts in the modern era with the Egyptian State is divided into six stages based on the ruling regime and the personality of the ruler and church leaders, including:

1) The monarchy era until 1952:

During the monarchy era, the church did not have a clear political role in public affairs. However, Copts practiced their roles in society as Egyptian citizens in the first place, so they effectively participated in political life, particularly in the 1919 revolution, in addition to strongly participating in various governments at the time¹⁰.

Although there were certainly politically oriented sectarian demands by some of the Copts at the time, but most of these demands were adopted by Coptic figures away from the cloak of the church, at least overtly; as the church was not monopolizing talk in the name of Copts or adopt political positions as a Coptic institution¹¹.

2) The Nasserite era (1952-1970):

The Nasserite era is considered the beginning of the State's management of its relationship with the Egyptian Orthodox Church as an institution that implicitly represents the Copts in their "religious" demands¹², as there were no "political" demands at the time, neither to the Copts nor to Muslims due to the totalitarian rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Former President Gamal Abdel Nasser was keen on reinforcing the pillars of his rule by ensuring the loyalty and support of the Coptic Church. The mutual admiration between Abdel Nasser and Pope

⁹ CAPMAS: Christians in Egypt 5 Million, Shorouk news, Retrieved 3 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

¹⁰ Tareq al Bishri, Op. Cit.

¹¹ The Church and the Copts – Bet. the Political and Spiritual, Egyptian Institute of Studies, Retrieved 6 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

¹² George Fahmy, Challenges of Managing the Church's Relationship with the State in the Era of Pope Tawadros II, Shorouk news, Retrieved 6 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

Cyril VI, the head of the church at the time, led to success of this relationship from the beginning; a relationship which Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the well-known Egyptian writer, described in his book "The Fall of Wrath" as a 'relationship of mutual admiration between the two men'¹³.

Pope Cyril VI strongly believed in the saying attributed to Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:21 "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Accordingly, he did not try to involve the Church in political affairs, and therefore most of the role of the Coptic Church at the time was limited to the spiritual and religious affairs only, which Nasser admired, as he found this in the interest of the stability of his regime. As for Pope Cyril VI, he considered Abdel Nasser a strong national leader with a comprehensive national project, in addition to his strong hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood as well. In the Nasser era, Abdel Nasser allowed the Copts to build dozens of churches that had been frozen.

Anyway, the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser had nationalized the entire political life and crushed the opposition, preventing any political activity, neither from the church and Copts, nor from Muslims.

An indicator of this strong relationship between the two parties was the visit paid by Nasser to the St. Mark Church in 1965, the first visit of its kind by an Egyptian president to the church, where he delivered the opening statement upon invitation from Pope Cyril VI¹⁴.

The relationship between the Church and the State during the rule of Nasser can be summed up in a statement by theology professor Abdel-Masih Baseet to the effect that 'This period cannot be compensated, since the Copts did not encounter any problems because of their religious identity.'¹⁵

But this relationship quickly changed following the June 1967 setback and its impact on all Egyptians, both Muslims and Copts; where Muslims resorted to commitment to teachings of their religion,

¹³ Copts of Egypt bet. Citizenship Umbrella and Church Umbrella, Op. Cit.

¹⁴ Relations of Presidents of Egypt with the Church, Al-Ahram, Retrieved 6 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

¹⁵ The Priest and the Pharaoh.. Pope Shenouda During the Sadat and Mubarak Eras, Al Jazeera Net, Retrieved 6 May 2020 from ([URL](#)).

seeking a kind of psychological and spiritual protection, and so did the Copts, taking shelter in the church and clergymen.

To sum up, religious tendencies for all Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians escalated at the time. However, on 28 September 1970, Abdel Nasser died, after whom Anwar El-Sadat took office as President of Egypt.

Summary:

1- Until the beginning of the Nasserite era, the Coptic Church had not represented the Copts in their relationship with the State, but only secular¹⁶ Copts used to play such role based on citizenship, being an essential part of the nation's fabric.

2- The claims of the secular Copts from the State in the pre-Nasserite period varied between legitimate demands such as restoration and building of churches, and extremist sectarian demands, but the general aspect controlling this stage was that Copts directly administered their relationship with the State and the ruling regime without any need for the church to represent them or play as mediator between them and the State.

3- Abdel Nasser was the first to consider the church the representative of Copts in their relationship with the Egyptian State with respect to their administrative and religious affairs. This was due to Nasser's totalitarian rule, where he completely abolished the partisan and civil life in Egypt; and therefore there was no alternative to the Copts other than the church, which was exactly what Nasser wanted.

4- Despite the intimate relationship between Abdel Nasser and Pope Cyril VI, their relationship was not codified in a way that may allow the gains that the Copts obtained to become a legal right for them, such as the construction of churches when needed within the framework of certain objective

¹⁶ Secular Copts intended here are Copts that have no religious position within the church, i.e. those who are not clergymen; not secularists that advocate removal of religion from life, especially matters of government and politics, and that are not related to a specific religion.

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conditions. In fact, no laws were enacted in this regard and the relationship between Abdel Nasser and Pope Cyril VI remained administered only on a personal basis.

5- The fact that the relationship between the two parties (Church and State) during the Nasserite era was not politically motivated, as mentioned above, does not mean that politics was completely absent from the scene at the time. In fact, Abdel Nasser primarily established a political relationship with the Church to secure its loyalty to his totalitarian regime, although it was not considered a political relationship on the part of the Church for the above reasons.

