

The Plight of Coptic Christian Minorities in Post Mubarak Egypt

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The Coptic Christians of Egypt are considered to be the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and are estimated to be around 10 percent of the total Egyptian population. The term *Coptic* is derived from the ancient Greek word for Egyptian, and St. Mark the Apostle is considered to have founded the Coptic Church towards the middle of the first century. The Coptic Church in Egypt witnessed several challenges during the Byzantine and later Muslim era. Since the formation of the Egyptian republic in 1952, the Coptic minorities underwent several forms of discrimination under the periods of Nassar, Sadat and Mubarak at varying levels. The condition of the Copts began to worsen following the Arab Spring and after the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in 2011. The election and overthrow of Mohammed Morsi led Islamist government in 2013 further deteriorated the situation. Copts were often discriminated against at various governmental institutions, and restrictions were placed on building new churches and monasteries. In recent times violent extremism from groups like ISIS has forced many of the Copts to dislocate themselves or leave the country. In this context, this paper traces the trajectory of the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt, their struggle for equality, the government responses and the challenges they had to undergo following the overthrow of the Mubarak regime and the advent of the present ruler Abdul Fateh Al Sisi since 2013.

Keywords: Coptic Christians, Muslim Brotherhood, Middle East, Arab Spring, ISIS

The Arab Spring was not a spring; it was an Arab destructive winter transplanted in our countries by evil hands to destroy and fragment our countries and societies.

Pope Tawadros II¹

While the history of Christianity in Egypt can be traced back to the arrival of the Holy Family in the early period of the first century, the establishment of the Coptic Orthodox Church began with the coming of St. Mark, the Apostle at Alexandria in 42 AD. After the Roman hegemony, the church came under Muslim rulers following the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the 7th century. Over a period of time, the church adapted to its changing circumstances and kept its faith alive for centuries. As the biggest Christian minority group in West Asia or Middle East, the Coptic Christians in Egypt are estimated to be between (10- 20 per cent) of the total Egyptian population of more than 100 million though this figure is very often disputed (Amin, 2020). The

¹ Pope Tawadros II is the 118th and current Pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the See of St Mark. He succeeded Pope Shenouda III as the leader of the Coptic Orthodox church of Alexandria on 18th November 2012.

Christian community, in general, has been shrinking in the Middle East. Once the birthplace of Christianity and where the Christian intellectuals led the pan-Arab movement, the Post-Arab Spring trends have put Christians and other religious minorities of the Middle East at high risk. Christians, who accounted for 20 per cent of the total Middle East population in the early twentieth century, have now been reduced to between 3-4 per cent (Haider, 2017). The rise of radical Islam, repressive regimes, failed states, lack of economic opportunities, forced migrations and religious persecution are some of the reasons for the dwindling Christian population (Brain Katulis, 2015). Though it is difficult to estimate the exact numbers, the Coptic Church claims its total population to be around 15 million based on the church documents (Mohamed Azmy, 2019). The Coptic church played an important role in the crucial historical moments that Egypt had undergone for centuries. During the period of Muhammed Ali, the Christians had high representation in the bureaucracy (Ghanem, 2016). In the twentieth century, the Coptic Church cooperated with the scholars of Al-Azhar in demanding British withdrawal from Egypt. The participation of Coptic Christians in the government was very high during the period of Saad Zaghloul and the party that he founded, i.e. the Wafd Party in 1919. Since the founding of the Egyptian republic in 1952, the Coptic church encountered several challenges posed by the political establishment that led to the nationalisation of all religious institutions including the church.

Coptic Christians during the Periods of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak Regimes

The advent of Arab Nationalism under Nasser following the military coup of 1952 did harm the interest of the church and elite Copts in many ways. Nasser imposed state surveillance on the church's schools and decided to merge Islamic teachings into the school curriculum. Several constraints were imposed on the religious institutions, including the church and confiscated its trust properties. The land reform policy that the regime adopted did severely affect the Coptic elites who held huge amounts of land. The regime redistributed the land to the Egyptian farmers, of which the majority were Muslims, and this built a barrier between the church and the state. Nasser agreed with Pope Cyril V to guarantee the state protection to the Church and its believers in return for considering the church as their only political representative before the state (Elsässer, 2010; Amin, 2020; Karakoc, 2015). Following the death of Nasser in 1970, his vice president Anwar Sadat rose to the presidency. One of the things which Sadat did was to grant freedom to some of the Islamist groups that were oppressed under the Nasser regime. These groups started a hatred campaign against the Coptic community. The fear among the Copts further intensified with Sadat's amendments to the Egyptian constitution, which made sharia law as the main source of legislation in Egypt. The Patriarch of Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III was very critical of Sadat's move and insisted upon the preservation of Coptic rights of citizenship. With the aim of making Egypt internationally competitive, Sadat initiated the so-called *intifah*², i.e. the open-door economic policy and privatised many institutions which were once nationalised. The privatisation move did not benefit the Copts financially as Sadat refused to return the Coptic Waqf lands to the Coptic community. The Copts were totally frustrated as they could not get back their

² Intifah- An Open-door economic policy Initiated by Anwar Sadat for attracting private investment in Egypt during the 1970's.

agricultural lands and neither could they benefit from the open-door economic policy. This made them highly dependent on the church rather than the state for their support and services. Sadat went to the extent of exiling Patriarch Shenouda III and accused him of trying to create a Coptic state within Upper Egypt. Despite his anti-Coptic rhetoric, Sadat was unable to appease some of the Islamic groups which eventually led to his assassination in 1981 (Leveugle, 2014). The period of Mubarak which lasted for three decades (1981-2011) witnessed the era of relatively peaceful cooperation between the church and the state. One of the measures taken by Mubarak was the release of Pope Shenouda after 40 months of detention. During the Mubarak era, the Coptic church followed a neo-millet system³. The security apparatus considered the Church leaders as the only responsible figures for the Coptic Christian community. In spite of the close relationship, there was an absence of Coptic Christians in the high positions of the government. Another cause of worry for the church was the matter of church construction. The permit applications for church construction had to undergo a very long and bureaucratic procedure which forced the church authorities to construct a church first and later seek permission. In spite of close church-state relations, there were dissenting voices from within the Coptic community, such as the *Kefaya*⁴ (enough) movement by George Ishak that called to oust Hosni Mubarak even prior to the Arab uprising and sectarian conflicts between the Muslims and Copts (Yefet, 2019).

Coptic Response to the Tahrir Uprising and the Ouster of Mubarak

The waves of Arab spring, which started in Tunisia in December 2010 with the self-immolation of a street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi soon reached the streets of Egypt with the beginning of the Tahrir protest on January 25, 2011. It was the result of the three-decade-old harsh policies of the Mubarak regime on its people. The rigging of the 2010 parliamentary elections, the rise in food prices, high rates of unemployment, together with a police state were some of the factors that caused the uprising. “*Bread, Freedom and Social Justice*” was the popular slogan of the protesters (Prashad, 2012). Though the protest was started by the youths and the liberals, later on, the Muslim brotherhood (al- Ikhwan al-Muslimim) joined the struggle.

The position of the church towards the early uprising was clear from the words of Pope Shenouda III, 2011

“We thank Mr. President for his quick response to the ongoing incidents and his appointment of Mr. Omar Suleiman as the vicepresident. I called the president to thank him and to express my support and the people’s support amidst these incidents. May Lord grant him strength to protect Egypt and sustain peace, order and power.” (Amin, 2020)

Since the church had a good equation with the Mubarak regime, it decided to keep itself away from public protest and advised its believers to do the same. To the surprise

³ Neo Millet system- A system of managing interfaith issues that exists parallel to legal institutions in the post-revolutionary Egypt.

⁴ Kefeya- A movement founded by Coptic Christian George Ishak in opposition to Mubarak’s presidency in 2004.

of the church hierarchy, ordinary Coptic Christians took active participation in the protests. The allegations that the Mubarak regime may have been involved in the bombing of the Alexandria Church in early January fueled the anger toward the regime. The Coptic activist among the demonstrators came to be known as the “Coptic Youth Movement.” (Rowe, 2013)

As the revolution unfolded, the participation of Coptic youth in large numbers forced the church to embrace the protest and engage in post- revolutionary activities in order to restore its position among the Coptic community. The 18-day protest created new hopes for interreligious unity when Copts protected Muslims during Friday prayers at Tahrir square, and open-air prayers and liturgies were led by the Coptic Orthodox and Evangelical churches in the same venue. The common slogan of the streets was *‘Christians and Muslims, one hand’* and *‘The Unity of the Cross and of the Crescent’* When Mubarak resigned on February 11th, along with the vast majority of Egyptians, the Copts too celebrated victory and hoped for a bright future under a new state (Rowe, 2013).

The Transition Phase under SCAF and the Maspéro Massacre

After the ouster of Mubarak, the political spectrum of Egypt underwent a sea change. The Coptic leadership feared that the political transformation would marginalise the Church and open other gates to different sects of the Coptic community, ultimately damaging the church’s role as the sole political representative of the Coptic community. The Coptic laymen, on the other hand, were looking for more opportunities for political representation. The hopes for the Copts following the revolution turned to disillusionment very soon. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which took over from the Mubarak regime, introduced a set of constitutional changes to a national referendum in March 2011. The prospect of introducing new elections before a rewritten constitution alarmed liberal politicians and the Copts alike. But the constitutional changes won by 77 percent of the vote held on 19th March 2011. The Islamist sympathies of the committees that had drawn up the constitutional changes deepened the fear and suspicion among the Copts. The Copts realised the limits of their freedom within a month of revolution. The inter-sectarian conflict between Muslims and Christians broke out in several locations, which resulted in increasing attacks on the churches. The ongoing tensions led to the Coptic realisation that the military was not following their commitment to defend the houses of worship. This made them realise that the primary beneficiaries of the revolution were the Islamists and not the Copts (Guirguis, 2018).

By early October 2011, the issue of attacks on churches had reached at higher levels. During this period, a group of self-constituted young Copts supported by a small number of Coptic priests established a public movement seeking greater protection of the Copts and addressing the Coptic grievances. Calling themselves the *Maspéro Youth Union*, this group presented as a lay movement of Copts and fellow travellers who sought the development of a voice for Copts outside the church. This movement can be read as an undercurrent of dissent against the communal autonomy guaranteed under the neo-millet system, which gave a unique role to the church authorities. They were of the opinion that the Egyptian parliaments and governments famously underrepresented Coptic interests and instead favoured dealing with the church on major social issues. Leaders of the union who had a secular outlook sought to present a lay alternative to the church leadership though they were supportive of

the church's work. They were looking for a change, i.e. a second revolution in which Copts would arise to vocalise their interest in a more democratic Egypt. This happened at a time of frequent sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians and an ailing Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III, whose health and authority weakened soon after the incidents of Arab Spring. Taking advantage of this, the Maspero Youth Union took out a march from the suburb of Shoubra to the information ministry in Maspero on 9th October 2011. The marchers demanded that the Egyptian government prioritise the protection of Coptic churches and the right to freedom of religion. The military engaged in a violent crackdown on the protesters, killing 27 people and injuring hundreds. The Maspero massacre deepened the sense of mistrust among the Copts for the SCAF administration (Rowe,2015).

The Election of Mohammed Morsi and the Dispute Over the Constitution

The political transformation in Egypt in 2011 paved the way for the active involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organisations more than ever before. The church viewed the advent of Muslim Brotherhood not only as an existential threat to the Coptic Christians but also to the state. The continuous call by a few Islamists to return the *Dhimmi*⁵ status to the non- Muslims again increased the fear among the Copts. In the past, there were some furious statements from some of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders like Mustafa Mashhur, who said 'Christians were not allowed to enrol in military'. They were not allowed to re- establish or build churches. They were not allowed to walk in the middle of the road, and they must be pushed to walk at the margins. They were not allowed to ring their bell (Guindy,2006). The church leadership feared that it would be politically marginalised in the new state for once being part of the Mubarak regime, and all the political, economic and social interest it had acquired over the years, together with the political theology it built, would fade away, which may lead to the entry of new Christian Coptic movements (Amin,2020; Chapman,2012). Moreover, in spite of his positive statements such as 'In this square, sectarianism died' the return of the Shaykh Yousuf Al Qardawi to Egypt created suspicion in the minds of the Coptic Christians. The main argument was that since the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, it was practising a sectarian divide against the Coptic Christian community. Another source of worry was the rise of the *Salafis* after the political transformation and an increasing call to implement the Sharia.

The elections to the people's assembly (*maglis al-shaab*) that followed in November 2011 and January 2012 were disappointing to the Copts as it was clear that the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour party associated with the Egyptian Salafist movement were the key beneficiaries. Eight Copts were elected to the assembly, all from marginal opposition parties largely supporting the socialist leader Hamden Sabbahi and former Mubarak ally Ahmed Shafiq. The passing away of Pope Shenouda in March 2012, months before the presidential election, raised several concerns as to who would represent the Coptic interest before the state in a way that would be heard and respected. The victory of Mohammed Morsi from the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom

⁵ Dhimmi- A person living in Muslim lands, who is granted special status and safety in Islamic law in return for paying capital tax. The status is made available to NonMuslims who were people of the book mainly Christians and Jews.

and Justice Party was a severe blow to the Coptic Church. The Church viewed it as a setback in its efforts to construct a liberal regime. Mohammed Morsi did make an effort to mitigate the fears of the Copts by the appointment of Samir Marcos, the former Deputy Governor of Cairo, as one of his Assistant Presidents anfiq Habib, a prominent Coptic Evangelical as the deputy leader of the Freedom and Justice Party. In November 2012, the Coptic orthodox church elected its new Patriarch Pope Tawadros II, and Muhammed Morsi did not attend the coronation ceremony which was viewed negatively by the Copts (Guirguis, 2018).

Dispute over the Constitution

For Copts, the central point of debate in the Egyptian constitution has long been the presence of Article I, which enshrined Islam as the state religion and stated that the principles of Islamic sharia are the main source of legislation. The debate over the new constitution brought the Islamists and the Copts against each other. While the traditional Islamist from Al Azhar campaigned for the retention of the clause, the Salafist (Nour Party) sought to revise it and include rules of Islamic Sharia to be enshrined in the constitution. Under the old formulation Copts were not subjected to the *Sharia* in their personal status laws. The Copts feared that changes in the constitution might alter the nature of personal status law and encourage the use of *Sharia* as the only basis for the resolution of family disputes. Debates within the constitutional assembly between the dominant Islamist current and liberal and secularist opposition had led to the resignation of opposition members from the assembly. In order to ensure that the assembly would be able to pass a new constitution and to prevent his own actions from judicial interference, President Morsi issued a fateful decree that had the effect of putting presidential decrees beyond the reach of judicial review. Morsi was pushing hard for the November 22 decree. In the same month, two of Morsi's top Coptic aides, assistant president Samir Marcos and Rafiq Habib resigned in protest. Morsi in turn appointed large number of fellow Islamist to replace the members who had resigned. This convinced the Coptic church that they could only rely on the Coptic Patriarch Pope Tawadros II to represent the community's interest. On December 1st the constitutional assembly had presented a new constitutional draft to the president which included several articles that empowered Islamic institutions and civil society at the expense of a secular state. In the referendum conducted on December, 64 percent endorsed the changes though only with a 33 percent voter turnout and it was clear that a large number of people boycotted the referendum. The widespread opposition of Coptic Christians to the constitutional changes contributed to sectarian tensions. Yousuf Al Qardawi announced on his website that it would be 'sinful for Muslims to celebrate Christmas with the Copts'. In between the attacks on Copts became rampant. In the words of former IAEA Director and Egyptian political dissident Mohammed El-Baradei, Morsi was setting himself as '*a new pharaoh*'. The Muslim Brotherhood accused the church of encouraging a *Tamarud* rebellion movement against it, led by young Christians and the diaspora (Fahmi, 2014).

The Military Coup of 2013, the Rise of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and the Attacks on Copts

By late June 2013, massive protests began to arise throughout Egypt against the Morsi regime demanding his resignation. According to the Egyptian military source,

as many as 14 million people participated in the protest on 30th June 2013. The precarious situation called for a military intervention which overthrew the Morsi government and brought Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al- Sisi to power on 3rd July 2013. While declaring that the army was planning to oust the government with a promise to rewrite the 2012 constitution and introduce new elections, Mr Sisi was flanked by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, and the Coptic Pope Tawadros II, who sent a message that the Coptic Church was rallying behind the new leader. The presence of the Coptic Pope seemed to indicate to many of Morsi's supporters that the Copts had conspired with the military in ousting Morsi. In the following days, Copts became disproportionately subject to attacks by the members of Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party. Scores of churches and church affiliated sites were torched, attacked and looted by Muslim Brotherhood members. Though many Muslims and Christians participated in the protest to oust Morsi, the Coptic Christians were badly targeted. Conspiracy theories circulated by the brotherhood members fuelled hatred and violence against the Copts. Fiery sermons were delivered by the Islamists from the loudspeakers of the local mosques calling for vengeance on the government and on the Copts for Morsi's ouster. Churches, shops, schools, youth clubs and orphanages were targeted. In some places where the security establishment was weak, Christians took it to themselves to protect their properties.

By the time Sisi's men brought law and order into complete control, hundreds of churches were destroyed, many Christians were killed, many more injured, and many had left their homes in the place where the Muslim Brotherhood had a strong presence. Sisi declared Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation in December 2013. The new constitution was approved by a 98 percent vote in January 2014. The 2014 constitution enshrined collectivistic Coptic rights in a new article 3 in a manner that reinforced the traditional authority of the Coptic Church, stating that "the principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders". The new constitution had a space for Coptic law that paralleled the broader status of the Sharia (Rowe, 2015). Sisi won the presidential election in May 2014 by a 97 percent majority with a promise to improve economic and security conditions. The Copts had more expectations that he would provide them with basic rights and personal safety. During this transition period, the Islamic insurgency has been active in Sinai ever since Morsi's ouster. Terrorists affiliating with ISIS were targeting tourists and Christians. This period witnessed an increase in attacks on Christian targets. A report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information put the number of attacks at 87 in 2014 and 400 in 2015, with the highest number of attacks in Northern Sinai. Sisi could neither keep ISIS from expanding its operations into the mainland nor prevent the sectarian violence against Coptic Christians by the Islamists aligned with ISIS. Despite increasing anti-Christian incidents, Sisi received a hero's welcome at Cairo's St Mark's cathedral on January 6th 2016, during the Christmas Eve Mass. This was the first incident that an Egyptian President participated in at a Cathedral during Christmas Mass (Guirguis, 2018). The huge attacks on Christians made ordinary believers more attached to the church leaders as they felt likely to be targeted in the changing political scenario. The church, on the other hand, tried to consolidate its authority among the believers by not giving any chance to separate the religious and political roles of the church. Because of the positive overtures between the church

and the new administration, the Coptic church did mobilise its believers to vote for Abdul Fateh al Sisi during the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2018. Many Copts viewed him as a protector and as solidarity with the Copts; President Sisi regularly attended the Patriarchal Christmas Liturgy every year (Rowe, 2015; Yefet, 2016).

Major Problems that Worries the Coptic Christians since 2013 Discrimination and Treatment as Second-Class Citizens

In spite of positive overtures from president Sisi, the rights of Coptic Christians still remain on paper. As per the constitution of 2014, Egyptians enjoy absolute freedom of religion. But the constitution also decrees Islam to be the state religion, and conversion to any religion other than Islam is prohibited. President Sisi has always emphasised the idea of Egyptian unity. Though Sisi has won praise from the international media on the issues of proclaiming brotherhood with the Copts, nothing much has changed back home. But at the same time, Sisi has failed to acknowledge the low level of Christian representation in the government, the army, the security establishment and the educational institutions. While refusing to acknowledge the differences between Christians and Muslims and stressing the point that “*We are all Egyptians*”, he does not see Copts as a minority in need of protection and is therefore not willing to extend the necessary measures for equal treatment (Yerkes, 2016).

Failure to Protect the Copts from Violence

Pope Tawadros had championed Sisi as the ‘*savior*’ of the Copts following the ouster of Mohammed Mors in 2013, but with the frequent level of attacks against the Copts, targeting Coptic homes and places of worship, frequent abductions of Copts for ransoms and in some cases forced conversion of woman to Islam. has eroded their faith in the President. The ordinary Copts who face daily discrimination are no longer happy with the way the Sisi administration projects Christian-Muslim relations, the church leaders and by the Egyptian media. The 2020 parliament elections witnessed one of the highest Christian candidatures. Yet the hope of the Copts to end religious discrimination, the dream of equal treatment within the Egyptian legal system and protection from sectarian violence never came true under the Sisi administration. On many occasions, while condemning the attacks on the Copts, the Sisi administration stresses that “*we are all Egyptians*”. In the public discourse, the Copts are described as an integral part of the nation and examples of religious discrimination are played down. Incidents of sectarian violence against the Copts are presented as a general problem of lawlessness or social unrest rather than a targeted attack on the Christian population. In most cases, the church leaders or politicians have refrained from describing incidents of sectarian violence as broader anti-Christian sentiments in Egyptian society. In many cases, the culprits go unpunished. One among them was the incident of May 2016 when a Muslim mob burned several Christian homes in Minya in reaction to an unconfirmed rumour that a Christian man and Muslim woman were having an extramarital affair. Before torching the man’s house, the mob stripped his 70-year-old mother and dragged her along the street naked. Though Sisi had promised to take strong action, the government dropped the case against the Muslim suspect and filed charges against the Christian man for adultery (Guirguis, 2018).

A Futile Law on Church Construction since 2016

The problem of granting permission to build churches was a major problem that worried the Coptic community for several years. Prior to 2016, the president had the sole power to approve the building of the houses of worship as per the Ottoman decree of 1856, which was updated in 1934. In 2016, parliament enacted a law regulating the construction and renovation of churches and the legalisation of active but unlicensed churches to the provincial governors (Emam, 2020). Following this, Christian communities submitted a request for approving the legal status of unlicensed churches, which constituted over half of the active churches. Although the need was perceived as an effort to address the needs of the community, it was limited to only churches and not mosques. It enabled district governors to reject the request to build churches due to reasons of security, the number of Christians in the area and also on matters of the distance between the church and the nearest mosque (Yefet, Defending the Egyptian nation: national unity and Muslim attitudes toward the Coptic minority, 2019). Until 2019, the number of final approvals issued for church construction was less than 200 churches out of more than 5000 applications. At the same time, more than 25 churches were closed during this period (Hoyle, 2020).

The Use of Customary Reconciliation where Copts are Always at the Losing End

Social tensions involving Christians and Muslims, whether it is a business dispute, an argument over property or an affair between a man and woman, are subjected to customary reconciliation rather than taking this into a court settlement. In almost all cases, the Copts will always be at the losing end. Most of the time, they will be forced to make compromises, and on some occasions, the entire Coptic family would be forcibly evicted from their home village without paying any compensation. The use of customary reconciliation totally leaves out the Copts without any protection from the Egyptian legal system. This is used as a system to appease religious hardliners rather than defending the rights of the Copts. Even some of the Coptic bishops have opposed the use of reconciliation and publicly condemned the government for forcing it upon them. However, the Coptic Orthodox church has remained silent on this issue and many other issues concerning Copts due to the church's loyalty to the regime in power. At one of the incidents, a security official told human rights watch that the job of the police was not to intervene and stop killings but to investigate afterwards. On many occasions, officials at the local levels had favoured informal dispute settlement over the court proceedings, and many times the victims were forced to make compromises with the preparators. The lack of implementation of the rule of law has prompted many criminals to kidnap Cops from affluent families and demand a huge amount of ransom. Kidnapping members of the Christian community was a good way of making money for some criminals as they had very weak protection (Brownlee, 2013).

Losing Faith in the Church Authorities and the Emergence of Dissenting Voices

Due to the increasing local violence, people are losing faith in the president and in the decision of the church leaders to keep supporting him. Many Copts have come out against the Church's praise of President Sisi and warned that it would result in

increased vulnerability to attacks on the Copts by the Islamists. In spite of President Sisi's initiative for the establishment of the Supreme Committee to Combat Sectarian Violence in 2018, attacks on Copts continue to grow. Many a time, the local Copts are getting sick of expressing the public ritual of expressing the solidarity between Christians and Muslims after a terrorist attack and claiming that we are all Egyptians. And in recent times though Pope Tawadros II had shown solidarity with some of the senior clerics of Al Azhar or with the President himself, the ordinary Copts had turned down requests to show public solidarity with Muslim clerics after incidents of terror and violence. Bishop Macarius of Minya has been the most vocal critic of the church's official stand on Sisi. While the Coptic Orthodox church commemorates February 15 as the martyrdom of twenty Copts and one Ghanaian killed by ISIS in Libya, the martyrs of the Maspero movement have not been recognised by the Orthodox church despite demands by the activist to recognise their deaths at the hands of the Egyptian military vehicles and snipers (Lukasik, 2018;Kartveit, 2017).

The Rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the Threat to the Copts

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or *Daesh* (ISIL) in 2014 in Syria and Iraq was a major turning point in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The Islamic State went on to target everything which they found un-Islamic, which includes Shias, Christians, Yazidis and people of other faiths. After the rise of ISIS, the attacks on Copts began to be rampant. The beheadings of 20 Egyptian Coptic Christians and a Ghanaian citizen on the shores of Sirte in Libya by the Islamic State in 2015 shook the entire nation, with Egyptian President Sisi calling for massive airstrikes on the suspected IS targets inside Libya. The years 2016 and 2017 witnessed a series of terrorist attacks against the Coptic Christians in Egypt by the Islamic State. The Copts, who were very much impressed during Sisi's Christmas Mass attendance, were deeply dissatisfied following the attacks on the Copts in 2016. In 2016, on 11th December, an explosion outside St Peter's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of Abbassi in Egypt killed at least 25 people. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and promised further attacks as part of its "war on polytheism". In February 2017, ISIS issued a 20-minute video calling Coptic Christians a "*favourite prey*" and vowing to wipe them out because "God gave orders to kill every infidel". Following this, ISIS-linked insurgents stepped up their terrorist campaign in Sinai, forcing hundreds of frightened Christian families to flee their homes. The Palm Sunday bombings of 2017 in Tanta and the St. Marks Coptic Orthodox Cathedral bombing in Alexandria took more than 50 lives. ISIS claimed that the operatives who carried out its mission were Egyptian nationals and warned of future attacks to come. In spite of declaring a three-month emergency, ISIS struck in the same year when a bus full of Christian families headed to the monastery of St Samuel the Confessor in western Minya was ambushed by a group of 10 gunmen in military fatigues. Though the Egyptian military reacted on the same day by conducting air strikes on Islamist bases in Libya, such actions could not protect the Copts. From such incidents, it is clear that in spite of many promises from President Sisi, the security establishment could not safeguard the Copts against the threats issued by the Islamic state. Prior to 2014, the attacks on church buildings were something which happened only in the countryside, but after the rise of ISIS, the terror attacks in some of the most important Coptic churches in the heartland in Cairo and in Alexandria had sent shockwaves to the Christian community. (AlJazeera, 2017; Guirguis, 2018)

Conclusion

Ever since the advent of Arab spring in 2011, the Coptic church believers in Egypt are finding it hard to survive in the midst of the changing social, political and economic scenarios. The Copts were willing to give democratic rule by the Islamists a chance, but the November 22 decree of Morsi in 2012 and the unwillingness of the government to move beyond the mere token representation of non-Islamists damaged the reputation. With the political administration and the church leadership failing to prevent increasing attacks and discrimination against the Copts, this had, in turn, increased dissenting voices from within the church community. Though the relations between Pope Tawadros and President Sisi are very cordial, and in spite of some of the positive overtures from President Sisi, like opening the largest Christian Cathedral in the Middle East in Cairo on January 2019 and attending regular Coptic Christmas Celebration in 2016, average Copts are feeling less safe in Egypt than in the Mubarak years, especially after the advent of ISIS. But the new changes since 2013 have once again helped the church to regain its position as the only representative of the Coptic community. Meanwhile, the Coptic community in the United States has made several attempts to lobby the US government and other international bodies to protect the Coptic minority in Egypt. From the point of view of the Coptic diaspora, the post-Arab spring situation in the Middle East and the deteriorating situation of the Christians in Egypt have called for special protection of the Copts as persecuted religious minorities.

Due to many forms of discrimination, the wealthy Copts tried to migrate to western nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia, where they enjoyed a better standard of living and religious freedom. But the Egyptian government, over the years, rejected any claim of discrimination towards the Coptic minority and attributed such arguments to a conspiracy of external enemies, especially the Zionist Christians and Israel. The regimes also blamed the violence against Copts as a result of local rivalries and even accused the involvement of foreign hands. Under Sisi, there was a wide gap between rhetoric and reality, and institutional discrimination and sectarian tensions continue to rise. A crackdown on civil society and public space is also a problem for pro-Christian voices. Due to this, groups such as the Maspero youth movement, which functions independently from the church, have limited voices. Pope Tawadros discouraged the Copts from criticising the President, which led to larger discontent among ordinary Copts. The Coptic leadership backed the Sisi regime out of fear that an Islamist government would further persecute the Christian minority. Trapped between the state and society, Coptic Christians have protection from neither. They are very often treated as subjects and not as citizens.

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