

political  
Reports

26 AUGUST 2020



المعهد المصري للدراسات  
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

# Egypt's Copts and Politics Determinants and Developments

Dr. Mamdouh Almuneir



[WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG](http://WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG)

[f Eipss.EG](https://www.facebook.com/Eipss.EG) [t Eis\\_EG](https://twitter.com/Eis_EG)

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64  
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: [info@eis-eg.org](mailto:info@eis-eg.org)

## Egypt Church & Jan. Revolution: Attitudes & Transformations

Mamdouh Almuneir

The advent of the Egyptian January Revolution in 2011 marked a new era for the Church and Copts in Egypt. Pope Shenouda III remained loyal to former President Hosni Mubarak and his regime until the latter was deposed by the revolutionaries at Tahrir Square on January 18, 2011 – but by a decision of the military junta at the time. In fact, the calls of Pope Shenouda and church leaders upon demonstrators did not succeed in stopping the revolutionary tide at the time.

This report will monitor the main features of the church's relationship with the January revolution until the military coup on July 3, 2013, and the conflicts among key actors - the regime, the Church, the Copts - in light of the new reality that imposed itself on everyone in January 2011, where its prominent features can be summarized in the following points:

### First: The church's refusal to participate in the revolution

The leadership of the Church refused to participate in the January Revolution and called upon all Copts not to participate, through issuance of several statements to this effect at the time, whether from Pope Shenouda III or by some bishops. In this regard, for example, Pope Shenouda III said:

- "Coptic people do not revolt or disobey the powers that be."<sup>1</sup>
- "It is in our nature to desire a quiet life. We don't like to take part in demonstrations or things like that."<sup>2</sup>

This supportive stance for Mubarak quickly changed in the wake of Mubarak's stepping down, as the Church issued a statement hailing the nascent revolution, greeting the "honest youth of Egypt who led a strong white revolution in Egypt and sacrificed their precious blood to achieve its success ..."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The prior Coptic revolution, Sherif Azer, Mada Masr, 7 January 2015, accessed 3 August 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> St. Takla Haymanout Website, Coptic Church Statement on Jan. Revolution, 15 Feb. 2011, accessed 5 August 2020, [URL](#)

## Second: Church's monopoly of representation of Copts decline

Some attribute the church's monopoly of representation of Copts to the period prior to the January Revolution, specifically two years before its outbreak, when the Kifaya (enough) Movement was incepted, with the participation of Coptic figures such as Amin Iskandar and George Isaac in the movement's foundation. However, this was not a general Coptic pattern, but rather an elitist trend represented by limited Coptic secular personalities, who in turn contributed to the emergence of the so-called secular Coptic trend that intersected with the leadership of the Church at the time.

The great opposition on the part of Copts to the church's rejection of the second marriage of the divorced males or females, which had been stated in Regulation-1938 but was later canceled (by Pope Shenouda III), gave this trend a relative momentum at that time<sup>4</sup>.

It also was a motivating factor for these people to move out of the control of the church and expand their demands from only demands related to the sect, such as second marriage, to citizenship and its wider scope in the expression of public affairs in general.

The Coptic secular current rejecting the Church's monopoly of the representation of Copts can be divided into three categories, according to the Coptic researcher Isaac Ibrahim, as follows:

The first type: Christian religious movements that express a religious position, such as the "Protectors of Faith", where these movements express the positions of some clerics, whether they are hardline or somewhat open-minded.

The second type: movements that express a demand related to a Coptic right that is organized or obstructed by the Church, most notably the movements adopting demands related to the personal status, such as groups of "The Right to Life", "Victims of Personal Status", "Breaking away from the Sect", "Copts 38" and other movements, including even people expressing their own demands.

The third type: movements that arose in circumstances related to Coptic demands, but which engaged in issues related to Egyptian public affairs, and participated in demonstrating on public issues, or

---

<sup>4</sup> 300,000 Christian Divorce Cases, Al-Watan Al-Masria, 16 May 2015, accessed 5 August 2020, [URL](#)

engaged in issues of a political nature, including elections or referendums, such as the Maspero Youth Union<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, the Church strongly resisted this trend among other secular Coptic movements, as it wanted to remain monopolizing representation of the Copts before the Egyptian state, especially after these movements reached 36 in mid-2012, according to a statement by Fadi Youssef, founder of the “Coalition of Egypt’s Copts”, that was confirmed by the Coptic Advisory Council<sup>6</sup>.

### Third: The demise of Pope Shenouda III

Pope Shenouda III passed away on March 17, 2012 at the age of 88 years, of which 41 years he spent as Patriarch of the Egyptian Coptic Church<sup>7</sup>. Then, Anba Pachomius was chosen to be the interim pope for running the Coptic Church affairs, on March 27, 2012 – for about 8 months from March 2012 until Pope Tawadros was elected on November 7, 2012<sup>8</sup>.

Anba Pachomius led the political struggle that was fiery at the time. There were only three months before the presidential elections, and the Church had already lost the race of constitutional amendments and parliament elections.

As a result of the polarization in Egyptian society that was instigated by the military junta at the time, the Church leadership and Copts in general were deeply concerned at the escalating influence of the Islamic movement within the Egyptian state, given the fact that the Church used to be an ally of the state and the regime throughout its history.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Crisis of Coptic Movements between State Power and Church Patriarchy, Isaac Ibrahim, 1 October 2015, accessed 3/8/2020, [URL](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Shenouda III (Pope of Alexandria), Wikipedia, accessed 5 August, 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>8</sup> Evolution of the political role of Egyptian Church after January Revolution, Masr Alarabia, 18 August 2015, accessed 5 August 2020, [URL](#)

August 26, 2020

The Mubarak regime, as mentioned before, was keen to feed up feelings of fear among the Copts of the Muslim majority, so that the Church would continue to protect the regime, and thus ensure its loyalty and permanent support.

With the eruption of the revolution and the collapse of the Mubarak regime, the (illusionary) firewall of the Church fell, and with the polarization between Muslims and Christians fueled by the military and sometimes extremist media discourse from some, and entering into a vortex of action and reaction, the Church engaged in this struggle with the regime, society, and even with large segments of Copts with the psychology of fighting for survival and existence, not just to obtain additional gains, taking advantage of the current liquidity situation and the transitional period in which everything is reformulated.

It was noticeable at the time, that the Church was keen, in all its options throughout the transitional period, to align with the choice of the existing regime represented in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), despite the strained relationship between them due to the Maspero massacre, but the fear and dread of the growing Islamic trend was stronger than everything. Therefore, in constitutional amendments, parliamentary elections, presidential elections, or the Constituent Assembly, the church was always siding with the regime and its allies, against the Islamic movement with all its factions.

When President Morsi was elected, the church remained supportive of the regime, represented in the military, against the president, who was considered as a a threat to its existence, given his Islamic background.

Therefore, it is clear that the Church's policies did not change with respect to its relationship with the state, whether during the period of Pope Shenouda III and his attitude towards the January Revolution, the transitional period under the Anba Pachomius, or during the period of Pope Tawadros II, where the church transformed into a full-fledged political party<sup>9</sup> with a project, competing,

---

<sup>9</sup> Egyptian churches withdraw from the Constituent Assembly on the eve of the inauguration of Pope Tawadros, France 24, 17 Jan. 2011, accessed 3 August 2020, [URL](#)

mobilizing, protesting, negotiating and informally having candidates, as well as practicing all forms of political action, including political pressure groups as well.

But the other most important feature at this stage was that while the Church was moving as a major political party during this period, it no longer had a monopoly on speaking in the name of Copts, although it had fought for a long time in defense of it.

A number of Coptic youth participated in the January Revolution despite the Church's absolute rejection of demonstrating against the regime, as we explained above; and this distancing between the two parties increased after the Maspero massacre in October 2011, where a large number of Copts protesting there were killed by the army and police forces. A great number of Copts believed that the Church did not seriously seek to hold the SCAF accountable for what happened, which made it lose the trust of many Christians as their representative before the state<sup>10</sup>.

Some researchers also consider that the bombing of the All Saints Church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve (2011) was the real cause for the Copts' political separation from their church<sup>11</sup>.

Also, the unprecedented freedom that the Egyptian people experienced after decades of oppression and tyranny throughout Mubarak's rule, encouraged many Copts to express their demands, whether they were related to the sect or to the Egyptian public affairs, whether away from the Church or in coordination with it.

#### Fourth: Copts and incidents of violence

There are many incidents of violence that led to deaths among Copts in the aftermath of the January revolution. Following are the most prominent violence incidents that occurred during this period, regardless of the causes that led to their ignition<sup>12</sup>:

---

<sup>10</sup> Violence Against Copts in Egypt, Jason Brownlee, Carnegie, 14 November 2013, accessed August 6 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>11</sup> Copts' Social Integration in Revolutionary Egypt, May Muguib, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, [URL](#)

<sup>12</sup> A chronology of the most prominent incidents of violence against Christians in Egypt, BBC, 11 August 2015, accessed 5 August 2020, [URL](#)

### The Atfih Incident (2011):

The Atfih incident took place in March 2011 in the city of Atfih, Cairo, against the backdrop of a relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman, which led to the outbreak of clashes, where a number of people were injured.

### The Imbaba Incident (2011):

Sectarian violence erupted in 2011 in Imbaba, in the Cairo governorate, killing 13 people. The clashes erupted after dozens of hard-line Islamists besieged a church there, demanding the return of a girl who they claimed was Christian and converted to Islam and who was imprisoned in the church<sup>13</sup> ().

### The Maspero Incident (2011)

This incident occurred in front of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (Maspero), where some Copts were protesting against the demolition of a building that they considered to be a church in Aswan Governorate, southern Egypt. The incident left dozens of people dead and hundreds injured at the hands of army and police forces there.

All forms of violence remain criminalized and considered as an immoral act regardless of the belief of their perpetrators. Meanwhile, the absence of standards of justice, transparency, and accountability is a major crime that is undoubtedly borne by the tyrannical regime.

### Fifth: The church's new alliance with the regime

The Church and Copts supported the candidate that represented the military and the deep state, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shafiq, in the 2012 presidential election. However, when Shafiq lost and Morsi won the presidential race, the church engaged in a new alliance with the deep state, where the interests of both parties converged in working to bring down the first elected civilian president.

One of the most important political battles that the church fought after Morsi's success was its withdrawal from the Constituent Assembly (CA) together with the so-called "civilian current".<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Egyptian churches withdraw from the Constituent Assembly..., France 24, Op. Cit.

The church was also accused of being responsible for the "Black Bloc" organization, which was implicated in many acts of violence prior to the 3 July coup (2013)<sup>15</sup>, especially against the Republican Palace and headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party.

Lawyer Ahmed Saif Al-Islam in late February 2013 filed a complaint to Prosecutor General Counselor Talaat Abdullah, against some leaders of the Orthodox Church, and some secular Christians, for forming the terrorist organization of "Black Bloc" as he described it<sup>16</sup>, but the church leadership denied its connection with this organization and disavowed its actions<sup>17</sup>.

### Sixth: The Church and preparation for the coup of 3 July 2013

The Coptic Church participated in preparations for Egypt's coup d'état of 3 July 2013, using all its potentials both at home and abroad to secure success of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's military coup against President Mohamed Morsi. The Copts represented the principal component of the protests of June 30, 2013, as the elites that were dissatisfied with Morsi's rule did not have the ability to mobilize masses. While dozens, sometimes hundreds, used to respond to the calls for demonstrations against Morsi by the National Front for Change, chaired by Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei and other opposition movements, on almost a weekly basis, the church was able to mobilize thousands of its followers to demonstrate on June 30, where most of the protesters either belonged to the church, or were army and police personnel and conscripts in plain clothes, in addition to a few thousand opponents of Morsi's rule.

IConfirming the Church's celebration of the June 30 demonstrations, Pope Tawadros II said, "It was not an ordinary day for Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, as there was a state of unanimity and wonderful cohesion to get rid of the Brotherhood rule ... The nuns were carrying the Egyptian flag side by side with their veiled Muslim sisters."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Black Bloc, Al Jazeera Encyclopedia, 25 March 2013, accessed 8 August 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>16</sup> A complaint to Prosecutor General accuses some Orthodox Church leaders of training Black Bloc militias, Rassd website, 25 February. 2015, accessed 8 August 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>17</sup> Egyptian Church denies relation to the Black Bloc militias, Anadolu Agency, 30 Jan. 2013, accessed 8 August 2020, [URL](#)

<sup>18</sup> Tawadros to Kuwaiti Watan newspaper: The Spring revolutions are a malicious plot, Al-Shorouk newspaper, 23 March 2014, accessed August 8, 2020, [URL](#)



It is worth noting that Pope Tawadros II's attitude towards the January revolution was similar to the attitude of Pope Shenouda III and perhaps worse, according to his statements in March 2014 in an interview with the Kuwaiti Al-Watan newspaper, saying: "The revolutions of the so-called "Arab Spring" were not a spring or even autumn, but they were an orchestrated "Arab winter" brought by malicious hands to our Arab region to break up its countries into mere small, weak states."<sup>19</sup>

However, the official position announced by the Church and its leaders before June 30 was very cautious, where the church's official statements were trying to appear neutral letting the Copts free to participate or not in demonstrations. However, on July 3 Pope Tawadros II appeared clearly in the coup scene, supportive of the army's move against the first democratically elected civilian president in Egypt.

## Conclusion

This brief review of the Coptic Church's role from the January Revolution (2011) up to the July coup d'état (2013) shows that the Church believes that ensuring its survival in the Egyptian society relies on two basic factors that have represented a general framework of its performance during this period:

*First:* keeping close to the regime in order to obtain its support and protection, a rule that the Mubarak regime created - as previously mentioned - even if the regime was responsible for the violence against Copts, but the Church was much concerned about preserving the interests of the Coptic religious, political and economic elite, even if this came at the expense of the rest of Copts.

*Second:* feelings of fear that were sometimes mixed with hatred toward the rise of the Islamic tide in Egypt were the second main motivation for all the Church's mobilization during this period, in order to preserve its interests that may be lost in the event of an actual Islamist control over power, even if this came through democratic procedures.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid