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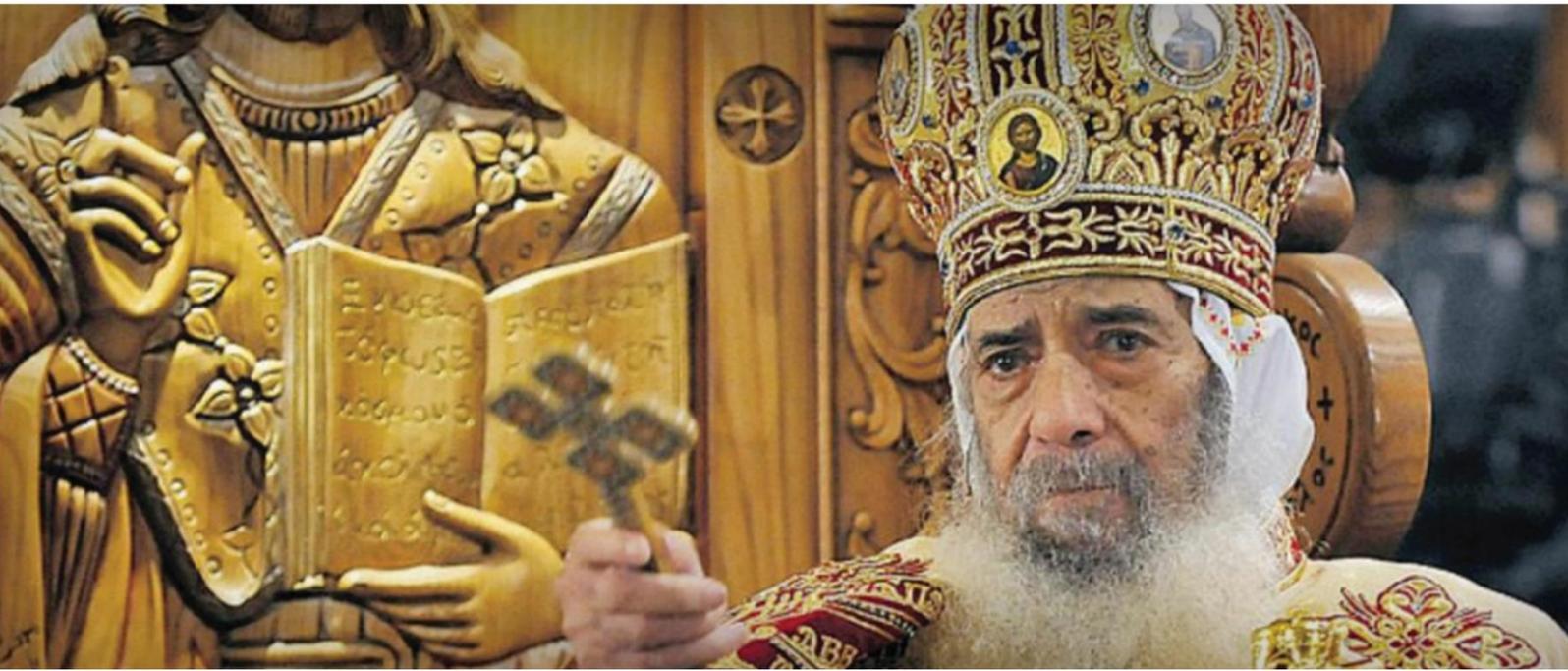
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# The Church State in Egypt Origin And Formation

Dr. Mamdouh Almuneir



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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)

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## The Church State in Egypt - Origin And Formation

Mamdouh Almuneir

This article will review how Pope Shenouda III's political project turned into a kind of "Church State" during the Mubarak era and how the relationship between the two parties developed to this extent and the impact of this on the Egyptian Church and State.

When Mubarak assumed power in the wake of Sadat's assassination, Shenouda III had been under house arrest at the Saint Bishoy Monastery in the Natroun desert since September 1980.<sup>1</sup> There was bad blood in the atmosphere, amid the consequences of the Sadat assassination, and Mubarak was afraid that the power of the armed Islamic groups would target him like his predecessor, especially since he attended the assassination and was almost injured.

Therefore, Mubarak tried to ease the tension and released most of the political detainees, but the Pope remained in custody until January 1985.<sup>2</sup> During this period, messengers between the two men conveyed messages and understandings, as well as the pressures of the Coptic diaspora organizations, especially the American Coptic Association, via a number of influential members of the Congress sympathetic to their cause, which eventually resulted in the release of Shenouda and his return to the seat of the Patriarchate in exchange for his support for the Mubarak regime externally and internally and not to defy the State, as he did during the era of Sadat.<sup>3</sup>

Diaspora Copts and US International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 can be considered the two major variables during the Mubarak era, which had a significant impact on the relationship between the state and the church:

First: The influence of the diaspora Copts on Egyptian public affairs at the end of the Sadat era and throughout the Mubarak reign, where they backed Pope Shenouda III in his struggle with Sadat and exerted great pressure on the Egyptian regime during the Mubarak era.

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<sup>1</sup> The Priest and the Pharaoh.. Pope Shenouda III in the eras of Sadat and Mubarak, Al Jazeera, accessed 29 June 2020, [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> One of the sponsors of these understandings was Former Minister of Housing Hasaballah Al-Kafrawi. See the first source.

July 12, 2021

Second: The Act issued by the United States in 1998 called the International Religious Freedom Act, where the United States gives itself the right to protect freedom of worship in different countries, including the protection of minorities, and to take whatever policies it wants to protect religious freedoms and minorities around the world.

Although this law is good and no one may disagree with it, the practical reality is that Washington was looking for a legal justification to allow it to interfere in the internal affairs of countries, as well as take minorities in different countries as a pretext for passing certain policies to serve its interests.

In this regard, the diaspora Copts and the Egyptian Church greatly benefited from this law, where Mubarak's regime submitted to the Church in a way that made the Muslim majority feel that they were the persecuted minority in their own homeland.

As for the diaspora Copts<sup>4</sup>, In his study on them, Coptic researcher Hani Labib refers to this influence, saying, "It is noteworthy that all the organizations and bodies established in the seventies in the diaspora used to support the late Pope Shenouda III against President Anwar Sadat, where the crisis between the diaspora Copts and President Sadat worsened when they launched a wide-range campaign on him during his visit to the United States in August 1981. They also supported Pope Shenouda III in facing the law on apostasy.

The diaspora Copts also defended Shenouda while he was under house arrest in the monastery of Anba Bishoy in Wadi al-Natrun during the period from September 1981 to January 1985. This confirms that the attitude of diaspora Copts towards President Anwar Sadat was behind Sadat's conviction that they were acting for Pope Shenouda III, and that the Pope was their main motivator against him, especially since the Pope Shenouda III did not condemn them for their attitudes and behavior."<sup>5</sup> We understand from Hani Labib's words that the Pope was satisfied with what the diaspora Copts were doing.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Diaspora Copts' here refers to Copts of Egyptian origin who are active in the Coptic file, whether individually or within institutions and organizations they practice their work under their umbrella.

<sup>5</sup> Diaspora Copts, those that fled for earning their living, Hani Labib, Al-Watan newspaper, accessed 27 June 2020, [link](#)

July 12, 2021

In another important section of the Coptic researcher's study, Labib explains the impact of the influence of the diaspora Copts on the Church during the reign of Pope Shenouda III, saying, "While Pope Cyril VI had resorted to President Gamal Abdel Nasser to build the new cathedral and to pay the salaries of workers at one time, Pope Shenouda III did not face such crises, as the diaspora Copts were the main supporters of the Coptic Church for the reconstruction of monasteries, the building of churches, and the establishment of service and development projects, given the fact that they are its children on the one hand, and for their sense of responsibility and duty towards the Church on the other hand."<sup>6</sup>

### The Mubarak-Shenouda alliance

Pope Shenouda III returned to his seat at the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo, amid understandings between him and President Mubarak in exchange for his release and his return to the leadership of the Copts. This was manifested in the fact that the Church became publicly supportive of Mubarak and his policies as well as the succession of his son Gamal Mubarak, where the Pope remained until the last day before Mubarak decided to step down during the January revolution, supportive of him and rejecting any demonstrations against him.

On the other hand, the Patriarch became the sole representative of the Copts in everything, and the Church became a supra-constitutional institution that is not subject to any form of control or scrutiny by the state, where it has become, not metaphorically speaking, a state within the Egyptian state.<sup>7</sup> It is not subject to any financial control over its resources or expenditures; it regulates its entire internal affairs, and it even refuses to comply with the judicial verdicts.

Thus, the church was no longer the spiritual reference to the Copts only, and the Pope no longer had a clear political project only, but Shenouda even transformed this project into an actual state inside Egypt.

Certainly the Copts, as Egyptian citizens, also suffered from Mubarak's regime, where the sectarian strife incidents escalated during his reign. Many researchers believe that a large part of these incidents

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The late President Sadat publicly accused Shenouda of being separatist

July 12, 2021

were fabricated by the security services during Mubarak's reign, so that the Copts would remain in a state of constant fear and the need to be protected Mubarak's state, according to Jason Brownlee, a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment, in his study of violence against Copts, confirming that the Egyptian security services were responsible for most incidents of violence against Copts<sup>8</sup>.

A distinction must be made between the Church and its being transformed into a sectarian state, and the common Copts, most of whom were suffering, as most Egyptians used to suffer from the Mubarak regime, away from security persecution.

Here, some may think that there is confusion between the idea of the privileges that the Church obtained and the talk about the suffering of the Copts. The truth is that there is no ambiguity, as Mubarak gave privileges to the Church as an institution, not to the Copts as citizens. The matter was a purely beneficial exchange between the two parties. The Church supported Mubarak and backed him with full force, and in return, he provided it with an exceptional and distinguished position within the Egyptian state.

Even in the case of the Copts who obtained political or economic privileges, the matter was elitist and a kind of appeasement of the Church as an institution and not out of a belief in the right of Copts or even Muslims to exercise their role as citizens enjoying full rights.

Mubarak and the military regime that is still governing never respected people's rights and freedoms as much as the matter was mere interests and balances that were recalled when needed.

The Church, as caring for the Copts, has lost a lot of its credibility with its believers. The Church, which is supposed to be expressive of a high moral and human model derived from the teachings of Christ, it has become supportive of tyrants and murderers of their people and even demanded its followers to support them!!

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<sup>8</sup> Fastenrath and Kazanjian, "Important Factors for Church Building in Egypt," 26–28

July 12, 2021

The Church lost a lot in the battle of values and morals in return for political gains that change with circumstances, according to numerous Coptic thinkers and researchers<sup>9</sup> who completely rejected this political role played by the Church since Pope Shenouda III took over.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Muslims and their religious institutions suffered the most from the Mubarak regime, especially the Islamists, whether by confiscating their money and properties, arresting or preventing from work, or restricting mosque activities and worshippers, and the state monopoly of supervision over everything, even what can be said and cannot be said by mosque preachers.

### Conclusion:

- 1- The Egyptian Church turned into a state within the Egyptian state, depending on the political project of Pope Shenouda III.
- 2- Diaspora Copts and US International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 represented a strong support for the Pope during the Mubarak era to complete his political project and build the Church state. The diaspora Copts provided Shenouda with financial independence from the state, and the US International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 provided him with political independence and equality in the face of the state.
- 3- The Pope was keen not to personally collide with Mubarak and the regime, and indirectly made the diaspora Copts his pressure tool without direct responsibility in order to preserve his relationship with Mubarak, which is the key to the success of the Church's project, as Shenouda remained loyal to this relationship until Mubarak stepped down.
- 4- The regime bears a lot of responsibility for the violent incidents that occurred against the Copts, so that they would remain sheltered by the state for fear of the Islamic scarecrow, which the regime has been keen to use constantly.

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<sup>9</sup> Political confusion: Egypt's Copts between the citizenship umbrella and the church's umbrella, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, accessed 29 June 2020, [link](#)

July 12, 2021

5- The state did not fulfill its duty to completely solve the problems of the Copts, and resorted to security and temporary solutions, which increased the scale of sectarian tension.

6- A large number of Coptic figures and youth rejected the Church's political orientations and considered them harmful to the church's image among the Egyptian people and followers of the Church itself.

