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**COPTS IN EGYPT: BETWEEN MINORITY PROTECTION AND POWER
LEVERAGING**

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in the EU's Neighbourhood taught by Joshua Castellino and Prof. Kathleen Cavanaugh
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Copts in Egypt: between minority protection and power leveraging

Christians of Egypt, mainly referred to as Copts, are the largest minority in the country. Their estimated population is between 4.7 to 7.1 million, forming roughly 10-15% of the Egyptian population that is estimated now around 98.5 million people.¹ Copts of Egypt are considered also the largest Christian community in the Middle East and one of the oldest Christian communities around the world. Egyptian Copts consider themselves descendants of the ancient Egyptians. Due to the historical changes of the Egyptian political system in the past centuries, with Muslim and Arab rulers coming, Copts numbers drastically decreased throughout the history of the country. In the modern history of Egypt, Copts have gone through different phases of integration, freedom of practice, and equal treatment in Egyptian society. Since 1952, the year on which Egypt became a republic, the church-state relations have been going through fluctuating phases of uncertainty and disruption. The role of religion in the state has hardly ever been rationalized in Egypt, the clearest example is the constitution which adopts a religious biased language that gives Copts in Egypt a feeling of hostility. The article 2 of the Egyptian constitution reads: "Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic its official language. Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation."² That atmosphere of hostility translated into the Copts community ties and the sense of belonging in Egypt being strongly influenced by the religious institution. Despite the existence of evangelical, catholic, and Orthodox beliefs, "the Coptic Orthodox Church" acts as the institution officially representing Christians in Egypt.

Across different presidents ruling Egypt with their political agendas, Copts were promised political and civil rights, some of these promises came to action and many were used as a political statement to ensure the maintenance of the good relationship with the Coptic Orthodox Church. This paper aims to look at how the situation of vulnerability of Copts in Egypt has been used as a tool to leverage power by presidents. One of the main defining elements of the situation of Copts in Egypt is that their rights are critically influenced by the relationship between the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the president in power. Therefore, the next paragraphs will be discussing the situation of Copts in Egypt under Mubarak, Morsy, and Al-Sisi, with a particular look at some incidents and regime actions to give an understanding of the development of Copts situation in Egypt until nowadays.

During Hosni Mubarak's ruling in Egypt, which lasted for 30 years, a strong alliance was formed with the Pope of the Orthodox Church "Shenouda III." At the beginning of his presidency in 1981, Mubarak released Shenouda and other prominent Coptic figures that were under house arrest in a monastery in the desert sent by the previous president Sadat.³ Few years after, Mubarak reinstated Shenouda III as the pope of the Orthodox Church in exchange for the support of the Church to state's policies and the avoidance of taking any opposition stance against the regime. For that reason, Copts have supported Mubarak's re-election, his political party (The National Democratic Front Party), and his constitutional amendment that the Church was against earlier. This strong alliance between Mubarak and the pope, could be seen as a

form of religious corporatism, entailed institutional privileges to the Orthodox Church that was criticized and claimed to have increased the separation between Copts and Muslims and given the pope stronger authority over all Copts in Egypt.⁴

Despite that Mubarak's era has been seen as a positive gradual development in the coexistence in the Egyptian society,⁵ the situation of Copts socially and politically did not necessarily improve. Even with the strong relationship between Mubarak and the Coptic Orthodox Church, which entailed promises of protection and political support, the last decade of Mubarak has witnessed a strong increase in the sectarian violence between Muslims and Copts.⁶ Several attacks on churches and domestic conflicts were reported, yet the government reaction to these incidents has been slow and not effective. On the political representation side, the number of Copts in the Egyptian Parliament never exceeded 3% in addition to a few individual cases of Copts reaching high-level positions in the government.

Mubarak's regime used the vulnerability of the Copts to strengthen the rhetoric of the war against "Islamic Terrorism", anthropologist Talal Asad described that Mubarak's regime "maintained that it was the only force capable of ensuring religious peace precisely because it suppressed Islamic extremism." For decades, Mubarak's propaganda held the discourse that without his protection, Copts won't be able to survive the sectarian targeting from Islamic groups. At the moments when the sectarian attacks between Muslims and Copts intensified, the regime exploited Coptic insecurity to its own political benefit. Instead of putting the police and security measures at the service of all citizens equally, the regime instated itself as the only guardian from sectarianism and Islamic violence against Copts.⁷ Although this might seem that aims at protecting, many sectarian incidents of sectarian attacks exacerbated by police reaction, by leaving the scene when they were most needed, or by slow reacting to very urgent situations. The security agents of Mubarak's regime were responsible for the death of more Copts than those who died in any sectarian attack in the modern history of Egypt.⁸ The major church attack in the first minutes of 2011 during the New Year's mass has shown the failure of the Egyptian security forces to provide any protection to Copts, which fuelled Coptic youth to join the call for demonstrations and drove them to the square despite the Church's disagreement with any form of protestation against Mubarak's regime.

The Copts engagement in the 25th January 2011 revolution can be analyzed through two readings, the first one is the participation of Copts in the revolution and the second is the institutional reaction of the Coptic Orthodox Church and other churches of belief to the events. The reading on the participation of Copts especially Coptic youth in the revolution explains the resentment that Copts felt due to the vulnerability the previous regime had made sure it always existed. Thus, revolting against the regime seemed like a legit channel to put forward this anger towards a change to a state of equality, freedom and social justice. Copts reuniting with Muslims against the regime represented a strong sentiment of national solidarity in Egypt. On the other hand, the Coptic Orthodox Church had a completely opposing stance towards the 25th January revolution. The pope in an official statement encouraged the Coptic community to boycott the protests saying "Thank God that my sons are not participating in the demonstrations." the statement had a strong message to warn Copts that participating in the

protests means not being the Pope's sons, therefore not being the church's son. The pope's statement points to a proclulsion to the church's hardest penalty: excommunication.⁹

The Coptic Orthodox Church's reaction to the revolution could be attributed to two significant reasons. The first is the fear of the replacement of Mubarak's regime being an Islamic regime that would threaten the Coptic community. The Second is that the church might not have the same relations with the new regime replacing Mubarak while they had an already established strong alliance with his regime and its institutions. Similarly, the appearance of Islamist political actors showing political influence on the square was worrisome for Copts and non-Islamist Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood dominating the political scene in the wake of removing the dictator who suppressed them brought up a lot of ethnic and religious division inside the Egyptian society. Moreover, the chaos that came with the transition of power and lack of public security formed a strong threat to the vulnerable minorities in Egypt, mainly Copts.

The fear of an Islamic regime was translated in the Church's strong support to the opposing candidate to the Muslim Brotherhood candidate "Ahmed Shafik", who comes from Mubarak's regime, during the presidential elections of 2012. The winning of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate "Mohamed Morsy" showed the inevitability of clash that would soon happen by the Islamists taking power and marginalizing anyone who disagrees with their politics. The constitution of 2012 was the first sign to imply that marginalization made Copts, in particular, more vulnerable in issues which they have been fighting for such as establishing places of worship, non-Islamic-based laws for religious dispute resolutions and the freedom to the community in choosing the religious representative and intermediary with the state.

By the beginning of Morsy's presidency, there was a strong feeling amongst Copts that Islamists act as if they enjoy absolute power and legal immunity to be questioned.¹⁰ At the same time sectarian violence had rapidly increased, sectarian attack reports rose from 45 reports in 2010 to 112 in 2012, according to Egyptian press reports.¹¹ Many of these sectarian attacks happened in cities of upper Egypt which are heavily populated by Copts, the voting opposition against Morsy in the presidential elections made Copts target Islamist assaults. The Anti-Copts violence drove further validation from the community towards a coup that would overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood regime. Consequently, the Coptic community largely supported General Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi as the leader of the military coup that managed to get rid of the Islamists.

With Abdel Fatah Al- Sisi coming to power, a new alliance was formed between the state and the Coptic Church led by the subsequent Pope Tawadros II. This alliance looks similar to Mubarak's-Shenouda III pact, supported in return of protection. However, using his charisma and strategy on providing gestures to gain public support, Al-Sisi made a notable presence in Coptic religious celebrations, starting with attending the Christmas Mass in January 2015 and followed by the active presence in most of the biggest celebrations. Al-Sisi's active presence gave a calming message to the Coptic community and a promise of equality, protection, and freedom of practice. The new regime dealing with the Copts situation in Egypt does not look any different from the former regimes, Al-Sisi's propaganda is crafting the image of the

“Saviour of Copts” in Egypt. However, the narrative is still evidently used to legitimize all his narratives and regime’s actions under the fight against Islamist, the war on terror and the protection against the sectarian war in Egypt. The contrast between the rhetoric and the reality is astonishing. While having 36 Copts members of the 2015 parliament representing the highest number ever for Copts in the Egyptian parliament, which gives a progressive step about Copts participation in political life, on the ground the situation has not improved for Copts rights.¹² The new authoritarian regime has only made the situation worse, with the restrictions on freedom of speech, Copts are not even able to speak out their concern to the regime, neither through the institutional channel “the Church” nor through media or civil society. Furthermore, the state validates shutting down all voices that call for human rights, freedom of expression, equality, and democratic participation vindicating that those voices hurdle the regime’s mission to maintain the public security, the war on terror, and the protection of national unity.

In conclusion, the government's failure to ensure the protection of the rule of law in Egypt has significant consequences on vulnerable communities such as the Copts. Despite their suffering from persecution, violence, and sectarian attacks, the primary source of threat for the Coptic community is not a confessional element, it is the political realm that is controlled by alliances that did not serve the people of this community. Since the 1960s, Copts in Egypt have been advocating for having equal access to permissions to build houses of worship, a process that had been made difficult for them intentionally and caused sectarian incidents that costed tens of Copt’s lives. They have been asking for adding their religious events as official holidays, which some schools and universities intentionally assign exams on these days, unequal to all Muslim religious events which are official public holidays. They have been asking about equal representation in TV programs, TV shows, and educational curriculum, which is dominated exclusively with Islamic content. They have been asking for equal treatment by security forces in protecting them during any sectarian violence, by rapid reaction and fair treatment not based on the religion section of their national ID. Yet, it is evident that the above-mentioned regimes were aware of Copts' needs and demands that ensure the protection of the community from living in a hostile atmosphere. However, the regimes decided to add to this vulnerability and to not answer to the continuous complaints, since the neediness of the Coptic minority would represent a tool for regimes to legitimize their policies. The divide and rule strategy have been a dominant theme of how regimes handled Copts’ problems in Egypt. It is noticeable that the regime has been dealing with Copt’s struggle as a tool for political gains. Whereas it became clear that the state repression of Islamists will not necessarily entail protection to Copts, and that putting the Muslim and Coptic communities in the face of each other will only increase the sectarian conflict and threaten the Coptic community further. Therefore, for the regime to effectively protect and empower the Coptic minority it has to make political effort to change policies and ensure their security and freedom on the ground, and to drop the institutional lens and deal with that community as an essential component of the survival of the Egyptian society, as Egyptian citizens and not as a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

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