

## COPTS AND THE MILLET PARTNERSHIP: THE INTRA-COMMUNAL DYNAMICS BEHIND EGYPTIAN SECTARIANISM

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### ABSTRACT

The sparse scholarship on the political role of Coptic Christians in modern Egypt almost always takes the Coptic Orthodox Church as a point of departure, assuming that the head of the church, the Coptic patriarch, is not only the spiritual leader of the community but its political leader as well. This article argues that the disproportionate attention afforded to the Coptic Orthodox Church in this scholarship has obscured intra-communal dynamics of the Copts that are essential to an understanding of their political role. Through an analysis of historical struggles between the Coptic clergy and the Coptic laity for influence in Egyptian politics, as well as a particular focus on how these struggles have played out in the arena of personal status law, the article demonstrates that Egyptian politics and Coptic communal dynamics are deeply intertwined, to a degree often disregarded both by Copts and by Egypt analysts.

**KEYWORDS:** Christian-Muslim relations, Coptic Christianity, Egyptian politics, personal status law, sectarianism

The journalistic shorthand that has emerged in discussing the current situation of Egypt's Coptic Christians is that this is a particularly difficult, precarious time for the community. In the midst of the uncertainty looming over the country as a whole, the Copts are said to bear a double burden: the burden borne by all Egyptians as a consequence of the January 25th revolution and the ensuing rise of the Mursi and El-Sisi regimes, as well as a burden borne particularly by Christians, namely, the apparent revival of sectarian tensions dating to the bombing of an Alexandria church just before the revolution. In the wake of the notorious New Year's 2011 bombing in Alexandria, Copts came together, in defiance of the church hierarchy, to mount a series of unprecedented protests, particularly at the Radio and Television Building in downtown Cairo, known as Maspero. As one such protest unfolded in October 2011, Maspero became the site of one of the worst massacres of Copts in modern Egyptian history.

Particularly problematic in so much of the journalism—and, indeed, so much of the scholarship—that examines the modern Coptic community is the disproportionate attention afforded to the Coptic Orthodox Church as the purported representative of the community. This disproportionate attention has tended to obscure the vitally important intra-communal dynamics of the Copts. Yet, as I seek to demonstrate below, grasping these dynamics is essential to understanding not only relations between Copts and Muslims in Egypt, but further, relations between Copts and the Egyptian state. Accordingly, this article undertakes an analysis of Coptic communal dynamics

and their impact on relations both with the state and with Muslims that refuses the centrality of the church as an institution—a centrality so often taken for granted. What this analysis will reveal is that Egyptian politics and Coptic communal dynamics are deeply intertwined, to a degree often disregarded both by Copts and by Egypt analysts. Indeed, one can no longer view the history of the Coptic community as *sui generis*, as exceptional, or as separate from that of Egyptian Muslims.

Since the 1970s, Egypt, and for that matter the entire Arab world, has witnessed virtually uninterrupted growth in institutions that are actively engaged in the interpretation of holy scriptures and the application of these interpretations to everyday life.<sup>1</sup> From the televangelism of Amr Khaled to the Azhari institutes of the educational system, the presence of faith-oriented institutions in the public sphere is greater now than ever before in Egypt's modern history—and it continues to grow. While these faith-oriented institutions have enjoyed material support from a wide spectrum of generous benefactors—not least, the Egyptian state—civic institutions in the public sphere have, on the whole, suffered a steady decline over the past thirty to forty years. One of the consequences of this *Islamic trend* for Egyptian Muslims is that reference to one's faith has become at least as common in the current Egyptian public sphere as reference to one's national feeling.

In tandem with this Islamic trend, there has grown a *Coptic trend*, likewise embracing media, social, and educational institutions. But in contrast to the institutions of the Islamic trend, which have had varied origins and benefactors, those of the Coptic trend have overwhelmingly developed within the organizational framework of the Coptic Orthodox Church—and if not literally within that framework, then at least with the knowledge and blessing of the church hierarchy.

The astonishing success of church leaders in keeping these institutions within their orbit owes much, perhaps ironically, to the Egyptian state. In the 1950s, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Coptic church hierarchy shared a foe—Coptic landowners and notables. Nasser sought to dispense with these elite Copts given their participation in the old regime, while the church hierarchy saw the Coptic elites as a threat to their control of church finances and endowments. As a result, Nasser and the Coptic patriarch made common cause to marginalize the Coptic elite. Since that time, the Egyptian state has recognized the Coptic patriarch as both the spiritual and chief political representative of the Coptic community. Patriarchs have used this position of prominence to make the Coptic Orthodox Church the dominant institution in the lives of most Copts.

Rounding out the argument, just as Egyptian Muslims have found themselves bombarded in recent years by admonitions about faith from the institutions of the Islamic trend, Copts have, for their part, found themselves enveloped by institutions controlled by or affiliated with the church—and all this while the civic institutions of the bygone post-independence era withered for lack of funds. These are the circumstances under which two solitudes—one Christian, and one Muslim—have emerged in Egypt.

## STATE OF THE LITERATURE

Unfortunately, scholars of modern Egypt have contributed astonishingly little to public understanding of the Coptic community, whether in Egypt or abroad. Indeed, if one judges their importance in

1 For accounts of this growth, see, for example, Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit: Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

contemporary Egypt by the extent to which they attract attention from scholarly observers, one might well conclude that Copts have a negligible impact on Egyptian social, political, or cultural life. There are, for instance, startlingly few English-language histories of the modern Coptic community or Coptic social life.<sup>2</sup> Copts appear to attract attention from Western scholars only insofar as they attract attention from Egyptian Islamists, not for the dynamics of their own community. A case in point is Rachel Scott's recently published book, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State*.<sup>3</sup> The subtitle holds the promise of according serious and sustained attention to the implications of Coptic life and culture. Nevertheless, in a book that is explicitly dedicated to non-Muslims and their relations with the Egyptian state, the text is overwhelmingly concerned with Islamist thinkers and their vision of Egyptian citizenship, and Coptic conceptions of citizenship are relegated to a chapter at the end entitled "Coptic Responses." The title of that chapter is highly revealing, for Copts seem to emerge in their own right only when they *respond* to Islamists.

Nevertheless, Scott deserves recognition for at least acknowledging the existence of the Coptic community and raising the question of their position in the Egyptian polity. An astonishing number of recent works in anthropology, history, and political science discussing modern Egypt make only the most cursory reference to Copts—if they bother to make reference to Coptic Christians at all. In a recent, unsystematic survey of both landmark and recent monographs examining modern Egypt in these disciplines, the author located no fewer than thirty-three texts that each contained less than five references to Copts.<sup>4</sup> Far more significant than the few references to Copts in these works, is the

2 Among the important exceptions to the rule are Sebastian Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Magdi Guirguis and Nelly van Doorn-Harder, *The Emergence of the Modern Coptic Papacy* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011); B. L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics 1918–1952* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Hamied Ansari, "Sectarian Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expediency of Religion," *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 3 (1984): 397–418; Peter E. Makari, *Conflict & Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007); and Thomas Philipp, "Copts and Other Minorities in the Development of the Egyptian Nation-State," in *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic: A Reassessment of Revolution and Change*, ed. Shimon Shamir (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). Likewise vital, although examining the period preceding the modern, is Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Beyond these published sources, there are the following unpublished doctoral dissertations, all of which are essential in a subject area with such a small scholarly literature: Dina el Khawaga, "Le Renouveau Copte: La Communauté Comme Acteur Politique" (PhD dissertation, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 1993); Elizabeth Oram, "Constructing Modern Copts: The Production of Coptic Christian Identity in Contemporary Egypt" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University, 2004); Anthony Shenoda, "Cultivating Mystery: Miracles and the Coptic Moral Imaginary" (PhD dissertation, Social Anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 2010); Angie Heo, "Technologies of Intercessory Power: Images and Movement among the Coptic Orthodox of Contemporary Egypt" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, 2008).

3 Rachel M. Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

4 Where possible, the books listed here were searched electronically for references to Copts, and in the absence of electronic versions of the texts, tables of contents and indexes were carefully reviewed: Kamran Asdar Ali, *Planning the Family in Egypt: New Bodies, New Selves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Anne Alexander, *Nasser: His Life and Times* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005); Selma Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution, 1919–1952* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt: The History and Society of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); John T. Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of*

fact that they rarely cast the modern history of the Copts as important to grasping the modern history of Egypt as a whole. That is, Copts are cast as having, at best, an incidental role in the history of modern Egypt. In several works, this problematic absence of Copts is still further compounded by the assumption that the modern history of Copts is *sui generis*—specific to the Coptic community and properly understood on its own terms, separate from that of modern Egypt as a whole.

There are several factors that have contributed to this state of affairs in modern Egypt scholarship. Most importantly, the scholar's choice to identify a Coptic Christian community in contemporary Egypt is one with intensely political implications, given longstanding debates about Egyptian citizenship and the equality of Copts before the law. Indeed, so sensitive is the topic that both the Egyptian state and the Coptic Orthodox Church have actively discouraged research into notions of Coptic identity. In a 1994 interview with *Al-Musawwar* magazine, the late Pope Shenouda characteristically declared: "We are not a minority in Egypt. We do not like to consider ourselves a minority and do not like others to call us a minority." Strikingly, he went on to explain:

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*Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Khaled Fahmy, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Michael Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jane Hathaway, *The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: the Rise of the Qazdaglis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nicholas Hopkins and Reem Saad, eds., *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2004); Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); James Jankowski, *Egypt's Young Rebels: "Young Egypt" 1933–1952* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975); James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, for Worse: The Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Arlene Elowe Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Abdesalam Maghraoui, *Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt, 1922–1936* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Rabab el-Mahdi and Philip Marfleet, eds., *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (London: Zed Books, 2009); Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Tamir Moustafa, *The Struggle for Constitutional Power: Law, Politics, and Economic Development in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mark Allen Peterson, *Connected in Cairo: Growing up Cosmopolitan in the Modern Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, eds., *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Nancy Y. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Relli Shechter, *Smoking, Culture and Economy in the Middle East: The Egyptian Tobacco Market 1850–2000* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Robert L. Tignor, *State, Private Enterprise, and Economic Change in Egypt, 1918–1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

“The terms minority and majority indicate segregation and discrimination. This does not befit the sons of a single homeland, especially if this homeland is beloved Egypt.”<sup>5</sup>

The absence of reliable, commonly accepted statistics on the Coptic community is emblematic of these political sensitivities surrounding the topic in Egypt. By way of example, in 1975, Pope Shenouda put forth the estimate of 6.8 million, or 18 percent of the Egyptian population. In the next year, the official census put the figure at 2.3 million of 36.6 million Egyptians, or 6.3 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> Critics of the census figures cite the reluctance of Copts to reveal their faith, and of census officials to ask questions about faith. Indeed, census officials are accused by such critics of having attempted, in the past, to ascertain faith from a cursory examination of names.<sup>7</sup>

A related factor impeding serious scholarly exploration of notions of Coptic identity is the alacrity with which particular American and European political forces have taken up the cause of anti-Christian persecution in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Among the leaders in this regard is the Hudson Institute, which houses the Center for Religious Freedom under the directorship of Nina Shea.<sup>9</sup> Accusations of anti-Christian persecution have served as a means to discredit the Egyptian government in Washington policy circles. Emblematic of this was how a panel at the 2012 American-Israel Public Affairs Committee conference evolved into an elegy for the Coptic community, led by Shea.<sup>10</sup> One can trace the themes in the center’s work back at least several decades. Indeed, the Islamophobia that pervades the writings of Shea and her colleagues is only the latest instance of what one might call the persecution discourse. Arguably the pioneer of this persecution discourse—at least in an Egyptian context—is an activist who has taken on the pseudonym Bat Ye’or.<sup>11</sup> In a series of books published since 1971, Ye’or has insisted on a distinctly ahistorical approach to the study of Christian life in the Middle East. Indeed, her principal claim is that little has changed in the plight of Arab Christians since the time of the Prophet, and that Muslims have enacted and reenacted patterns of violence against them.<sup>12</sup>

The unfortunate consequence of this politicization of scholarship in Europe and North America, as effected by Shea and Bat Ye’or, is that serious scholars have for the most part avoided issues of sectarianism and Coptic identity in their research for fear of having their work associated with the Islamophobia of the persecution discourse. Still further, the consequence of the politicization of

5 Pope Shenouda, interview in *Al-Musawwar*, April 29, 1994, quoted in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Near East and South Asia Daily Report*, May 6, 1994, quoted in Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Violations of Freedom of Religious Belief and Expression of the Christian Minority* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994), 37n15.

6 For a detailed summary of historical census results and non-government estimates of the Coptic population, see table 2.1 in E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt: Spatial and Social Change*, University of Durham Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Occasional Papers Series no. 32 (Durham: University of Durham, 1986), 25.

7 *Ibid.*, 29.

8 For a broad discussion of this issue—one which seizes upon the Copts as a case study—refer to Saba Mahmood, “Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 418–46.

9 The writings of Shea and her colleagues at the Center are exhaustively documented through the links at Hudson Institute, Center for Religious Freedom, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.hudson.org/policycenters/7-center-for-religious-freedom>.

10 Jordan Gerstler-Holton, “US Israel Lobby Group Issues Harsh Rhetoric on Treatment of Copts,” *Egypt Independent*, March 5, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/us-israel-lobby-group-issues-harsh-rhetoric-treatment-copts>.

11 Joel Beinin discusses Ye’or and her impact in *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

12 Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmis: Jews and Christians under Islam* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985); Ye’or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

scholarship in Egypt is that both the Egyptian government and the Coptic Orthodox Church hierarchy have refused to give their sanction to research agendas taking up the issues of sectarianism and Coptic identity. This, of course, has distinctly practical implications for researchers in the Egyptian context. For instance, American researchers holding Fulbright grants in Egypt must have their projects approved by Egyptian state authorities, and “projects regarding subjects that are socially, culturally, or politically sensitive may be denied clearance.”<sup>13</sup> As for the church hierarchy, access to the Patriarchal Library in Cairo is carefully controlled and generally denied to all but the most trusted members of the church.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Central among the priorities of elite Copts in the nineteenth century was to turn existing relations between their community and the emergent modern Egyptian state on their head by insisting that Copts had to strive for success not as a *protected community* but as individuals. They were convinced that the idea of a protected community, to which the Coptic clerical establishment and the bulk of the Coptic community clung, would not suffice in the twentieth century—indeed, that this idea of protection was a relic of the past that required dismantling and displacement by the modern ideas of equality before the law and citizenship. Coptic Christian landowners would thus defend their holdings as citizens of Egypt—but, importantly, never intended to forsake their Coptic communal identity.<sup>14</sup> In their view, the Egyptian and Coptic dimensions of their identity were not irreconcilable. Quite to the contrary, they were mutually reinforcing.

Indeed, in the eyes of their Western Christian brethren, the Copts of Egypt had long constituted a human link, both to the erudition of the ancients and to the morality of the primitive church. Western travelers frequently alleged in their accounts that the Copts had preserved the purity of their race through the centuries, given a purported refusal to mix their blood with that of the Arabs, as Egyptian Muslims were labeled. This imagined narrative of cultural distinctiveness would become vital for the elite Copts of the nineteenth century, with their disproportionate influence and wealth, for the narrative declared Copts the most Egyptian of all Egyptians.

What set these Coptic narratives of cultural distinctiveness that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries apart from preceding such notions is that they were backed up by the powerful apparatuses of scholarly disciplines, archaeology and history among them. Indeed, given the pretensions to universalism at their core, these were disciplines that would leave no facet of human experience untouched, and whose reach necessarily transcended borders, making empire not only possible but, arguably, necessary. The so-called scientific interventions of archaeologists and historians, with their results cast as “independently verifiable” or “impartially corroborated,” would embolden elite Copts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to make political claims unprecedented in their scope. Perhaps the only Western historian to have explored this issue of elite Copts’ self-conception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is Donald Reid. Indeed, through his pioneering research on Murqus Simaika and the development of Coptic cultural institutions, detailed in *Whose Pharaohs?* and elsewhere, Reid

13 Fulbright U.S. Student Program, “Egypt: 15 Fulbright Full Grants,” accessed November 5, 2012, <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/countries/selectedcountry/132>.

14 For details of the emergence of this Coptic landowning elite, refer to Gabriel Baer, *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt, 1800–1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 63–64.

has cast light not only upon how Copts viewed their heritage and their role in Egypt, but further, upon the fundamentally contested and negotiated nature of Egyptian nationalism.<sup>15</sup>

Elite Copts published Coptic newspapers, notably *Al-Watan*, developed by Mikhā'il 'Abd al-Sayyid in 1877.<sup>16</sup> They distributed Coptic journals, including the literary *Al-Majalla al-Qibtiyya*, the spiritual *Al-Haqq*, and the educational *Al-Shams*.<sup>17</sup> They conferred at Coptic clubs, such as *Nādī Ramsīs*.<sup>18</sup> Most prominently, however, they saw their goal as enlightening what they viewed as the lower orders of the Coptic community through the Tawfiq Society, founded at Cairo in 1891. Yet, despite their exalted ambitions, elite Coptic laymen faced a significant obstacle in the quest to achieve formal equality, and lead their community to the progress and advancement much heralded in their writings. That obstacle was the hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In ideological terms, whereas the landowners were convinced that Copts had to struggle for their rights of citizenship and a position of prominence in Egyptian public life, the church hierarchy sought to preserve the status quo of a separate, protected Coptic community. In practical terms, whereas the landowners were convinced that elite laymen were the members of the community most qualified to represent the community and to administer church affairs beyond the spiritual realm—that is, to control the endowments and the leadership of the Copts—the church hierarchy sought to preserve the authority of the patriarch, in both spiritual and temporal affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Elite laymen emphasized their commitment to render the Coptic church a “rational,” “functional” institution. Of the “reformers,” Lord Cromer later remarked, with much esteem, “young Copts see that, unless they wish to be left behind in the race of life, they must bestir themselves.”<sup>20</sup> Edith Butcher, writing in 1897, congratulated the Coptic reformers for having rid the community of one particularly “backward” custom:

At one time fifteen was considered a suitable age to marry a boy, and twelve for the girl. Already, however, public opinion, backed by the remonstrances of the Church, has improved in this respect, and now a man must be twenty and a girl sixteen before the Patriarch or Bishop will grant the license without which no priest can celebrate a marriage.<sup>21</sup>

Elite Copts were, however, racing not merely towards an abstract notion of “progress” or “modernity,” but towards affluence. Despite the rhetoric of *church modernization*, the confrontation was, in fact, about control—of both vast tracts of precious yet unexploited *waqf* land and the leadership of the Coptic community. The British occupation found among elite Copts willing collaborators, with not only a common commitment to modernization but also common material and political aims. As Coptic historian Ramzi Tadrus recounted, “Thanks to the freedom, the justice, and the

15 Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 258–86; Reid, “Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egyptology, Imperialism, and Egyptian Nationalism, 1922–1952,” in James Jankowski and Israeli Gershoni, eds., *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 127–49; Reid, “Archaeology, Social Reform, and Modern Identity among the Copts, 1854–1952,” in Alain Roussillon, ed., *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national: Identité et modernisation en Égypte, 1882–1962* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1995).

16 J. Heyworth-Dunne, “Education in Egypt and the Copts,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Archeologie Copte* 6 (1940), 104–05.

17 Samir Seikaly, “Coptic Communal Reform, 1860–1914,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970), 267–68.

18 *Ibid.*, 268.

19 Ibrahim, *Copts of Egypt*, 117–27.

20 Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 2:211.

21 E. L. Butcher, *The Story of the Church of Egypt* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1897), 2:415.

rapid improvement the Nile Valley was experiencing under British rule, Coptic dignitaries and their families were able to develop their abilities for work and finance, and concentrate almost exclusively their zeal in accumulating fortunes in land, stocks and bonds, companies.”<sup>22</sup>

During his lengthy tenure as the British Agent in Cairo, Lord Cromer had attached importance to the support of the Coptic Christian elite for the British occupation of Egypt. Indeed, just prior to his return to Britain, he met with the Reverend Rennie MacInnes of the Church Missionary Society, in order to signal his concern with the status of Christians in the face of the rise of pan-Islamism in Egypt. In that meeting, Cromer ventured to suggest that Christians might find themselves entirely excluded from state posts were nationalists to hold sway in government. For the Copts, perhaps the most alarming among those activists challenging the occupation was Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Shawish. Shawish served as a potent symbol of pan-Islam for Copts, given his Tunisian roots. He was seen as a successor to Mustafa Kamil and had become editor of the newspaper *Al-Liwa*:

The Copts should be kicked to death. They still have faces and bodies similar to those of demons and monkeys, which is proof that they hide poisonous spirits within their evil souls. The fact that they exist in the world confirms Darwin’s theory that human beings are generated from monkeys . . .<sup>23</sup>

When Coptic prime minister Boutros Ghali was assassinated in 1910, the fears Cromer had stoked about the nationalist movement seemed validated, not least among elite Copts. They had seen in Ghali’s rise to power the triumph of meritocracy. In the eyes of the nationalists, however, Ghali had functioned as a mere tool in the hands of the British, and was emblematic of the collusion of a wealthy Egyptian elite with the occupying power. Nationalists had targeted Ghali for his unswerving loyalty to the occupying power: in 1899 he signed the Sudan Agreement; in 1906 he presided at the Dinshaway tribunal; and, at the time of his death, he was arranging a forty-year extension of the Suez Canal Company’s concession.<sup>24</sup>

In response to Ghali’s assassination, an unprecedented sectarian gathering was arranged for March 6–8, 1911, in Asyut, wherein elite Copts would assess the state of their community.<sup>25</sup> As Sir Eldon Gorst, the British Agent in Egypt, explained:

I may remark incidentally that the organizers of this congress, a small clique of wealthy landowners in Upper Egypt, did not claim to represent more than some 12,000 of the 700,000 Copts of Egypt, and that they are purely self-constituted representatives of their co-religionists, an influential section of whom, including the Patriarch, head of the Coptic Church in Egypt, disapprove and deprecate their proceedings.<sup>26</sup>

Among their demands were recognition of Sunday as a holiday, an end to discrimination in the civil service, access to religious instruction in public schools, communal representation in provincial

22 Quoted in Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “The Political Situation of the Copts, 1798–1923,” in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 2:195.

23 Quoted in Robert L. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 310.

24 Otto F. A. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 86.

25 According to Samirah Bahr, “Coptic Congress of Asyut,” in Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 602–03, 1,150 delegates representing 10,500 Copts participated in the Congress. Such figures were hotly disputed at the time by British officials.

26 Quoted in Kyriakos Mikhail, *Copts and Moslems under British Control: A Collection of Facts and a Résumé of Authoritative Opinions on the Coptic Question* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1911), 36.



councils, and the fair distribution of government grants.<sup>27</sup> However, the Congress was directed not against the British occupation writ large, but against the particular policy of the British Agent of the time, Gorst. Indeed, the landowners went to great lengths to assure British lawmakers that they wholeheartedly supported the British presence in Egypt. To this end, a correspondent of the Coptic newspaper *Misr*, Kyriakos Mikhail, was dispatched to London in June 1910 to ensure that the landowners' actions were cast in a favorable light in the imperial metropole. As Mikhail explained in a propaganda booklet he assembled and published in 1911: "[T]he Copts do not, and never have, doubted the material and lasting good which has been accomplished since the administration of the country was placed under British control." Rather, as Mikhail continued, "We have asked for justice and equality with other Egyptians, and for a full participation in the fruits which have resulted from the new regime."<sup>28</sup>

Gorst disapproved of Cromer's approach, rejecting the notion that "the British presence protected the Copts and other native Christians from possible massacre by the Muslim majority"<sup>29</sup> and, upon his appointment as British Agent, sought "to render our rule more sympathetic to the Egyptians in general and to the *Muhammedans in particular*."<sup>30</sup> To accomplish this aim, he expanded the authority of provincial councils, particularly in educational matters. The councils thereupon imposed taxes to fund *kuttabs*—schools focused principally on the study of the Qur'an—from which Coptic students were excluded. Gorst's attitude caused Coptic landowners great consternation. The provision of religious instruction for Muslims, and not Copts, at public expense constituted, in their eyes, an attack on their citizenship as Egyptians.

A rival Muslim Congress, labeled the "Egyptian Conference," was held in Heliopolis shortly thereafter, from April 29 to May 4, 1911. Egyptians learned of the sectarian strife through *Al-Watan* and *Misr*, Coptic newspapers, and *Al-Liwa* and *Al-Muayyad*, Muslim newspapers, which had been engaged in a fierce media battle since 1908. Throughout 1911, Muslim leaders argued that Islam should be acknowledged as the state religion. The Copts' ultimate goal, they alleged, was a separate nation for Copts alone.<sup>31</sup>

Upon his 1911 arrival in Egypt, Lord Kitchener strove to ease the tensions Gorst's shift in policy had provoked. He imprisoned Abd al-Aziz Shawish, and embraced the moderate landowners of the Umma Party. By establishing property qualifications for membership in the Legislative Assembly, he ensured that the bulk of seats in the body were held by landowners; and, by reserving the power to appoint fifteen members of the Assembly, he ensured that the Coptic landowning elite was well represented. Up to this point, members of the elite had played an insubstantial role in the nationalist movement. Sinut Hanna, Murqus Hanna, and Wissa Wassif had supported the National Party prior to Mustafa Kamil's Islamic turn, but such men were in the minority among Coptic landowners. The Coptic newspaper *Al-Watan* had labeled Wassif "Judas Iscariot" for his involvement in National Party administration.<sup>32</sup>

27 B. L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics, 1918–1952* (London: Croon Helm, 1986), 13.

28 Mikhail, *Copts and Moslems under British Control*, 19.

29 Peter Mellini, *Sir Eldon Gorst: The Overshadowed Proconsul* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 124.

30 Quoted in Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 292.

31 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 14–15.

32 *Ibid.*, 10.

## THE INTERWAR PERIOD

For most historians of Egypt, what is important about the sectarianism of 1911 is the purportedly aberrant nature of the episode, and little else. Indeed, relative to the events of 1919, the events of 1910 and 1911 merit scarce attention in the historiography.<sup>33</sup> When recalled at all, the Coptic and Muslim Congresses are attributed entirely to external forces—namely the meddling of the British in a relationship that had apparently remained harmonious from time immemorial.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the image of the 1919 Revolution most frequently invoked is that of Copts and Muslims standing together under the banner of the Wafd Party, with Saad Zaghlul, the Party's leader, unleashing his rallying cry: "Egypt belongs to Copts as well as Muslims. All have a right to the same freedom and the same privileges."<sup>35</sup> Cross and crescent were placed side by side on posters and banners; meetings were held in churches and mosques alike. Indeed, Coptic priest Murqus Sergius spoke from the pulpit of al-Azhar.

Coptic landowners played a seminal role in the rise of the Wafd. Shortly after Saad Zaghlul's appeal for independence at the British High Commission on November 13, 1918, members of the Coptic elite gathered together at the Ramsis Club and pledged their support for the emerging movement. Among them were Sinut Hanna of the Umma Party; George Khayyat, a wealthy Protestant who was the American consul in Asyut; and Wassif Ghali, the son of the assassinated prime minister. Zaghlul acknowledged the work of the Copts who had fought for his release from detention in Malta when he assembled his delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference: Hanna, Khayyat, and Wissa Wassif were among the eighteen members. The bulk of Coptic landowners developed a fierce loyalty to the Wafd. Sinut Hanna and Makram Ebeid were exiled with Zaghlul to the Seychelles in December 1921. Wassif Ghali, George Khayyat, Wissa Wassif, and Murqus Hanna were later sentenced to death for Wafd activities undertaken in Zaghlul's absence. Upon his return to Egypt in July 1923, Zaghlul named all six to the Wafd Executive Committee of fourteen.<sup>36</sup>

At the level of ideas, in the Arabic press that flourished throughout this period, contestation was fierce as to the form that Egyptian nationalism should take.<sup>37</sup> One of the principal combatants in this debate was Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid of the Umma Party who, before the War, had served as editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Al-Jarida*, and would later assume the leadership of both the National Library and the Egyptian University.<sup>38</sup> Using the newspaper as vehicle for his ideas,

33 See, for example, Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, and Barak A. Salmoni, eds. *Re-envisioning Egypt, 1919–1952* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005). Not one of the papers in this excellent recent volume on the so-called liberal period addresses the sectarian question.

34 Tariq al-Bishri is among the foremost exponents of this position, captured most prominently in his book, *al-Muslimūn wa-al-Aqḅāt fī ṭīār al-jamā'ah al-waṭaniyah* [*Muslims and Copts in the Framework of the National Community*] (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyah al-'Āmah lil-Kitab, 1980). According to this divide-and-rule narrative, the British had aimed to exploit sectarian division within Egypt to consolidate their authority. Those who endorse this view of Egyptian sectarianism frequently cite the gradual expulsion of Copts from the civil service during the occupation, and their replacement with Syrians and Armenians, as evidence of such a policy. Yet, to focus upon purported British attempts to divide and rule is to conceal the indigenous dynamics of the sectarianism that intermittently came to the fore in Egyptian political life between the 1882 arrival of the British and the 1952 Revolution.

35 Quoted in Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 17.

36 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 60–65.

37 Reid, "Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past."

38 The best-known discussion of Lutfi and his ideas is in Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). The account that follows draws upon both this and Israel

Lutfi al-Sayyid had rejected Islamist strains of thought in the Egyptian nationalist movement, convinced that the European model of nationhood, rooted above all in territory, should serve as a guide for Egyptians—but not at the expense of their distinctive Egyptianness. As he explained, “The idea that the land of Islam is the home-country of every Muslim is an imperialist principle, the adoption of which could be useful to any imperialist nation eager to enlarge its territory and extend its influence.”<sup>39</sup> For Lutfi, loyalty to Egypt and Egypt alone was essential: Egypt’s glorious past extending all the way back to Pharaonic times was exalted. In this, Lutfi stood apart from his fellow nationalist Mustafa Kamil, who remained unconvinced that Islam had to stand apart from Egyptian nationalism. Lutfi thought this separation urgent in his program of reshaping the Egyptian character, such that the nation could become a part of the “modern” world.

As B. L. Carter has explained, Wafd Party publications offered an image of the Egyptians as “a unique and homogeneous race, sharing physical and mental characteristics.”<sup>40</sup> Further, as Donald Reid has documented at length, throughout the 1920s, particularly in the wake of the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922, Egyptian intellectuals developed a fascination with Pharaonism.<sup>41</sup> Taha Husayn and Salama Musa looked back with pride upon Ancient Egyptian civilization: Husayn argued that “most Egyptians were descended in a direct line from the Pharaonic Egyptians” and that “Arab civilization, when compared with the older one, had had a meager impact on Egypt.” Musa encouraged “the erection of Pharaonic statues and memorials, believing that such solid evidence would reinforce the Egyptians’ sense of continuity.”<sup>42</sup>

In 1918, Saad Zaghlul had drawn Coptic landowners into the Wafd with a firm promise: in the wake of independence, the Copts’ “status will be our status, they will have the same rights and the same duties, with no difference between any of us, save in personal achievement.”<sup>43</sup> During the 1920s, Coptic landowners believed Zaghlul had delivered on his promise, as Copts were indeed reaching the highest echelons of power. Such men as Wassif Ghali, Murqus Hanna, and Makram Ebeid came to head ministries in the government.

By 1935, however, the situation had changed drastically. That year, Murqus Sergius, the Coptic priest who had preached from the pulpit of al-Azhar in the midst of the strikes and demonstrations of March 1919, argued that the British should remain in Egypt, given the Copts’ need for protection from the Muslim majority.<sup>44</sup> During the 1930s, the Egyptian political scene witnessed the emergence of Misr al-Fatat, the Young Men’s Muslim Association, and the Muslim Brotherhood—organizations with unabashedly sectarian platforms. The ferocity of sectarian appeals was intensified in such an atmosphere. For instance, intercommunal tensions came to the fore in the 1938 election campaign, during which Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi, the Rector of al-Azhar, labeled the Copts “foxes.” The students of al-Azhar flooded the streets of Cairo and chanted, “A vote for Nahhas [leader of the Wafd] is a vote against Islam.”<sup>45</sup>

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Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

39 Quoted in Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 178.

40 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 64.

41 Reid, “Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past,” 133–39; Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?*, 293.

42 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 97–98.

43 Quoted in Mirrit Boutros Ghali, “Egyptian National Unity,” in Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 950.

44 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 74.

45 Quoted in Moustafa el-Feki, *Copts in Egyptian Politics, 1919–1952* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1991), 125.

Perhaps the most striking and revealing dimension of the sectarianism of this period is the participation of the Wafd Party therein. Indeed, not even that traditional bastion of secularism on the Egyptian political scene refrained from manipulating religious sentiment. As Leland Bowie has explained, the Wafd took a particularly strident stand against foreign missionary activity in 1933, when reports were circulated that a missionary school had disciplined a Muslim student for failure to convert. The Party advocated for no less than the elimination of all evangelism from Egyptian soil.<sup>46</sup> Wafdists came to accuse Liberal Constitutionals of atheism and irreligion, and Coptic priests throughout Egypt suffered attacks during the uproar. By 1936, the Wafdist finance minister, a Copt, exhausted unprecedented quantities of government funds on translation of the Qur'an into foreign languages, construction of mosques, and remuneration of preachers. During the following year, the Wafd Party, in dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, recommended that secondary school students write religious examinations, and that schools erect mosques and religious libraries on their premises. Such moves, coupled with the Wafd's refusal to condemn sectarianism, drove Copts out of the Party. Coptic participation in the Wafd executive dropped to 12 percent in 1942, from the 44 percent of 1923. From 1942, Wafdist prime ministers incorporated only one Copt into each cabinet, down from the traditional two—and, from 1946, the post held was typically uninfluential.<sup>47</sup>

## THE 1952 REVOLUTION

By this time, there had emerged a class of bureaucrats and military men who had received their training from the British, but who were not as mesmerized by the West as the *effendiyya* class was. Further, this was a middle class disenchanted with the prevailing political jockeying. Such disenchantment became acute in the 1940s: Attacks on British personnel and property in 1946 prompted the declaration of martial law, and British forces actually killed several Egyptian policemen in the midst of the unrest near the Suez Canal.<sup>48</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Return of the Spirit* and *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* spoke to the concerns of this generation.<sup>49</sup> In these works, through his discussion of the excitement of the 1919 Revolution and the corruption and injustice that followed in the Revolution's wake, al-Hakim gave voice to the frustrations of the “new middle class”—frustrations associated, above all, with the abject failure of the “Generation of 1919” in realizing their liberal project.

In the 1952 Revolution, this new middle class came to the fore, replacing the existing elite with a largely military leadership. The Free Officers had links to the Muslim Brotherhood: Nasser briefed Brotherhood members on the Free Officers' progress, and the General Guide of the Brotherhood offered men as reinforcements. For a time, Brotherhood members appear to have exercised considerable influence on the path the Free Officers adopted. In entrusting the drafting of a constitution to a committee of fifty on December 10, 1952, the Revolutionary Command Council insisted that the document recognize Islam as the religion of state.<sup>50</sup>

46 Leland Bowie, “The Copts, the Wafd, and Religious Issues in Egyptian Politics,” *Muslim World* 67, no. 2 (1977): 123–24.

47 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 220–23.

48 Khalid Mohyī al-Dīn, *Memories of a Revolution: Egypt, 1952* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995).

49 Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Return of the Spirit*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012); al-Hakim, *Maze of Justice: Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, trans. Abba Eban (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

50 For the relationship between the Free Officers and the Muslim Brotherhood, see Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement*, particularly 53–54.

Despite the links to the Brotherhood, General Muhammad Naguib, the Free Officers' figure-head, actively campaigned for unity, attending services at churches and mosques alike. For him, safeguarding the rights of minorities within Egyptian boundaries was a cardinal concern: "I have had to go to great lengths to persuade the minorities that the new Egypt will be as tolerant as any state in the world."<sup>51</sup> Among the symbolic gestures intended to demonstrate his concern for Jews' and Christians' welfare were visits to synagogues on Yom Kippur and to churches on Christmas Eve. His Christmas card depicted a church, a mosque, and a synagogue standing together on Egyptian soil.

In contrast, for Gamal Abdel Nasser, rapid political and social transformation of Egypt was vital, regardless of the collateral impact of that transformation on minorities. Matters of faith seemed of relatively little importance in national affairs when compared to pressing matters of development. Nasser promoted an organic notion of society, in which political conflict was seen as fundamentally destructive. The principal struggle the nation faced, according to this line of thinking, was the quest for modernization—and this quest demanded science, technology, industry. Above all, though, the quest demanded engineers. While military men were the heroes of the political revolution, at the center of the socioeconomic revolution were engineers. Indeed, these were the men and women who would build the infrastructure that would unleash the country's enormous economic potential.

Science and engineering thus became the watchwords of the times: With proper engineering, all was possible, all was within reach. This was engineering not merely of roads, bridges, and dams, but of society as a whole. Society required just the sort of scientific management that the irrigation system required. To this end, Egyptians were organized into functional categories, of workers, peasants, intellectuals and professionals, national capitalists, and the military.<sup>52</sup> These different parts of society had different functions and different strengths, but all these parts had to function in harmony. This corporatist system would permit the maximum degree of unity of purpose at all levels of the nation. At the head of this system, the brain, so to speak, was the government, which would formulate and pursue great national ideals which all could share.

In January 1953, the Muslim Brotherhood had won exemption from the ban on political parties issued by the Revolutionary Command Council. Nevertheless, in Nasser's corporatist framework, the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood was regarded as imperative, given the potential for divided loyalties among Egyptians. Indeed, the reform of the legal and education systems were undertaken in just this spirit. In theory at least, the nation's schools would assume responsibility for providing religious instruction to both Christians and Muslims for one to two hours each week. The state forced al-Azhar University to undertake a structural modernization and embrace faculties such as medicine, engineering, and agriculture. Through such expansion, Nasser diminished al-Azhar's distinctive role as a center for the interpretation of Islam and, hence, diminished the institution's autonomy and influence.<sup>53</sup>

From the rise of the Free Officers to the year before Nasser's death, only two Copts, Farid Fayek Farid and Halim Girgis Bishay, were elected to the People's Assembly. Hamied Ansari attributes the lack of Assembly representation to a gradual drop in the Coptic rural population, caused by the

51 Quoted in Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 70.

52 John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

53 Law Number 103 of 1961 would empower the president both to appoint and to dismiss the Shaykh of al-Azhar. See Tamir Moustafa, "Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 1 (2000): 4–7.

migration of Copts from villages to cities and, ultimately, overseas. The electoral system allotted a disproportionate number of Assembly seats to rural areas.<sup>54</sup> Although the Assembly had no practical impact on policymaking, the persistent failure of Copts to win representation in the body was a source of concern for the community—particularly given the absence of Copts in Nasser’s circle of advisers. The Free Officers’ Organization had but a single Coptic member, well beneath the leadership tier. Indeed, Copts were poorly represented and scarcely influential in the Egyptian Armed Forces. In the late 1940s, Christians constituted only 7 percent of the officer corps, and there were more Christian officers in the medical corps than in any other branch of the armed forces.<sup>55</sup> On July 23, 1952, only one Copt, Azer Demian, occupied the rank of general.

In an effort to ensure Coptic representation in the People’s Assembly, in the late 1950s, Nasser decided to reserve ten districts with significant Coptic populations for Coptic candidates. All candidates in elections required the approval of the mass party of the time, the National Union. Only Copts competed in the districts for the votes of both Copts and Muslims. The failure of that plan led Nasser to amend the 1956 Constitution such that he could appoint ten members of the Assembly himself. In 1964, the president selected eight Copts to join the one elected Copt, Bishay, in the Assembly. Hence, nine of the Assembly’s 360 members, 2.5 percent of the body, were Copts, with the bulk of that representation achieved in an almost explicitly sectarian manner.<sup>56</sup>

The crisis of Coptic participation in revolutionary institutions was matched, if not exceeded, by a crisis in the institutions of the Coptic Orthodox Church. During the formative years of the Nasser regime, the Coptic patriarch, Joseph II, was elderly, and his valet Malik corrupt. Malik had apparently taken advantage of the patriarch’s confidence to extract protection money from churches and monasteries and, further, engaged in a lively trade in episcopal appointments. No fewer than sixteen of the nineteen appointments of bishops made by Joseph during his tenure from May 1946 to September 1955 were tainted by allegations of bribery.<sup>57</sup>

One such organization—al-Umma al-Qibtiyya, or the Society of the Coptic Nation—though created with social and cultural activities in mind, would become actively political. The young lawyer Ibrahim Fahmi Hilal founded the organization in 1952, having witnessed the burning of a Suez church in January of that year.<sup>58</sup> As one member of the Society explained, “We wanted the Patriarch to create jobs for Copts, to open factories and businesses for unemployed Copts. But the Patriarch was weak. He had no personality, no strength of character.”<sup>59</sup> The organization would struggle to develop a sort of Coptic nationalism, largely by way of a revitalization of the Coptic language.<sup>60</sup> The Society demanded several things from the nation’s leaders, including a Coptic radio station, protesting the predominance of Islamic symbols and ideas in the Egyptian media; protection for the “besieged” Coptic community from the violence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Young Men’s Muslim Association, and militant Islamist groups; and an accurate reflection of the size of the Coptic community in the census.

Despite reaching a membership peak of 92,000, the Society failed to convince Copts and the Egyptian government to make the commitments they saw as necessary to the Coptic community’s

54 Ansari, “Sectarian Conflict in Egypt,” 402.

55 Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, 245n31.

56 Sebastian Elsasser, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79–81.

57 Otto F. A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1970), 42.

58 Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 95.

59 Quoted in Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 97.

60 Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 95.

survival. Indeed, the group was banned in April 1954 by the new regime. At that point, Society members decided upon revolutionary action. Hilal and five followers seized control of the patriarchate and forced Joseph to abdicate on July 25, 1954. The pope left the patriarchate building under armed guard. Ultimately, however, Hilal found himself surrounded, and negotiated his surrender with the Coptic minister of supply, Guindi Abd al-Malak. The regime arrested 86 conspirators at the core of the organization, and the patriarch was restored to power.<sup>61</sup>

The episode was profoundly humiliating for the community, particularly before the new regime. Copts were seen as scarcely capable of administering their communal affairs. Only the intervention of the Revolutionary Command Council had brought a peaceful end to the crisis. Fourteen months after the kidnapping, a Coptic militant attempted to assassinate the patriarch, by which point the church, community, and regime had agreed that Joseph was no longer fit for leadership. On September 21, 1955, Guindi Abd al-Malak announced government approval for the banishment of the patriarch to Dayr al-Muharraq in Upper Egypt. Joseph was deprived of his powers by government decree and replaced with a triumvirate of bishops.<sup>62</sup>

With the death of the patriarch came further rancor between the Holy Synod and the *maglis al-milli*. Clergy and laity could not agree on procedures for the election of the next patriarch. The *maglis* favored the election of a bishop as patriarch, given the influence laymen exercised over the bishops, while the synod favored the election of a monk, given popular disgust with church corruption. Once again, the government intervened. In 1957, the procedures were established by presidential decree: an election committee composed of nine members of the *maglis*, nine members of the synod, and an Interior Ministry official would select six candidates, each at least forty years of age, for the post; each bishop would name twelve electors who, with representatives of the *maglis*, synod, and the Ethiopian church, would narrow the field of candidates to three; a child would draw the name of one of the candidates from a box in a darkened room; and, with presidential ratification, the candidate selected would assume the post.<sup>63</sup>

The influence of the Coptic laity in national affairs had dissolved with the economic emasculation of land reform and the political emasculation of a mass party. Further, the autonomy of the church as an institution had dissolved with successive government interventions in the most sensitive of its affairs. Debates about explicitly communal issues—the mechanism for selection of the patriarch, the powers of the *maglis al-milli*, the administration of the endowments, and personal status adjudication—had become national debates.

#### NASSER, KIROLOS, AND THE MILLET PARTNERSHIP

On April 19, 1959, Mina al-Muttawahad al-Baramusi assumed the post of patriarch. Mina, who thenceforth took the name Kirolos VI, was well aware that church and laity were bitterly divided.<sup>64</sup> Further, it appeared at the time that only Nasser would decide who was fit to represent Copts in national affairs. Among the 150 most prominent government-appointed officials in Egypt, three were Copts: a cabinet minister, a university dean, and a president of a court of appeals.<sup>65</sup> The

61 Ibid., 96.

62 Ibid., 98–99.

63 Mohamed Heikal, *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat* (New York: Random House, 1983), 161.

64 I have elected to employ this spelling of the patriarch's name, rather than the proper transliteration, Kirulus, or the English rendering of the name, Cyril. This transliteration, Kirolos, is pervasive in the literature.

65 Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 44.

Coptic cabinet minister at the time, Kamal Ramzi Estino, was not a politician but a technocrat, and occupied the minor portfolio of Supply.

Upon his election as patriarch, Kirolos reportedly warned Estino, “Please don’t try to take care of the Church. It is my problem.”<sup>66</sup> Relations between Nasser and Kirolos were strained for a time, with insults perceived and pride injured on both sides—among the trifling issues that spawned disputes, conflicting schedules and the sizes of papal and presidential delegations. However, Mahmud Fawzi recounts that the two men came to an understanding during a meeting on October 14, 1959. According to Fawzi, Kirolos explained to Nasser:

If we build a factory with millions of dollars and we hire thousands of workers who have no conscience or religion, what do we get? They will wreck the factory. But, Mr. President, if we construct a factory with only 200 pounds and hire only ten workers who are conscientious, religious, and loyal to their country, the small factory will enjoy far greater production than its larger counterpart. Therefore, Mr. President, I will work to instill in my children knowledge of God and love of country.<sup>67</sup>

Although in all probability apocryphal, the episode speaks to the bargain Nasser and Kirolos reached during the 1960s. In short, Kirolos proposed the restoration of what I have termed a “millet partnership.”<sup>68</sup> The pope would present the concerns of the community directly to the president and promote loyalty to the regime among the Copts. In exchange, the president would ensure the security of the community and the status of the patriarch as the Copts’ legitimate representative and spokesperson. Perhaps the quintessential image of the Nasser-Kirolos partnership is that of the president laying the cornerstone of the Cathedral of Saint Mark in Abbasiyya on July 24, 1965, and declaring, “Christians and Muslims have always lived as brothers.”<sup>69</sup>

Nasser acted swiftly to consolidate the patriarch’s position. In the summer of 1960, through Decree 264, the president limited the holdings of each *waqf*, or Christian endowment, to 200 acres of cultivable land and 200 acres of barren land. The Agrarian Reform Authority seized *waqf* holdings beyond the prescribed limit, and compensated the church for them. Responsibility for *waqf* administration was then vested in the Coptic Orthodox Waqf Organization—a body appointed by the patriarch from the memberships of the Holy Synod and the *maglis al-milli*. The *maglis* was shocked by the *waqf* decision. The laymen declared that the church was deeply in debt, and could not afford to pay the wages of the priests and patriarchate staff. Kirolos informed Nasser of the situation and, in 1962, the president dissolved the *maglis*. On the government’s behalf, Nasser donated 10,000 pounds to the church. Within two years, the patriarch had eliminated the church debt and developed a reserve fund of 150,000 pounds. When plans to construct a new cathedral were revealed to Nasser, he made a further government donation of 500,000 pounds to the church.<sup>70</sup> Further, the president agreed to grant permits for the construction of 25 new churches each year.<sup>71</sup>

66 Ibid., 113.

67 Quoted in Mahmud Fawzi, *al-Baba Kirulus wa Abd al-Nasir* (Cairo: Al-Watan Publishers, 1993) (translations of this source are those of the author).

68 Paul Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, no. 2 (1999).

69 Quoted in Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, 49.

70 Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 158.

71 Ansari, “Sectarian Conflict in Egypt,” 399. The president would ultimately grant permits for the construction of only 68 new Coptic churches during the 1960s.



Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal recounts that “the Patriarch could come and see Nasser whenever he liked.”<sup>72</sup> At the time, Edward Wakin asked Kirolos, through an aide, “Does the Patriarch plan to hold any discussions with the government?” The response Kirolos offered reveals the political role the patriarch had assumed and the millet partnership he had developed:

We are always in touch with the government whenever necessary. [Estino] is the government’s liaison officer on Coptic matters. We send him most of our petitions and he sends them to the President. Sometimes we contact Nasser directly or the government ministers concerned. Most of the time we receive favorable responses and good will.<sup>73</sup>

In exchange for such acknowledgement and attention, the patriarch offered the regime unyielding support. In July 1961, when Nasser labeled Muhammad the first socialist, Kirolos identified kernels of socialism in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Throughout the 1960s, the patriarch attacked the remaining vestiges of colonialism in Africa, condemned Lyndon Johnson and American involvement in Vietnam, and voiced his support for the American civil rights movement. Nasser’s resignation in the wake of the 1967 War prompted Kirolos to join the rush to the presidential palace, in the hope that he could convince the president to rescind the decision. Once Nasser had decided against resignation, Kirolos ordered that all Coptic churches ring their bells in celebration.<sup>74</sup>

Further, Kirolos dispatched church representatives to Washington, London, Paris, the Vatican, and the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, in the effort to spread the Arab perspective on the conflict. In his letter to Roman Catholic Pope Paul VI, Kirolos explained: “It is no secret that Israel’s decision to annex Arab Jerusalem has caused tremendous distress to all Arabs, Muslims and Christians, for nothing is more painful to a person than an aggression that affects his religion.” The patriarch went as far as to declare, “Such actions make one willing to die to protect his religious heritage. We regard the crisis Israel has precipitated as directed against all Arabs, Christians and Muslims. We request your support to solve this problem.”<sup>75</sup>

Just as Nasser embraced Kirolos, however, elite laymen condemned their patriarch. The attack they mounted on April 18, 1964, through the Coptic newspaper *Misr* was vicious:

We are unable to understand the wisdom of the Patriarch, the most important person in the Church, rising at four or five in the morning to visit churches, knocking on their doors, waking up the servants at times when all people are still in bed. Is this a plot to wear down the priests and servants, or is it a way to get fresh air early in the morning?<sup>76</sup>

The attack reflects the bitterness with which wealthy Copts viewed the Nasser-Kirolos partnership. Members of the Coptic elite, once at the forefront of national affairs, found themselves replaced as leaders of the community by the church hierarchy—monks and clergy upon whom they looked down, as of humble origins.

72 Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 157.

73 Quoted in Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*, 116–17 (alternation in original omitted).

74 Fawzi, *al-Baba Kirulus wa Abd al-Nasir*.

75 Quoted in Fawzi, *al-Baba Kirulus wa Abd al-Nasir*.

76 Ibid.

## THE PARTNERSHIP AND PERSONAL STATUS

When President Mubarak introduced amendments to the 1971 Constitution in the year 2007, the always-contested issue of the status of *shari'a* in Egyptian law reemerged in public discourse. Among the most unexpected contributions to the debate that ensued was that made by the Coptic Orthodox patriarch, the late Pope Shenouda III. The position that Shenouda adopted in 2007 was strikingly conciliatory towards Islamists. Indeed, the pope ventured so far as to repudiate a statement made by one of his bishops, to the effect that Article 2 of the Constitution, which declared the principles of Islamic law, the *shari'a*, the principal source of Egyptian legislation, should be eliminated. The immediate rationale for Shenouda's step was his declared fear that such a move to eliminate Article 2 might well provoke sectarian violence. But Shenouda likewise insisted that, if the importance of *shari'a* was acknowledged in this way in the constitutional text, Copts should have the primacy of their communal law vis-à-vis the personal status affairs of the Christian community acknowledged in the text.

Of course, as readers of the new constitution are now well aware, the concern that Shenouda voiced in 2007 regarding the acknowledgment of Coptic communal law in the Egyptian constitution is addressed explicitly in the document. Immediately following Article 2, which again acknowledges the principles of Islamic law as the principal source of Egyptian legislation, is an unprecedented Article 3, which reads: "The canon principles of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of legislation for their personal status laws, religious affairs, and the selection of their religious leaders."<sup>77</sup> Article 3 is widely touted as a "concession" to the sensibilities of the Coptic community. Those who have expressed concern about the provision largely cite the document's failure to acknowledge members of faith communities apart from Muslims, Christians, and Jews, or those who practice no faith. However, neglected in this debate about Articles 2 and 3 and their implications for Egyptian society is how these provisions will influence the *internal* dynamics of the Coptic community. The Constituent Assembly's decision to include Article 3 in the constitution will have a significant impact on the balance of power within, and political development of, the Coptic community.

To discern just how the provisions might impact Copts, it is instructive to return to the statements made by Pope Shenouda in 2007. Why indeed would Shenouda, who had once campaigned for the equality of all Egyptians before the law, apparently alter his stance and embrace Article 2 in 2007? One can only reckon with this shift in Shenouda's position by examining the approach to church governance that he adopted after his return from house arrest in 1985. Having spent forty months between 1981 and 1985 confined to a monastery at the behest of the Egyptian state, Shenouda embraced an approach to governance that his predecessor, Kirolos, had pioneered. This was an approach that favored cooperation with the Egyptian state, on the assumption that the state would acknowledge the Coptic patriarch as the sole legitimate representative of the Coptic community in both spiritual and temporal affairs.<sup>78</sup>

As explained above, this approach had proved a remarkable boon to both Kirolos and Nasser, for it had permitted them to dispense with an adversary that they held in common: the Coptic lay elite. For his part, the patriarch would no longer have to deal with the incessant interference of the Coptic laity in church affairs—a Coptic laity that, for the most part, looked down upon the clergy as purportedly corrupt and wasteful. For President Nasser, marginalizing the landowners, lawyers,

<sup>77</sup> Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 18 January 2014, art. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict," 227–28.

and liberals of the Coptic elite dovetailed with his effort to rid Egypt of the remaining vestiges of the parliamentary era and redistribute the country's wealth.

For Pope Shenouda in 1985, the attractions of this approach were similarly clear: the patriarch could continue to build an ever widening network of social, cultural, and educational institutions within the framework of the Coptic Orthodox Church, leaving the church as the central point of reference in the everyday lives of most Copts. The state would stave off Islamist threats and guarantee Shenouda's authority within church and community, as long as Shenouda's loyalty to the regime remained intact. As is well known, though now rarely discussed, that loyalty indeed remained intact through the 25 January revolution, with Shenouda professing his support for Mubarak on state television.

Within this political context, Shenouda's comments from 2007 make sense. To acknowledge the *shari'a* and call for recognition of Coptic personal status law was simply to reinforce the status of the church as the central institution in Copts' daily lives, as well as his own status as the sole legitimate representative of the Coptic community. Insofar as the power over personal status afforded the power to define the Coptic community, he was determined to retain that power exclusively on behalf of the church.

## CONCLUSION

Although historians of the Coptic community have tended to argue that Copts were disproportionately and adversely affected by Nasser's socialism and authoritarianism, I have sought to argue, perhaps counterintuitively, that the circumstances of Nasser's purportedly secular rule laid the groundwork for a reassertion of Coptic communal identity. Under the stewardship of Pope Kirolos VI during the 1960s, the Coptic church seized the leadership role the state had forced Coptic landowners and industrialists to abandon. Indeed, Nasser and Kirolos cultivated what I have termed a millet partnership.

Now that Egypt's new constitution has vested power over personal status in the church on a formal basis, in a sense codifying this millet partnership and, by extension, the triumph of clerical forces over their rivals in the Coptic laity for control of the church and community, one cannot help but wonder what roles Coptic laypeople will find for themselves in communal and national politics. In the face of determined church efforts to marginalize them, as well as the state's support for these efforts, are Coptic laypeople who want a meaningful say in their community's and nation's future, destined to become apostates and insurgents?