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Islam and Civil Society – Perspectives from Egypt before and after Mubarak

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Let me put Islam aside for a moment, and just address the other key term in my talk – civil society. Civil society always involves three key instruments - constitution, pluralism, & transparency. It also requires three key supports - security police, a professional military force, & defensible borders.

The crucial question about civil society concerns its relation to the state: Is **civil society** always outside the state and opposed to the state, or can it be **within the state**, even allied to the state, as also to its multiple agencies, institutions and stakeholders?

When we consider this question in May 2011 and apply it to Egypt, we have to look at Christians within Egypt, specifically at the largest native minority anywhere in the Arab world, the Coptic community. Copts are ancient, and they number 10 % or 8 million in present day Egypt, but **is there a Coptic civil society?** And if so, how did it operate under the Mubarak regime, and how does it operate now, little more than 3 months after 25 January, the date that marked the Cairo uprising, the resignation of Mubarak, and the move toward a new state-civil society relationship in 21st century Egypt?¹

A mere two years ago one could say, with confidence, that

¹ Much of the analysis that follows derives from the magisterial essay by Paul Rowe, “Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak’s Egypt” *Middle Eastern Studies* 45/1 (January 2009):111– 126. I have adapted Rowe’s major points to a broader, more general audience, and also updated some of the references, but in the framework, as also the enumeration, of events, issues and persons, I am indebted to his insightful, comprehensive review of civil society in 21st century Cairo, especially as it applies to the Coptic community.

Mubarak's Egypt would survive in part because it managed to be what one author has described as a "hybrid regime", that is, a regime that shared characteristics of both an autocratic order and a democratic order, with major Islamic groups defining and legitimizing the institutional alternatives to 'full' democracy.²

But if Mubarak's Egypt was a relatively liberal "hybrid regime", it nonetheless retained tight controls on civil society so as to pre-empt political activism, whether from Islamist or from secular rivals to the regime. In spite of the constraints of Egyptian politics and their subordinate status as *dhimmis* (or 'protected peoples') under Islam, Copts did manage to create a broad edifice of civil society in Mubarak's Egypt. The explanations for **their success derive from two sources: (1) the internal strength and vibrancy of Coptic institutions themselves and (2) the non-threatening, even moderating influence displayed by Coptic civil society.**

Civil society in Egypt has never been – and I would argue, can never be – free from significant government interference, constraint, and outright repression. Since the revolution of July 1952, successive Egyptian governments have used both legal and informal methods to maintain a strong authoritarian system with few inroads for challengers, whether secular-democratic or religious in nature. During the period of Nasser (1954-1970), this was accomplished through elimination and targeted prosecution of any potential challengers and the maintenance of simple personal authoritarianism that came to be known as 'Nasserism'. After 1962, authoritarian rule was bolstered by the development of a

²The term 'hybrid regime', and its analysis within Egypt, has been provided by Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008): 16ff. Another book that looks at the same issue – of citizenship and minority rights – argues that the moderate Islamist group, or Wasatiyya, provides the way forward to thread together both secular and religious options, foregoing a democratic order in favor of an 'enlightened' autocratic regime in Egypt. See Rachel M. Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Scott argues that the Wasatiyya are the most likely way forward to redefine religious citizenship under Mubarak, namely, to propose "an Islamic framework such that their (the Wasatiyya) ideas open up the possibility for greater convergence between Islamists and Copts". (195) For reasons that will be given below, I will indicate how that option is unlikely, due not just to immoderate Islamist reaction to Coptic/Christian stakeholders in Egypt's future but also to the reluctance, and fear, of Copts themselves.

single-party state, and under Nasser's successors single-party dominance persisted, reinforced by the work of the military and security services. Following Sadat's assassination in 1981, President Hosni Mubarak took power and until January of this year maintained tight control through single-party dominance while allowing limited participation of several other weak political parties, including liberal-democratic and socialist oriented parties and the officially banned but periodically tolerated Muslim Brotherhood.

In the Mubarak period, an indulgent approach to press freedom and civil society organization combined with arbitrary control over any activity that threatened to challenge the established dominance of the governing party and the President. It is important to remember that Mubarak inherited a country rent by social and political division in the wake of his predecessor's moves toward the neoliberal *infitah* ('economic opening') program and a peace treaty with Israel. He slowly introduced political reforms over the course of the 1980s, deepening both the socially permissive climate and the neoliberal project. But, as one observer noted in the mid-1990s, 'even in Egypt, widely revered for an active associational life, civil society is undermined by a deficit in political toleration and constricted by arbitrary government regulation'.³

Paradoxically, Egyptian civil society benefited from a general degree of liberality punctuated by high-profile incidents in which the government sought to crack down on freedom of speech and the press, public gatherings, and the like. This provided the opportunity for civil society to develop marginally under the twin poles of Islamist activism and secular intellectualism. In other words, **civil society was possible because of Egypt's emergence as a hybrid regime under Mubarak. But organizations outside these vaguely tolerated groups were largely marginalized or disallowed, confining politics to a rigidly defined formal political arena. Until 25 January 2011 the prominent trend was toward the expansion of conflict and the rise in violent**

³ A.R. Norton, Introduction to A.R. Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, vol.1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995):12.

confrontations on the state-society level. While the regime's Islamist opponents remained the main focus of coercion and repression, secular political activists, human rights workers, and voters --- all were increasingly targeted over the past few years. This trend indicated the increasing insecurity of an authoritarian regime determined to maintain its monopoly on power.⁴

And the trend became even more evident with the limited democratic openings provided during the 2005 elections in Egypt. While the regime presented the elections as a new stage in the evolution of democratic society of Egypt, the opening proved chimerical. Constraints on domestic political activity were once again in evidence. Secular-minded intellectuals, represented by the kefaya movement and the Ghad political party, were harassed during and after the elections.⁵ While the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood won dozens of seats, these mostly provided a convenient bogeyman for the regime to crack down harder on the movement. Breakthroughs enjoyed by new media outlets led to a later crackdown on liberally-minded bloggers over the past couple of years.⁶

But what has happened to the Egyptian Christian minority, specifically the Copts, during the past two decades? While Copts are a marginal minority and face persistent discrimination in the form of the preferential status of Muslims in government and the military as well as

⁴M. Kassem, *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004):186-7

⁵Despite its marginal status, some still see the kefaya movement as the most promising movement for reform in the country. See M. Shorbagy, 'Understanding Kefaya: The New Politics in Egypt', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 29/1(Winter 2007): 39-60. And also Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak*: 14 & 160.

⁶Y. Meital, 'The Struggle over Political Order in Egypt: The 2005 Elections', *Middle East Journal*, 20/2 (Spring 2005): 260-61. Until recently, the most prominent blogger arrested and silenced over the past couple of years had been Abdul Kareem Soliman Amer, see Reporters Sans Frontieres, 'Four Year Prison Sentence for Blogger "Kareem Amer"', http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=21075 (accessed 23 Nov. 2007).

limitations on their rights in areas such as church construction and conversion, they have been **tolerated and occasionally supported by the government at the level of civil society. The Coptic Orthodox Church is a conservative religious movement that occasionally finds common cause with moderate Islamists even though individual Copts have been targeted by the more militant elements of the Islamist movement. At the same time, Coptic organizations displayed a preference for Western and secularist principles of governance that meshed well with either the regime's goals or those of the secularist opposition.**

How did Copts develop civil society institutions before the fall of the Mubarak regime? It is fair to say that in spite of the many challenges that Copts face both in the form of Muslim preference and a restrictive political environment, they managed to create a strong and vibrant set of civil society institutions through a combination of communal solidarity, adept political maneuvering, foreign pressure, and operating as a less threatening proxy for the secular opposition.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the plight of Copts in Egyptian politics among human rights networks, religious activists and scholars. As a result, many observers, participants, and even stakeholders emphasize the marginalization of Christian communities in Arab and Muslim societies, of which Egypt is often used as a case in point. The historic repression of Christian identity under Islamic influence has been a common theme, where Christians are limited entirely by their status as 'protected people', a tolerated but subordinate religious group. The increase in violent attacks on Copts during the 1990s and the publicity given to particular sectarian incidents such as the al-Kosheh incidents of 1998-2008 created a widespread understanding of the Copts as a 'persecuted people'. During the same period, a wide array of articles and assessments were published that took a somewhat more nuanced view of Christian participation in Egyptian public life but continued to emphasize its marginality and the extent to which Christians were victims of a Muslim majority. The growth of political Islam as a potent opposition force and one co-opted by the state only served to add problems for the average Christian Egyptian. One

concludes inter alia that: Copts faced the beginning of the 20th century with high hopes of full integration and equality, but at the outset of the 21st century they found themselves battling discrimination, violence, marginalization, and the threat of demotion to the old *dhimma* status in an increasingly Islamized Egypt where they were not accepted as equal partners or full citizens.⁷

Such assessments might suggest that Egypt's Copts are extremely limited in their self-assertion and unable to enjoy even normal status under any Egyptian political or legal regime. But this perception would be misleading, since Copts have always had to deal with the governing authorities in one way or another, and have often had an important role in the elite politics of the state.

Based on the traditional dominance of the Coptic Orthodox Church, each post-independence regime, from Nasser to Sadat to Mubarak, typically followed the pattern laid down since Ottoman times of engaging with the Christian population through their own communal organizations. The historic pattern of the late Ottoman period, known as the millet system, thus gave way to a neo-millet system in which the church operated as the main filter and representative for the interests of individual Christians under the secular republican system established in the 50s and maintained throughout the 60s.

During the 70s and early 80s the simultaneous neo-millet ascendance of the church and the growth of pluralist institutions strengthened Coptic civil society. The relatively tolerant attitude expressed by the Sadat regime enabled the growth of Coptic organizations as well. Despite divisions at the elite level, the church's organization remained in good working order, reflecting the revivalist movement that had strengthened notions of Coptic identity during this period. Philanthropic networks,

⁷See, e.g., D. Zeidan, 'The Copts - Equal, Protected or Persecuted? The Impact of Islamization on Muslim-Christian Relations in Modern Egypt', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 10/1 (1999): 64.

combined with the reinvigorated ancient institutions of the church such as the patriarchate and the monasteries, formed the backbone of a resilient communal edifice.

Yet radical Islamists still opposed, and even attacked, church structures and Coptic citizens, especially in Upper Egypt. The 1990s were a period of continuing challenges, but by the late 1990s, the government seemed to be curtailing Islamist militants, even though the broad discretionary authority provided to the security services also allowed them to use coercive methods against a wider section of the populace, and this often redounded against the Copts. Of particular concern were the heavy-handed tactics used during a police investigation into a murder case in the autumn of 1998 in the hamlet of al-Kosheh in Upper Egypt, in this case disproportionately targeting the Coptic community. The publication of accounts of torture against the Coptic community added a new dimension to consistent complaints that rural Copts suffered the prejudice of both opposition extremists and government forces. Tensions simmered in Upper Egypt, and another outbreak of intersectarian violence in al-Kosheh at the end of 1999 only served to increase the feeling of besiegement among average Copts. It also presaged a renewed assertiveness among the hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It paralleled and abetted **a new vigor among diaspora Copts, particularly in the United States and Australia, where public demonstrations and concerted lobbying efforts brought the status of Egypt's Copts to the forefront in foreign relations. Their protests, of course, were further highlighted in the USA by passage of the Religious Freedom Act (1998)**, which required Congress to conduct an annual survey and rank all nations for their compliance – or non-compliance -- with the human right to exercise freedom of religion. Egypt, a large recipient of US foreign aid, was brought under particularly close, often painful scrutiny.

And so civil society among Copts functions under a variety of different rubrics; several major actors, moments, and processes combine to project and ensure its continuing vitality.

1) **The Coptic Patriarch**

The most important bulwark of Coptic civil society is the ancient and venerable Coptic Orthodox Church, which maintains a presence throughout Egypt. The leadership of Pope Shenouda III is reflected in the personalized approach he takes toward appointing modernist bishops, the number of whom has quadrupled since his accession in 1971. The publishing and media arm of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate also has expanded considerably under his stewardship. The patriarch's own manifestos are ubiquitous at church events and book stalls, tackling all sorts of topics from Christian life to finer points of doctrine, and despite his advanced age, the Pope continues with a heavy schedule, including frequent trips abroad to monitor developments in diaspora churches and to demonstrate his global leadership at home, a fact also reflected in the pages of patriarchal publications.

One of the centerpieces of the Coptic Patriarch's work has been the cultivation of weekly worship observance and interaction with the faithful during midweek services at the Cathedral of St. Mark in Abbasiyya in Cairo. A Wednesday evening gathering at the cathedral attracts several hundred devotees, many of whom gather outside the packed church. Inside, the patriarch responds directly to questions provided to him in writing beforehand. The public audience provides a platform to demonstrate his whimsical sense of humor and his strong communication skills. These weekly appearances also provide opportunities for the patriarch to hold forth on a variety of topics, from personal advice to his parishioners to theological niceties (often targeting the modernist theologies of evangelical and Protestant groups), to the challenges of living in a Muslim society.

The latter topic is highly controversial. Throughout the 1990s the patriarch emphasized the patient forbearance of his parishioners, but since the Khosheh incident he has responded more vociferously to the occasional outbreak of sectarian tensions. For example, during one public appearance in May 2006, the Pope responded to reports of sectarian clashes in the town of Ayyat by condemning the violence and averring that the people responsible should certainly be punished. More remarkable than the Pope's intervention was the palpable feeling of

suppressed anger when Copts throughout the audience broke out in spontaneous applause and cheers.⁸ As a result, the cathedral has periodically become the epicenter of Coptic protests that have threatened to develop into riots. In July 2004, for instance, Coptic youth demonstrated outside the cathedral in July 2004 over the depiction of Copts in similarly negative light in a film entitled *I Love the Cinema*, even as they also opposed the later film, *Hassan wa-Marqus*. When the groups gathered outside the church, they chanted slogans such as 'Copts for peace, not surrender'. Their chants directly targeted the conventional wisdom among Copts that silence and suffering under discrimination is preferable to vocal defiance.⁹

2) **The central role of monasteries**

The expansion of the relevance of church institutions under the leadership of Pope Shenouda III and his corps of modernizing bishops came as a direct result of their investment of time and effort into the monastic and social service roles of the church throughout Egypt. Coptic monasteries and convents are the backbone of Coptic spiritual life and have served in this capacity for centuries. They are extremely influential both among the mainstream laity, who flock to monasteries on retreats and during public holidays, as well as being sources of support and recruitment for the upper levels of the Coptic hierarchy. The commitment to Coptic monastic life has in turn bolstered the internal organization of churches by providing an intellectual and social bulwark that is integrated into parish life. A visit to one of the many monasteries scattered throughout Egypt brings the visitor face to face with thousands of other devotees of the church who are there for spiritual retreat and refreshment. Far from being isolated and cloistered environments, the monasteries are hubs of activity.

Coptic monasteries also provide independent power centers for individual abbots and prominent church leaders (as in fact do dioceses and other bishoprics). The monastery of St. Macarius has long been perceived as the sole personal fief of its charismatic restorer, Matta al-

⁸N.A. El-Magd, 'Unprecedented Show of Coptic Anger', *Al Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 June 2007.

⁹Scathing Egyptian Movie About Copts Draws Street Protests', *Press Release US Copts*, 8 July 2004.

Meskeen. Also, under the past two patriarchs, monasteries have been rediscovered and refurbished in remarkable ways, particularly throughout the monasteries of the western desert in Wadi al-Natroun, and refurbished in remarkable ways. Particularly throughout the monasteries of the western desert in Wadi al-Natroun, monastic centers dot the landscape of Egypt, from the bustling Deir Abu Mina near Alexandria in the north to the venerable Deir al-Moharraq in Upper Egypt. They provide opportunities for prominent monks to publish and disseminate their own monographs and to act as centers for individual retreat and collective celebration by everyday Copts.

The expansion of the hierarchy under Pope Shenouda III has provided new opportunities for individual priests and bishops to create social service projects that address key community concerns that the government is largely unable to take care of. Parish social services in most locations include secular and health education initiatives as well as community development projects. In one diocese in Upper Egypt, a priest related how his parish provided an English-language school to the community, family planning and hygiene seminars, a community micro-credit scheme and community arbitration services.¹⁰ A common refrain among Copts is that 'the church is mother' to the people. The expansion of bishoprics has been accomplished both by creating new dioceses and by appointing general bishops, many of whom have taken up broad new social service projects. Indeed, publicity and service projects led by individual Coptic bishops have mushroomed over the years to such an extent that most of them boast some sort of broader church mandate among their various managerial roles.

3) The broader Coptic community, including dissidents

Social service, media and satellite initiatives do not lie solely within the purview of the Coptic Church hierarchy. Indeed, Egypt is a center of Christian television and video production for the burgeoning number of Christian satellite channels that broadcast in Arabic in the region and internationally. The Coptic community benefits from its own independent newspaper, the weekly *Watani*, the fief of journalist and editor Youssef Sidhom. The publication

¹⁰ Paul Rowe, Personal interview, Saraqna village, Asyut governorate, Egypt, 22 July 2000.

endures the typical vicissitudes of censorship in Egypt but continues to be widely available and is able to print critical editorials, many of which voice the particular issues and concerns of individual Copts. Other denominational and independent publications are also common among Christians. By 2000, there were said to be over 30 different high-circulation publications among the Christian community. Christian television programs are also commonly produced in Egypt, in places such as the production studios of Sat-7 television, a regional evangelical broadcaster. Others reach the community from abroad with the potential to stir inter-religious division. Perhaps most prominent and certainly most controversial among these is Father Zakaria Boutros, a retired Coptic American priest, who habitually challenges the tenets of Islam on his television show 'Questions about Faith', broadcast on the al Hayat satellite channel. Father Zakaria's no-holds-barred style has caused him trouble with many of the religious authorities, both Coptic and Muslim. On occasion he has demanded that Muslims excise passages of the Qur'an that target non-Muslim minorities, compared Muslim teachings to those of Hitler, and debated the core texts of Islam. While he has been disavowed by the church authorities, Father Zakaria remains on the air as a direct challenge to the traditional subordination of dhimmi('protected people') concerns.¹¹ Father Zakaria's foreign residence enables him to make bold statements. Domestically-based Copts have not fared so well. Coptic blogger Hala Helmy Boutros was forced into silence when she published complaints about harassment of church-building activities in the village of Odayssat in June 2006. While Coptic organizations may be able to use their demographic weight to criticize government policy, this indulgence typically ends at the level of the individual when suppression, or harassment, or arrest occurs in the name of restraining intersectarian tensions.

Such tensions are one of the chief targets of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) in its nationwide Forum for Intercultural Dialogue program. Founded by a prominent evangelical church layman Samuel Habib in 1950, CEOSS has long been involved in development initiatives,

¹¹ 'Coptic TV Show Causes Controversy in Egypt', *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No.943, 27 July 2005.

particularly in areas where Christians are clustered in large numbers, such as communities of Upper Egypt, although the organization serves communities, and does not provide services solely to Christians. Today the organization expends a budget valued at nearly \$8.5 million a year, engaging in community development, micro-credit loan schemes, and engages in cultural development projects. It also boasts a publishing arm, the dar al-thaqafa publishing house. Since 1992, the cultural sector has sponsored the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (known organizationally simply as al montada, 'the forum') as a means of creating a culture of free interchange of ideas among devoted religious adherents. By creating a free space of interaction among both ardently and nominally religious Egyptians, the Forum addresses the problems that lead to religious conflict.

The Forum program is divided among several different initiatives at the local, national and international levels. Nevertheless, probably the most promising aspect of the organization is the creation of local chapters that are set up 'to tackle issues of decentralization, social reform, human rights, and citizenship in areas beyond the boundaries of metropolitan Cairo'.¹² Groups established by the Forum provide pre-existing networks that serve as emergency response teams when sectarian tensions threaten to erupt into violence, as for example when a local team responded to sectarian rioting in Alexandria in late 2005. The organization provides a calming presence and commits religious leaders from both Christian and Muslim communities to defusing situations that might otherwise snowball.

Such constructive inter-religious initiatives are symbolic of new attempts to construct Christian-Muslim solidarity. In recent years, Coptic Christmas has been introduced as a new national holiday. Another key feature of Coptic presence in the public square has been the revival of Coptic cultural forums through the patronage of both the Coptic Orthodox Church and the government of Egypt. While the refurbishment of monasteries has fallen largely

¹²CEOSS, Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (pamphlet, no date). For an overview of CEOSS, see Peter E. Makari, *Conflict & Cooperation – Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007): 150-160.

to the church itself, albeit with the indulgence of a state that otherwise tends to restrict Christian building activity, the development of study centers and revival of cultural artifacts has been sponsored by both state and private organizations.

4) The allure of tourism, a Garbage Cathedral & foreign support

The pull of heritage and potential expansion of tourist interest in Egypt for the millennium celebrations led to a large scale commitment of public effort toward highlighting Copts as fully Egyptian. In 1999, a private initiative, the National Egyptian Heritage Revival Association (NEHRA) was founded with great fanfare and under the indulgent eyes of the state authorities. The initiative promised to raise millions of dollars to restore Coptic heritage spots, particularly in the areas said to have been visited by the Holy Family during their flight to Egypt. Additionally, in 2000 the American University in Cairo Press published the Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil. This project was complemented by the production of the liturgy in high-quality recorded format. The government likewise supported the church in revamping the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo and holding public celebrations at various locations around the country. Preparations for the millennium celebrations gave the government the opportunity to call for the inclusion of a book on Coptic culture in the state education curriculum in 1998.

The larger official heritage projects reflect the expansion of Coptic initiatives that have taken place throughout the 1980s and 1990s. One of the better-known initiatives is the expansion of the cave church complex in the east end of Cairo, an area settled by the garbage collectors, or zabbelin, a majority of whom are migrant Copts coming originally from Upper Egypt during the 1960s and 1970s. In the midst of the village a complex of churches have been established over the course of the past three decades, and the area has become a public shrine to the story, famous among Copts, of the miracle of the moving of Moqattam mountain, in the modern period attributed to Saint Samaan the Tanner. What was once a small secretive church built into an ancient cave has now been joined by six church sanctuaries, each of which is used for large open-air

meetings at which thousands of Copts regularly come to worship. Over the past decade, the complex has been adorned by raised-relief scenes of Biblical stories and hagiography created by a European artist. Overseen by a Coptic priest who has taken the name of the famed miracle worker, the complex has burgeoned into a pilgrimage spot for Egyptian Christians, foreign co-religionists, and regular tourists alike, profiled in Coptic and evangelical publications and increasingly seen as a symbol of the preservation of the Christian presence since ancient times. The garbage village has itself become the site for a wide variety of charitable initiatives sponsored by Egyptian and international organizations.

Foreign partnerships have always had dubious value to the Copts, who have often suffered from suspicions that they form some sort of fifth column for Western interests. Nevertheless, the expansion of globalization and the reversal of fortunes that has made the developing world the growing sphere of influence in worldwide Christian circles have had an impact in Egypt as elsewhere. In effect, by making contact with the mainstream of Christianity and by developing international affiliations, the Copts have made it more difficult for any Egyptian regime to attack the Coptic Church without repercussions¹³.

Christian organizations of all sorts benefit from the largesse of foreign supporters, Egyptian and non-Egyptian alike. Almost all of the organizations that have been mentioned, attached to the Coptic Orthodox Church or outside its institutional reach, are supported in one way or another through gifts from abroad. This persists in spite of the notoriously restrictive environment enforced in Egypt against receiving support from abroad. In addition to benefiting from foreign supporters, Coptic organizations tend to employ individuals with Western educations and backgrounds that set them up well to receive overseas development assistance. Even so, this should be understood in parallel with comparatively large financial subsidies provided from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to local Muslim charities.

¹³E. Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963): 172.

Thus foreign support proves both a vital lifeline and an Achilles heel for the community. August 2007 reports in the Egyptian media that Copts were receiving an undue share of USAID resources threatened to dredge up the perception that somehow Copts were being used by American interests to undermine national unity or to proselytize Egyptian Muslims. The press coverage, in fact, put an ominous pall over the terrain of Christian activity throughout Egypt.

Yet external influences also had a strong impact on the expansion of Coptic civil society. The growth of a large and vocal lobby group of Copts in the diaspora became the leading wave among Coptic popular movements. The most prominent of these is the US Copts Association based in Washington DC and led by Michael Meunier, but this organization serves as the leading edge of the wedge of foreign-based Coptic initiatives. Although these organizations have historically based their activism in states in the diaspora, seeking to have an impact through lobbying their own governments to put pressure on the Egyptian government, in recent years there has been evidence that they are gaining ground in the Egyptian environment. Meunier himself made a high-profile tour of Egypt in September 2006, speaking at a conference in Nag Hammadi, Qena Governorate. US Copts cited external sources to assert that 30,000 Copts were in attendance at the gathering, including many leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church. While many argue that diaspora activity merely points out the inability of Copts to organize on their own within the state of Egypt, Meunier's message seemed to indicate that activity in the diaspora should serve as an example for activity in Egypt. He also urged Copts to lobby against restrictions on church construction, the stipulation of religion on identity cards, marginalization of Copts in professional spheres and government appointments, and the activity of extremist groups.¹⁴ The fact that church leaders felt comfortable participating in this forum reflected the increasing freedom of some to embrace the more assertive role of advocacy. There seems to be a united philosophy of collective action if not close organizational cooperation between the Coptic Church in Egypt and abroad.

¹⁴US Copts Association, 'A Call to the Future of Egypt', *US Copts News Release*, 16 Oct. 2006.

Conclusion

In spite of the formidable obstacles to civil society organization in Mubarak's Egypt, including legal restraints, government opposition and the various challenges of political underdevelopment, in addition to the natural subordination of Christian voices within a majority Muslim society, Christians created a vibrant and resilient civil society apparatus.

The strength of Coptic civil society can be discerned throughout the various institutions and initiatives described above. In particular, they are bolstered by the revived and strongly institutionalized features of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the increasing assertiveness of civil society groupings supported by the Copts. In this way, both the neo-millet and pluralist forms of Coptic engagement bolster the civil society activity of the Copts in what was till 25 January 2011 the liberal but non-democratic state of Egypt. The church, an ancient and venerated institution with an independent hierarchy strengthened by a modern reform movement, remains the most important interlocutor for Coptic interests and is recognized as such by the state. New-style pluralist groups hold the interest of a great number of Coptic laypeople and benefit from international ties that have been developed by sympathetic allies abroad as well as in the Coptic diaspora. Competition between these two forms actually helps to bolster each one's relevance.

At the same time, the relative success of Christian civil society in the Egyptian state is abetted by state response to Islamist threats. In dealing with the Islamists, the state walks a fine line, for '[b]y interfering in civil institutions to eliminate the presence of the Islamists, the state also eliminates the services that they provide. Initially, elimination of the Islamists might be celebrated by a state that wishes to resume its corporatist controls, but at the same time it puts pressure on the state to assume even further the roles of nonstate actors'.¹⁵ Put simply, this dilemma has been absent in the

¹⁵H. al-Awadi, 'Mubarak and the Islamists: Why did the "Honeymoon" End?' *Middle East Journal*, 59/1 (Winter 2005):80

case of Christian organizations. Christians did not pose a security threat to the Mubarak regime and instead formed a convenient pet concern that justified a strong security state. When they have been pressed, Christians tended to provide qualified support for the Mubarak regime. Certainly this was the case with the Coptic Orthodox Church, as Pope Shenouda consistently supported the Mubarak regime, even when he has criticized it for its lack of attention to Coptic issues. The neo-millet system represented by the Coptic Orthodox Church remained a strong pillar of the regime till 25 January 2011.

Christians, because they chose to pursue a moderating influence in Egyptian politics, were seen as a useful pillar of internal stability. Their social service organizations have been, and continue to be, largely self-supporting and take care of community needs while also reaching out to the Muslim majority. Coptic civil society has come to occupy a liberal space that is otherwise limited in Egyptian politics. While the secular opposition to the Mubarak regime such as the kefaya movement and individual dissident bloggers were routinely rounded up, prosecuted, or otherwise harassed, Christian organizations tended to dodge such restraints under the protection of religious freedom. Christians did support the liberal viewpoint represented by the secular opposition, yet they did not pose an electoral or majoritarian challenge to the status quo. That political quiescence continues. Individual Christians may have preferred regime change, and the majority, it seems, did support the January uprising, but they also recognize that their best option for political action is the relatively apolitical channel of civil society activity, such as social service provisions, inter-religious dialogue and peace-building.

Coptic civil society, on the whole, advanced during the Mubarak years in spite of eminent challenges. The rise of Islamism represented by Muslim Brotherhood victories in the 2005 elections did pose an existential threat to Coptic civil society. Likewise, nationalist resistance to the Copts as a potential conduit for Western policy goals of a liberal religious and political order occasionally

threatened. The potential for political disruption since the ouster of Mubarak may bode ill for Copts, should uncertainty pervade the executive and other branches of government. Yet in other ways the glass remains half full for Copts. The question for the 21st century' remains: "Can the Coptic tradition seek out and co-operate in the efforts of their [Muslim] neighbors who share a similar struggle in obtaining a voice and inclusion in the [new, post- January 25 2011] Egyptian government?"¹⁶ Many are convinced that Copts, like other Christian minority groups in the Middle East, will be hard-pressed to remain a vibrant community should new crises arrive. But given the way Coptic civil society has already demonstrated its ability to negotiate a place in Egyptian society and has successfully guarded its particular advantages, the answer to this question may well be a qualified 'yes'.

Post-25Jan2011

During the past three months the Arab world, with Egypt at its epicenter, is in the midst of a sea change the end of which no one can predict. Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 and the rest is history. First it was Tunisia, then Egypt, and now it is Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Jordan. A lot of things are set to change in North Africa and the Middle East. Egypt's ability to lead will likely be restored, but the region's political map is going to undergo a lasting change. History is speaking, and we're all listening.

The Arab world is in the throes of a revolution, one that will change its shape, mindset and future. Forget partial reform and gradual evolution. As the demonstrators proclaimed in no uncertain terms, "The people want to bring down the regime." But what will

¹⁶R.P. Henderson, 'The Egyptian Coptic Christians: The Conflict between Identity and Equality', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 16/2 (2005):165.

come next?

We are now faced with a new and unprecedented situation. The collective Arab conscience is being reborn, and things are never going to be the same again. It's hard to know where this will take Arabs, Muslims and the rest of the world, but a few facts are clear:

- The ongoing revolutions are "grassroots" revolutions. They are not imposed from above, nor brought about by military coups. For the first time in six decades, the upper echelons of the political regime are not the ones showing the way. The Arab people, for the first time ever, are deciding the fate of their own presidents and regimes. The revolution has been spontaneous, fluid, and so far irreversible. The masses that took to the streets were intent on bringing about radical change. They refused to go home before their leaders were ousted. They made history, and they are going to make some more.

- What we see today are not revolutions against despotic regimes alone, but also against conventional elites and the opposition that was part of those elites. A radical shift of existing elites is about to happen. The legitimacy of despotic regimes is gone, and with it the legitimacy of the former opposition. In all likelihood, the traditional opposition will have to step aside and refrain from riding the revolutionary wave, but how is that shift going to effect clerical leadership, whether in Al-Azhar or in the Coptic patriarchy? The answer is not yet clear.

- Part of the vitality of the current wave of Arab revolutions is due to the fact that they were not led from above. In the Tunisian case, the revolution had no unified

leadership, although labor and professional groups offered some guidance. In the Egyptian case, there was a lack of unified leadership or even organized groups from the scene. Scattered groups offered horizontal coordination, but the overall design for a new future remains unclear. In Libya, all we can see so far has been a spontaneous eruption of anger feeding on historical and psychological injustices.

- The aim of the ongoing revolutions is not only to depose despotic regimes but also to establish true democracy. This is rather ironic considering the disdain with which Arab officials and their Western interlocutors held the idea of democracy in the Arab world. The mainstream media tried to dismiss democracy as being a secular idea with no relevance to reality, but the demonstrators begged to differ, and though it will deviate from western models and precedents, some form of democracy will emerge in Egypt, as elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East.

- Arab revolutionaries have proved themselves to be fierce, even uncompromising in their demands. Their central demand has been to oust the regime regardless of the cost. Over the past few months, we've been told of how simple folks were proud of the sacrifices their children made for the cause of freedom. A different view of martyrdom has emerged, with untold consequence.

- The revolutionaries do not seem to care what foreign powers thought of them. They didn't ask for foreign assistance. Actually, in Egypt and Tunisia, foreign powers seemed to be more of a hindrance than help. The first reaction of Western powers was either to aid and abet the

despots or to ignore the significance of what was happening. Indeed, the revolutions pulled away the masks of falsehood and double standards, for the West generally acted as if supporting despots was worthier than the cause of freedom and democracy.

Above all, the argument of "Arab Exceptionalism" has been refuted. This used to be a favorite cliché, invented by Arab officials and reiterated by Western academics. Now it has been thoroughly discredited. Researchers and the general public must take note; many textbooks need to be rewritten.

- The current Arab revolutions speak volumes about the crimes that post-independence regimes have committed against their own people. Those regimes stand now accused of undermining Arab culture and stifling the Arab spirit, of giving birth to one-party and despotic governments. And when under threat, these same regimes didn't hesitate to fire teargas and live ammunition at their own people, even sending planes to strafe innocent civilians.

The pattern of Arab revolution has turned out to be astoundingly uniform. It starts with a small, localized protest. Faced with brutal suppression, the protests go out of hand until the whole country is engulfed in revolution. At one point, the army is asked to deploy, but it either stays neutral or takes sides with the people. The dictators eventually leave. But before that, their reactions are quite similar. They make concessions that are too late, they promise reform that is too limited, and they speak of foreign conspiracies while also blaming the revolt on Islamists.

The question now is not which country will revolt next. It is whether one autocrat or another will actually step down without first committing brutalities. Either way, the Arab despotic state is fading.¹⁷ “Hybrid regimes”, like Egypt, will be replaced by those professing to be more transparent and also more rigorously democratic. Will that enhance or diminish the status of minorities, in particular, the Copts? The answer is not yet clear, but what is clear is that the role of Copts will be less official than unofficial, and that the real social power of Copts will continue to reside less in Copts Abroad than in civil societies that flourish within post-Mubarak Cairo on the banks of the Nile and also in the monasteries of Wadi al-Natroun.

¹⁷ Much of this analysis depends on the excellent article by Khalil Al-Anani, “The End of Arab Despotism” published in Al-Ahram in March 2011. See <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1037/op174.htm>