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Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.

Clashes and coalitions

Christians and Muslims in Egypt

Mar 16, 2011 by Paul-Gordon Chandler



Photo by Brooke Comar.

On March 11, the one-month anniversary of former President Mubarak's resignation, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria to celebrate national unity and condemn sectarianism. The march was called by the same youth coalition that launched the revolution. This time their slogan was "No to sectarian strife."

Egyptians from all spectrums of society were waving flags and banners reading "Muslims and Christians are one." Hundreds of people held up crosses and copies of the Qur'an, chanting "Christians and Muslims are one hand." Around the country, Muslim imams addressed religious harmony in their Friday sermons. In Cairo's Tahrir Square, an army general stood on the makeshift platform and lifted high the cross and the Qur'an, saying to the massive crowd, "The crescent and the cross are one. We are all Egyptians, Muslim and Christian." In the now world-famous square, Muslims and Christians prayed together for the unity and safety of Egypt.

It was a peaceful and profoundly heartwarming day. Yet these unity marches came after days of sectarian violence in Egypt that included the burning of a church south of Cairo and clashes between hundreds, if not thousands, of young Christians and Muslims. In an impoverished Cairo suburb, 13 people were killed and more than 140 injured.



Photo by Ben Robinson.

What is going on? How could Egyptian Christians be attacked and a church burnt after Muslims and Christians stood, fought and died together in Tahrir Square, where images of solidarity between both faiths stirred the whole world? Just over a month ago, in a sign of unity, Christians held a mass in Tahrir Square as Muslim protesters formed a ring around them to protect them during the service. Christians did the same for Muslims as they prayed.

As is often the case within outbreaks of religious violence, the immediate reasons are complex and local. The recent tensions originated in the village of Sol in Etfeeh, 90 kilometers south of Cairo. A conflict had been brewing for months after it was discovered that a Christian man had fallen in love with a Muslim woman. To clear the Muslim family's name, a cousin in the family murdered the Muslim woman's father, which led to the woman's brother (the son of the murdered father) avenging the death of his father by killing his cousin. During the emotional funeral, some Muslims blamed Christians for the murders, and they were incited to attack the nearby church, known as the "Two Martyr's Church." The church was torched, and some Christians fled their homes in fear.

On March 7, Coptic Christians from the Manshiyet Nasr neighborhood of Cairo, a predominately Christian area that is home to the city's garbage collectors, took to the streets to protest the burning of the Sol village church. Some one thousand young Copts held a demonstration to voice their anger, blocking two main roads and bringing traffic on the east side of Cairo to a halt for two hours. Even though their priest, knowing the potential for conflict, begged them to stop, the men continued, burning tires and throwing rocks at passing cars.

Muslims from the adjacent neighborhood heard that the Copts had already burned down a small mosque and were coming to burn down the iconic Sayyida Aisha mosque. Violent clashes erupted. Molotov cocktails and stones were thrown back and forth throughout the night before the army was able to calm the situation. Seven Christians and five Muslims were killed, with more than one hundred injured, in clashes that lasted into the early morning of the following day. Several Coptic homes and businesses in the area were also torched.



Photo by Yasmine Perni.

But the priest from the area where the violence took place told the press that this was not a clash between Muslims and Christians. "The attack was organized and [involved] guns," he said. "Muslim residents [here] don't have weapons."

His comments reflect a widespread view regarding this sectarian strife: that it is being orchestrated by pro-Mubarak members of the State Security and by members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, bent on revenge and counterrevolution.

The former ruling party took advantage of all weaknesses in the society, seeking to guide people's anger and keep their legitimate frustrations at bay. Most Egyptians see the recent religious conflicts as a counterrevolution plan targeting Coptic Christians, as they are the most vulnerable and hence the easiest to mobilize against. By creating chaos, instability and confusion, the secret police and the thugs of the former ruling party aim to make possible the return of the former regime in coming elections.

On the recent "day of national unity," Sheikh Muzhir Shahin from Omar Makram mosque delivered the sermon in Tahrir Square. He warned of "hidden hands that are trying to ruin the nation" by breeding tension between Muslims and Christians in order "to incite sectarian tensions and waste the gains of the revolution." There

is recent evidence that the state security has infiltrated the Salafist movement (which promotes a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam) and is using it to try to provoke a counterrevolution. It was the Salafis who clashed with the Copts last week in Cairo.

Other religious and political leaders agree that a state security plot is underway. Bishop Theodysius of Giza, where the Great Pyramids are located, said that those who burned the church in the village of Sol were "thugs and outlaws" attempting to cause division and subversion. Father Filopateer, also of the Giza diocese, insisted that the use of the words "sectarian tension" to depict the conflict is incorrect. He sees the violence as instances of criminal acts, not the result of religious tensions. The new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, warned this last week of a counterrevolution threatening the country with sectarian strife and subverting the nation's progress.



Photo by Yasmine Perni.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group in Egypt, has blamed the remnants of Mubarak's regime for the recent religious clashes. In a statement, the group said, "These people are operating under the principle of 'divide to conquer' and have incited a group of Muslim extremists to bring up other sectarian issues." Even the Islamic cleric Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, president

of the International Union of Islamic Scholars, publicly condemned the attack on the Coptic church, describing it as "the work of the devil." Al-Qaradawi asked Egyptians to support the new government and called on different religious groups to unite in rebuilding the country.

The outcry against the sectarian tension—from almost all parties and religious groups in Egypt—has been most impressive. Many concrete acts of support and solidarity have been shown toward Coptic Christians as well.

The January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition sent representatives to visit the village of Sol in Etfeeh, where they met with political and religious figures in the village to help bring calm to the situation. The coalition has also rounded up more than a thousand volunteers to assist in the rebuilding of the church. Many Muslims have also joined in solidarity with Copts who are protesting through a sit-in in front of the state television headquarters in Cairo.

Following up on their promise to rebuild the burned church and bring those behind the attack to justice, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces began reconstruction work on March 13. Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (the intellectual and spiritual heart of Sunni Islam), announced that he will personally visit the village and promised that Muslims will help in the reconstruction of the church.

The most prominent visit to Sol was from a special delegation of key Muslim and Coptic figures, including famous Salafi Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohamed Hassan, Coptic political activist George Ishaq and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Al-Beltagy. They met the heads of the Muslim and Christian families and visited Copts' houses. But perhaps most moving of all was the visit by television lay preachers Amr Khaled, one of the most popular preachers in the Muslim world (he is often called the "Muslim Billy Graham"). A week after the church burning, Khaled preached in the main mosque in Sol, challenging his listeners as follows: "And my message here today for Muslims and the Christians is: Let's be one hand. Each one of the people here in Sol has to do something. First we must each stop this problem in our own homes." Many villagers responded to Khaled by chanting slogans calling for unity.



Photo by Ben Robinson.

The interfaith youth movement that led the revolution paved the way for the future. While it may be a long and hard road to a new Egypt, the unity demonstrations were an encouraging counter to the sectarian violence of last week. The spirit of interfaith solidarity is still alive. It was notably illustrated at the close of Prime Minister Sharaf's nationwide television interview. Tearing up, Sharaf mentioned that he had just received two phone calls, one immediately following the other. The first was from an Egyptian on the Muslim pilgrimage (Hajj) in Saudi Arabia who promised to pray for him. The second was from a Christian friend of his son's who said that he and his fiancée light a candle every day for him in prayer.

A shorter version of this article appears in the April 5 print edition.