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## **Celebrations and challenges: Muslims and Christians look toward the future in Egypt**

By Paul-Gordon Chandler, March 28, 2011



[Episcopal News Service] Against the background buzz of the now-familiar sound of army helicopters flying overhead, it is an interesting time to pull aside from all that has recently made this region seem like the "Wild East" to reflect on Egypt's present situation. On Friday, March 25, we celebrated the two-month anniversary of the beginning of the Egyptian uprising, popularly known as the "25 January Revolution." We have indeed witnessed history. And it has been a time of profound emotion, full of exhilarating highs and exhausting lows.

In contrast to the protests all over the Middle East, such as in Libya, Bahrain, Tunisia and Yemen, Egypt's context is unique in that up to 10 percent of its population is Christian, mostly from the historic Coptic Orthodox Church founded by St. Mark. In the heat of the revolution and during its ongoing aftermath, this significant indigenous Christian presence has paradoxically allowed both for opportunities of unity and significant tension. If I had to sum up our recent experiences in the last two months, it would be in two words: celebrations and challenges.

There is so much to celebrate. In addition to the obvious new freedoms that exist due to the overthrow of the oppressive regime, the revolution has brought about a new and profound interfaith spirit among the youth. Time and time again, thousands of young Egyptian Muslims and Christians have taken to the streets together, first to protest the repressive system, and then to celebrate their victory. The scenes are moving, as Egyptians wave flags and carry banners depicting the cross and crescent embracing, with slogans such as "The crescent and the cross are one. We are all Egyptians, Muslim and Christian." Around the country, Muslim imams address religious harmony and the importance of unity in their Friday sermons. In the now world famous Tahrir Square, Muslims and Christians have prayed together for the unity and safety of Egypt. In essence the Egyptian revolution ended up as a summons to national unity, thereby condemning religious sectarianism. It has been deeply inspirational.

It is remarkable how much has been accomplished in such a short period of time; the ouster of President Mubarak and his regime, the appointment of a new cabinet, the dismantling of the notorious State Security, the removal of media

ensorship and state monitoring of personal communication (cell phones, e-mails), etc. Perhaps one of the most moving images was seeing millions of Egyptians, Christian and Muslim, enthusiastically line up side-by-side to vote in the March 19 referendum regarding the recent constitutional amendments that will pave the way for both parliamentary and presidential elections under more democratic terms. I spoke with one elderly man, 85 years of age, who was voting for the first time. His whole family went to the polls together, grandchildren and all, knowing that their votes would truly make a difference. Before the revolution, hardly anyone used to vote, as elections were usually rigged. But this recent day of voting was a cause for great celebration and all of Egypt seemed to be in a state of elation.

However, the very background behind whether one voted "yes" or "no" for the constitutional amendments highlights the great challenges and religious tensions that exist. Voting "yes" meant that elections would take place in the near future. Voting "no" was to request these elections be delayed and thus allow more time for new political parties to form and organize themselves so that Egyptians might be given as broad a choice for their leadership as possible. Interestingly, many of those who lobbied for the "yes" vote were the more conservative Muslims influenced by either the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists, a fundamentalist sect of Islam. These groups, which have existed for many years, already have grassroots networks throughout Egypt that are organized and ready to propose viable candidates from their respective religious ideologies. The concern was that new political groups will have too little time to be ready to prepare for elections currently scheduled for this September. Conversely, most of the youth demonstrators who led the revolution, as well as most Christians, voted "no," believing this was the only way to allow the revolutionaries' dream for a truly secular state to be realized.

The result of a 78 percent "yes" vote and a 22 percent "no" vote surprised the youth protesters and those who led the revolution, both Muslim and Christian, as well as the churches, because both groups do not wish religion to determine political affiliation. In this regard, prior to the historic vote, there were numerous stories of campaigning being done in poorer urban and rural areas by the Muslim Brotherhood saying the "Islamic duty was to vote 'yes.'" The Coptic Orthodox Church did the same, albeit vice-versa. In spite of the hopeful signs of interfaith unity that existed during the revolutionary protests, religion did come into the equation from segments of Egyptian society.

Many Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians, saw this recent referendum as a litmus test to determine how strong the Muslim Brotherhood's influence is among the populace. Even the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, the voice of moderate Sunni Islam, has expressed caution. Last week I assisted the United Nations office in pulling together 14 of the most influential religious leaders in Egypt, Muslim and Christian, for a visit from the U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. One of those in the Muslim delegation was Amr Khaled, the most-known television preacher in

the Islamic world. A voice of moderation, he expressed concern at the apparent growing grassroots influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. I share that to highlight that this is not just a concern expressed by Christians in Egypt, but by moderate Muslims who do not seek a more distinctly Muslim nation, but rather a truly democratic state, where religion is separate from political rule. It should be pointed out, to give a balanced picture, that while many moderate and secularized Muslims, as well as the majority of Christians in Egypt, are wary of the Muslim Brotherhood's intentions; that the Brotherhood has to date demonstrated balance, moderation and generosity.

Sadly, in the aftermath of the revolution, there have been episodes of tragic sectarian violence. While the reasons for these sectarian conflicts are complex and varied, most believe the recent inter-religious strife was part of a "counter-revolution" by pro-Mubarak members. However, due to the foundation laid by the revolution of exemplary interfaith solidarity, there has in response been a profound display of support and solidarity from a wide spectrum within the Muslim community toward the Coptic Christians.

In this regard, we see our role here serving as a catalyst to build bridges between Christians and Muslims as more important than ever before. Hence, in celebration of the Egyptian Muslims and Christians who are peacefully walking together the road toward a new Egypt, our postponed interfaith [CARAVAN Festival of the Arts](#) has been re-scheduled for May 12-18, with the purpose of honoring the interfaith youth movement that led the revolution in Egypt, and which we believe has paved the way for the future.

To be officially opened on May 12 at 7 p.m., by the U.N. Resident Coordinator/Representative to Egypt, James Rawley, 50 premier Middle Eastern and Western visual artists will come together for an arts festival held at our church, [St. John's Church](#), each submitting work reflecting the themes "My Neighbor" and "The Peoples' Egypt since January 25th." A number of the participating artists courageously joined the protests in Tahrir Square, some for all 18 days.

The recent tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt serve as a reminder that much work lies ahead. As those from both faiths journey into the future in concert, we all need to find ways to wage peace on each other. I believe this means being involved in an all-out effort to help Egyptians, regardless of their religion, by showering upon them our good will, trust, appreciation, prayer, love, solidarity and practical assistance. And this includes doing everything we can to break down the walls that create further alienation between Christians and Muslims, providing a bridge in the gap.

I close with the words of Sheik Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, a friend of the Episcopal Church here: "...now is the time for the peacemakers to take action. The sectarian violence must end ... A solution that addresses the deep

roots of the sectarian quagmire is urgently needed as we move into this new era ... I call upon [everyone] to take part in promoting a sectarian-free Egypt ... The sectarian issue is like an iceberg that is sure to melt down with the sunshine of freedom in our beloved country."

Helping to melt that iceberg is why we are here.

-- *The Rev. Canon [Paul-Gordon Chandler](#), a mission partner with the Episcopal Church, is an author, Episcopal priest, and interfaith advocate serving as the rector of [St. John's Church](#) in Cairo.*