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Analysis - Egypt's Christians wary of too much foreign support

Tom Heneghan

Reuters Africa (21.12.11) / HRWF (19.01.12) - The Arab Spring has increased pressure on Egypt's Coptic Christians, with attacks on churches and bloody clashes with Muslims and the military. Many foreign Christians feel driven to help.

Pope Benedict, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams and other church leaders have spoken out in defence of the Copts, indigenous Christians who make up 10 percent of Egypt's mostly Muslim population of 80 million.

In Europe and North America, governments have denounced the violence and called on Egypt's armed forces to guarantee equal rights for all citizens, especially religious minorities. Church groups have collected funds to send to Egyptian parishes.

Worried Christians in Egypt say attacks on them have multiplied in recent years, starting even before former President Hosni Mubarak - seen as a defender of their rights - was swept from power in February by the Tahrir Square protests.

But they are wary about getting too much support from abroad, fearing a backlash from Muslims who could resent special attention to a minority at a time when all Egyptians are suffering economic hardship and political uncertainty.

"We're not afraid of anybody. We don't want help from anyone," Rev. Antonius Michael declared as he handed out blessed bread after Mass in a Coptic Orthodox church in Old Cairo.

"It's not to our benefit to have loud voices overseas talking about Christians," said Ramez Atallah, general secretary of the Bible Society of Egypt.

"It's a great benefit to us to have loud voices abroad talking about a more universal bill of rights for all Egyptians."

NEW INTOLERANCE

The Copts are so named from the ancient Greek term for all Egyptians, which came to refer only to Christians after the arrival of Islam. They are the largest Christian minority in the Middle East.

Many business leaders are Copts, churches dot the cities and Atallah's Bible Society can advertise in newspapers and on roadside billboards.

About 95 percent of Egyptian Christians are Coptic Orthodox, while the rest are divided among Catholic, Protestant, Anglican and other churches.

The spread of hardline Islamism in recent decades, confirmed by a surge in support for puritan Salafi candidates in the current election, has fostered a new intolerance against them and led to increasing clashes and harassment.

On January 1, a suspected suicide bomber killed 23 people at an Alexandria church.

Twelve more died in May in clashes and a church burning in Cairo. In October, at least 25 died in clashes involving Christians and security forces after another Cairo church burned.

In smaller towns and villages, Christians report growing tensions. There are disputes over church-building and Muslim protests over real or imagined cases of kidnapping or conversion of Muslims to Christianity.

"It's fairly safe here (in the capital) because there are more people and media here, but down there many things can happen and nobody knows," said George Gaber, a Christian salesman at a souvenir shop in the Coptic section of old Cairo.

Christian minorities elsewhere in the Middle East have shrunk dramatically in recent decades as many flee to escape pressure and attacks by Muslim militants.

There are fears of the "Iraq syndrome," in which the fall of a dictator exposes minorities to attack by Muslim hardliners.

"Atrocities and attacks on churches and violence against Christians have become more frequent," said Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of the Coptic weekly *Watani*. "But 8 to 10 million people can't leave, nor do they have to."

POPE'S CALL

While small foreign donations, channelled directly to Egyptian churches, go mostly unnoticed, appeals by foreign politicians to protect Copts have touched a sore nerve in Cairo.

The government recalled its ambassador to the Vatican in January after Pope Benedict criticised the attack in Alexandria as a "vile gesture of death" and al-Azhar, Egypt's top Islamic authority, suspended its interfaith dialogue with Rome.

"Why did he call for protection for Egyptian Christians?" asked Mahmoud Azab, chief official for dialogue at al-Azhar, who said Benedict had to apologise before contacts could resume. "The Copts in Egypt are not a foreign minority community."

Sidhom said any special protection for Christians could alienate the moderate Muslims they needed as political allies to stand up to more hardline Islamists.

The two main Islamist movements, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, have won at least two-thirds of the vote in Egypt's three-stage parliamentary elections, raising fears they could join forces to pass strict Islamic laws.

"Restoring rights for Christians depends very much on their alignment with moderate Muslims and the support of these Muslims for the rights of Copts," he said. "Aid for Christians only will harm relations between them and moderate Muslims."

As long as they're not attacked, Atallah said, Christians actually have less to lose than moderate and liberal Muslims if Egypt opts for a strict version of Islam they do not support.

"They're the ones who are terrified," he said, noting that a swimming pool in the upscale Heliopolis quarter where his office is located recently banned female bathing because Islamists consider women's swimsuits immoral.

"They won't have the option of hiding in the enclave of churches, as Christians do," he said. "Christian women won't be forced to be veiled, but Muslim women will find it almost impossible not to be."

Islamist groups leading in Egypt's Parliamentary elections

Christians fear mistreatment could increase

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (02.12.2011) / HRWF (05.12.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Islamist groups made a strong showing this week in the first stages of Egypt's parliamentary elections, according to figures released today by elections officials, renewing concerns Christians have about their future in the country.

The Freedom and Justice Party, affiliated with the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood, won 40 percent of the vote overall. The Al Nour Party, made up of members of the extremist Salafi group, garnered 20 percent of the vote. By comparison, the relatively liberal Egypt Social Democratic Party received 15 percent of the total vote.

The candidates were campaigning for 112 seats, but the total number of seats allocated from this round of voting will not be known until after a run-off election on Monday (Dec. 5).

The election results confirmed the fears of Egyptian Christians, many of whom believe that Islamists will take control of the country in the wake of the revolution that deposed former President Hosni Mubarak. Egyptians now wait for the run-offs and final two rounds of this election, another election to seat the second half of Egypt's bicameral chamber, and then finally the election for the next president. Further wins by Islamists, Christians said, will guarantee increased persecution against them or at a minimum, entrench their second-hand status in the country.

Echoing the remarks of most Christians in the country, Marcelle Mageh, 22, blamed conservative Muslims for the dramatic increase in attacks against Christians in Egypt after Mubarak fell from power. Sitting in the Church of St. Theresa in Cairo along with her fiancé shortly after casting their ballots on Monday (Nov. 28), Mageh said the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood running the country along with the Salafis frightens her.

"You see all the problems that have happened before they got into power," she said. "Imagine what will happen when they get into power."

After the Revolution

After Mubarak stepped down from power on Feb. 11, there was a brief period of elation among Egypt's Christians. But the joy was quickly replaced by fear after a string of attacks against Christians by self-identified members of the Salafi movement and other Muslims.

Members of the loosely affiliated Islamic group attacked Christian-owned homes and business, set church buildings on fire, and prevented congregations from opening or reopening churches, and in one incident "punished" one Christian after accusing him of renting an apartment to two prostitutes. They ordered him to convert to Islam or they would cut off his ear. He refused to convert.

For about two weeks in April, members of the Salafi movement, along with Muslims from across the country, blocked off the city of Qena when the interim government nominated a Coptic man as governor over Qena Province. He was later replaced with a Muslim.

Over the same year, the Egyptian army attacked at least two monasteries. And during an unusual show of brutality in October, the army killed at least 27 people in Cairo, at least 23 of them Christians, who were protesting the torching of a church in Aswan.

To date, no one has been tried for any of the attacks or killings. In fact, the government has instead arrested numerous Copts in connection with the incidents, claiming they incited "sectarian" violence or possessed illegal weapons.

Two-Faced Rhetoric

Part of the reason Copts are so nervous about the Islamists gaining power, the Salafis in particular, is that they accuse them of being deceptive with their rhetoric. When the

Islamists are trying to gain power, they espouse policies they later deny or scoff at in private among their co-religionists, said Coptic Catholic Antowan Zekaria, 25.

"If they are in power, they show their real faces," he said.

In the case of the Qena protests, Salafi leaders said their objection to the Coptic governor was not because he was a Christian, but because he was allegedly connected to the Mubarak government. But video shot at the protests later showed protestors screaming because, they said, having a Christian "rule" over a Muslim was against Islamic law.

Salafi religious leaders have also made numerous statements emphasizing Christian's second-citizen status in Egypt, such as saying no Christian is fit to be president over Egypt. Several mass attacks against Christians in Upper Egypt happened this year after Salafi sheiks prompted attacks during Friday prayers.

Not all Christians in Egypt are convinced that the country under Brotherhood and Salafi leadership would lead to more persecution.

"It depends on the maturity of the leadership that comes afterward and how much they realize the importance of the image of Egypt internationally," said the Rev. Mouneer Anis, bishop of the Episcopal and Anglican Diocese of Egypt.

Lilian Sobhy, a surgeon who worked at a medical clinic in Kasr El Dobra during the recent riots, said that more persecution is coming, but that Christians who focus on that miss the larger point. The point, she said, isn't that persecution will come, but how to deal with it when it does.

"We believe that if the church is standing in the right place it is going to be glorious, so we don't really care who is going to win," she said. "Wherever it is going to happen, we believe that the Lord is sovereign."

Egyptian Coptics attacked, dozens slightly injured

By Mohamed Fadel Fahmy

CNN (18.11.2011) / HRWF (24.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hundreds of Coptics marching in Cairo Thursday were attacked by unknown assailants.

Thirty-two people were injured including two police officers, according to Dr. Adel Al Dawi, a ministry of health spokesman. Except for one badly injured girl who remained hospitalized late Thursday, those injured were treated for minor bruises and cuts.

The marchers were heading to Cairo's Tahrir Square to commemorate the deaths of pro-Coptic protesters killed in clashes in the Egyptian capital last month.

Coptic Christians, an ancient sect, make up about 9% of Egypt's largely Muslim population, according to the U.S. State Department. Problems between Egypt's Muslim majority and its Coptic Christian minority have been on the rise in recent months, with a number of violent clashes reported between the two groups.

Thursday's march was organized by the Free Copts Movements and the Blood of Martyrs movement, two of many new groups formed after clashes that took place on October 9 in the Cair neighborhood of Maspero leaving 26 dead and 300 injured.

"We were marching peacefully with candles to commemorate the 26 martyrs of Maspero on the 40-day anniversary of the Maspero attacks, when several youth clashed," said Sherif Doss, the head of the Egyptian Coptic Association.

"Some residents started throwing rocks and glass bottles from the rooftops of buildings at the crowds, which left many injured," Doss added.

"Hundreds of police conscripts assigned by the ministry of interior to protect the march started firing tear gas canisters to stop the clashes between the unidentified men," Sameh Mina a Coptic protester, told CNN.

"The Copts defended themselves and threw rocks back at the attackers until the police intervened," Mina added.

It is an Egyptian tradition to commemorate the dead on the 40th day after death.

Thursday's clashes came a day before a "million-man" protest scheduled for Friday in Tahrir Square against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

Massacre in Egypt said to cost Government all credibility

Killing of Christian protestors, far-fetched denials leave citizens enraged

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (01/11/2011) / HRWF (03.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Egyptian army's killing of 27 people - including at least 23 Christians - who were protesting the burning of a church building has removed any respect most Egyptians had for the transitional military government, according to Christian human rights activists in the country.

The activists, along with members of Egyptian churches, said that the attack and the subsequent denial of any wrongdoing by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has taken away any credibility the army had among Christians, moderate Muslims and "secularists."

Instead of assuming any responsibility for the killings, the military instead blamed unidentified "enemies of the nation."

Wagih Jacoub, a Coptic human rights activist who was injured during the attack, was enraged at the assault and subsequent denial of responsibility.

"They are absolutely lying," he said.

Jacoub said the evening of the protest resembled "hell brought down to Earth." He said he was walking with the protestors when he was hit across his chest with pellets from what he described as a homemade shotgun.

"All of the sudden I was bleeding; my head was bleeding," he said.

Jacoub recounted that he was also slashed across the top of his head with a knife; he then dropped to the ground, where he faded in and out of consciousness.

"People picked me up and took me to the hospital," he said.

After being treated for his injuries, Jacob wandered around the hospital in a state of horror and disbelief. Bodies from the protest had been pouring in, and relatives hovered over the dead, weeping and screaming.

Jacob noticed that one body looked very familiar. It was his friend, Mina Daniel. Before the attack, Jacob and Daniel had been walking and joking together as other protestors came up to Daniel to say hello.

"We were laughing and talking in the protest, and then a few hours later I saw him lying in the morgue," he said. "What did he do to deserve that?"

According to a medical report obtained and released online by his friends, Daniel was shot through the heart. Daniel, who had been injured during the January revolution, was an ardent political activist and a vigorous promoter of Christian-Muslim unity in Egypt. He was 25.

Vacillating Denials

In a press conference held three days after the Oct. 9 attack, generals with the SCAF vacillated between two positions: that they could not confirm whether soldiers were driving the vehicles that hurtled into the crowds, and stating that, "Soldiers driving armored vehicles were trying to avoid civilians who were throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at them."

They have now stated that they are seeking a man in "a red shirt" the SCAF said is responsible for running over protestors.

The army flatly denied shooting at the protestors, instead asserting that counter-revolutionaries hidden among protestors were responsible for the deaths.

"There are enemies of the revolution. Don't tell us this is a conspiracy theory. History has proven there are conspiracies," Gen. Adel Emara said. "These enemies attempt to raise doubts about the leadership which are untrue and ignite sectarian tumult."

Despite the military denials, at a press conference held on Oct. 14, forensic pathologist Dr. Magda Adly released a report stating that, of the 23 victims that doctors were able to examine post mortem, two had died of lacerations, 13 had been crushed by vehicles and two had been shot. Adly added that the doctors thought the caliber of the rounds found in the bodies of the victims were commonly used in the ammunition in Egyptian army sidearms. Doctors were unable to examine the four other victims.

In addition to the accusations against the military, there has been an uproar about the way the state media reported the incident. Although most of the killings happened just outside the Maspero media building, television news readers there not only told the Egyptian public that Coptic activists were attacking the army but implored Egyptians to go out to the streets and "defend the army."

A lay pastor for a large Protestant church who requested anonymity said Christians and moderate Muslims now see that the army is a big part of sectarian violence in Egypt.

"The army has revealed itself," he said.

The pastor said if the military was serious at all about addressing the events of what is now known as "Black Sunday," they would court-martial the soldiers who ran the vehicles into the crowds of protestors. If the killings were accidental, then the soldiers in question

should be tried for manslaughter and dereliction of duty, he said. If it was intentional, then they should be tried for murder.

Moreover, he said, if the soldiers were acting under orders, "Then the officers should be court-martialed."

Token Efforts

In the wake of the attack, the military-led transitional government announced it would rework the country's discrimination law by making penalties for violating it more severe. It also promised to make headway on a law to change the way Christians will be allowed to build churches.

But all the Christians surveyed said increasing the penalties is useless if, as human rights activist Athanasious Williams said, "They don't enforce the laws."

The pastor agreed, calling the changes "ineffectual."

"I don't think it's going to work," he said. "I will not believe it unless I see it implemented fairly."

Targeting Civil Disobedience

The Cairo attack started late in the afternoon of Oct. 9, when unidentified men began throwing rocks at the protestors, most of whom were Christians. As the protestors made their way from a largely Christian part of Cairo to the center of town, some of them began throwing the rocks back at their attackers, and in the melee that ensued, the men attacked the protestors with knives, metal poles, and construction timbers, according to witnesses.

By the time protestors reached the Maspero Building, the headquarters for much of Egypt's state-owned media, protestors began taking gunfire, and the military turned its riot-control vehicles on the demonstrators, running many of them over. Twenty six protestors died in the attack. The next day, another victim died of his injuries, bringing the total to 27.

The oldest victim was 66. The youngest was 19.

Medical officials reported that one soldier died in the melee. But the military, while claiming several soldiers were killed during the attack, declined to say how many were killed, stating that it would affect the morale of the army. The dead soldiers were buried quietly, they said, to avoid further "sectarian" violence.

Much of the attack was captured on digital video and placed on the Internet by protestors and the news media, including graphic footage of riot-control vehicles ramming into crowds and crushing protestors. In one video segment, a military vehicle flipped over just after striking several Copts. As a crowd rushed to the vehicle, presumably to pull out the driver and kill him, a priest threw his body over the soldier and protected him, taking the blows until the assault stopped. The priest later walked the soldier back to the safety of other military personnel.

Blame the Victims

The Oct. 9 protest came in response to a Sept. 30 attack in Upper Egypt where the Mar Gerges Church was burned down along with several Christian-owned homes and businesses in Al Marenab, a village in Aswan Province.

The church building, which was being renovated, was attacked by local Muslims who claimed the congregation had no right to alter it, despite legal documents parish priests had stating the contrary. The local Muslims claimed the structure was a hospitality house.

Before the attack, after negotiating with local Muslims, parishioners of the church had taken down crosses on the outside of the building. And when it was attacked, contractors were removing domes that locals held to be offensive.

The Mar Gerges burning was the third church building in Egypt in seven months to be burned down by a mob.

The protestors gathered in Cairo were upset, not only at the lack of government action in defending the church building from the mob, but specifically for claiming that the Christians in Al Marenab didn't have the proper permits but built it anyway – in effect saying that they brought the attack on themselves. No one has been arrested in connection with the burning.

Religious discrimination banned

By Katherine Weber

The Christian Post (18.10.2011) / HRWF (20.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has issued a decree fining anyone who practices discrimination, including religious discrimination, in an attempt to deflect negative attention towards Egypt's military rule.

The decree was issued Sunday by Hussein Tantawi, Head of Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

The amended article 161 reads: "Anyone committing any action that could cause religious, sex, racial, or language discrimination among the individuals; or against a sect, shall be imprisoned to three months at least, and be fined from 30,000 EGP up to 50,000 EGP."

The decree also contends that civil/public service employees who discriminate will be charged 100,000 Egyptian pounds.

Although somewhat of an advance towards a more unified Egypt in light of Cairo's violent clashes on Sunday, Coptic Christians argue that this is but a small step on the way to religious tolerance.

"[The decree] wasn't enough to ease sectarian tensions," Ishaq Asaad, lawyer with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights told The Daily News Egypt.

"[It is a] limited but positive symbolic step," contended Hafez Abu Saada, head of the Egyptian Human Rights Organisation.

Various countries have spoken out against Egypt's sectarian community, arguing that it favours Muslims over Christians and pits the groups against each other.

The United States Commission of International Religious Freedom issued a statement on Tuesday, Oct. 11 requesting a "thorough, impartial, and independent investigation to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice in civilian courts."

USCIRF also requests "that Egypt's military forces are held accountable for reportedly using excessive force."

In response to the ensuing violence, Germany's foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, commented: "It is about time that the Egyptian leadership understands the importance of religious plurality and tolerance."

Mourners are blaming the Egyptian army for the high death toll of 27 on Sunday, arguing that the Christian march was absolutely peaceful until the military started a crackdown. The ensuing clashes reportedly saw religious extremists join the attacks against the Christians, and even saw a military vehicle driven directly into crowds of protesters.

Some human rights activists reported military personnel firing directly into the crowd of protesters.

Violence erupted in Cairo a week ago when Christians gathered to protest against the burning of a Coptic church in Southern Aswan which took place on Sept. 30. The burning was carried out allegedly by local religious extremists who claimed the church did not have the license for the construction of a dome.

Christians are accusing both the state television and the military of making peaceful Christian protesters seem like the aggressors.

Egypt's military leaders held an emergency conference with Christian leaders on Monday, Oct. 10 to discuss peace and compromise.

Concerned countries agree that the upcoming elections in Egypt are imperative to the future of the country, especially for those practicing Christianity in Egypt.

U.S. President Barack Obama has released a statement, urging peace and compromise "so that Egyptians can move forward together to forge a strong and united Egypt."

According to reports, the current military tribunal which runs the government claims it will step down after the elections nominate a new leader.

"With parliamentary elections mere weeks away, the Egyptian government must promptly investigate, prosecute those responsible, and deter any future attacks," said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo.

Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million. Over recent months, Christians in the country have been anxious about their future in the country, as extremist groups which remained underground or inactive during the rule of the now ousted president Hosni Mubarak, became more socially and politically active following the fall of the regime in a "January 25 Revolution."

Egyptian army rejects top minister's resignation

CBS (10.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Egypt's finance minister submitted his resignation Tuesday to protest the government's handling of protests that left 26 dead, most of them Coptic Christian demonstrators, but the ruling military council rejected it.

Finance Minister Dr. Hazem El-Beblawi, in a letter to Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, said he was tendering his resignation over the "government's handling of Maspero," according to an aide.

"I think the government should have allowed some kind of recognition of their responsibility and they should have taken a much more drastic stand to apologize for the failure in maintaining the security situation," El-Beblawi later told CBS News' Alex Ortiz.

He said he submitted his resignation, which he confirmed that the resignation was rejected by the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces, because he "wanted to make [his] position known."

Overnight, some 20,000 mourners chanted slogans denouncing the ruling military during a funeral procession overnight for 17 Christians killed in the protest on Sunday night in Cairo. They accused the army of bearing primary responsibility.

At times, the prayers were interrupted by chants of "Down with military rule" and "The people want to topple the Marshal," — a reference to Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi who heads the ruling military council that took power after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in February. No state official or military official were present at the funeral.

Egypt's Coptic Christians, who represent about 10 percent of the 85 million people in this Muslim-majority nation, have long complained that they are second-class citizens in their own country. However violence against them in the eight months since the uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak has reached the highest level in decades.

The Coptic church has accused authorities of allowing repeated attacks on Christians with impunity. And Islamist extremists, known as Salafis, have gained power and freer rein since Mubarak's overthrow and are seen as instigators behind much of the violence against Christians.

In the aftermath of Sunday's clashes, the ruling military council condemned the surge in deadly violence as an attempt to undermine the state and signaled it would tighten its grip on power, something that would further infuriate activists who demand an end to military rule and a quick transition to democracy.

Activists say the generals are likely to take advantage of the nation's tenuous security situation to stay in power long enough to find a candidate they approve of to run for president in order to protect their vast interests.

The violence Sunday night began when thousands of Coptic Christians marched to the state television building to stage a sit-in over a recent attack on a church. As they marched, state television called on civilians to "protect" the army, casting the Christians as a mob seeking to undermine national unity.

Witnesses among the protesters said the march started out peaceful but turned violent when the Christians were attacked by civilians. What happened next is not fully clear. But a video circulating widely shows at least two military vehicle plowing through crowds of Christian protesters at high speed and running some of them over.

Rights activists and witnesses also say soldiers fired directly at protesters. State television claimed protesters had attacked soldiers. Clashes then broke out between Muslims backing riot police and soldiers on one side, and Christians and some Muslims on the other side. Forensic reports showed many of the deaths were caused by armored vehicles that ran down protesters, or by gunshots.

In response to calls for his resignation, the prime minister said the Cabinet's resignation was ready if the military council, which holds ultimate power, wants to accept it.

In the two days since the violence, Christians have grown furious with the military rulers, hurling a string of accusations in their direction.

Overnight, mourners packed the Coptic cathedral in Cairo for the funerals that began shortly before midnight Monday and lasted for several hours. They filled hallways and corridors as prayers were led by top church officials, chanting slogans that denounced the military council.

After the service at the cathedral, a small group of mourners marched to central Cairo's Tahrir Square with the body of Mena Danial, one of the activists killed Sunday. Danial's friends said that he had wanted to have his funeral in Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the 18-day uprising.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said that the role of military in killings of protesters should be probed thoroughly and impartially by an independent judicial authorities not by the military prosecutor.

"Time and again since February, the Egyptian military has used excessive force in responding to protests," said HRW spokesman Joe Stork. "The high death toll from the clashes on October 9 shows the urgent need for thorough investigations that lead to accountability and better protection for the Coptic community."

Security officials said at least three soldiers were killed in Sunday's violence, though it remains unclear how they died. No state funeral for them has been held yet.

The military prosecutor ordered 28 suspects detained for 15 days pending investigation. The prosecution alleged the suspects, the majority of them Coptic Christians, attacked members of the military and vandalized their equipment, according to state news agency MENA.

The Coptic church has announced three days mourning, fasting and prayers as Christians' sense of injustice hit a new high. One priest said that the fast was a means of showing loss of confidence in the authorities. He said such a measure had not been invoked by the church since former President Anwar Sadat's program of Islamizing laws during the 1970s.

Some Muslims said they would join the Christians in their fast in solidarity. A campaign named "Fast4Egypt" spread on social networking sites.

The outcry over the deaths may push Egypt's military rulers to address some Coptic grievances. The Cabinet has already announced it would issue a new law regulating houses of worship in two weeks, and that the law would criminalize religious discrimination.

In another apparent overture to Copts, authorities on Monday executed Hamam al-Kamouni, who was convicted and sentenced to death for shooting dead seven Christians in Christmas Eve in 2010 in Nagaa Hammadi, a town 290 miles south of Cairo.

In other developments, a military tribunal accepted Tuesday the appeal and ordered a retrial for a young blogger who is sentenced to three years for criticizing the military in his Web postings. Mikail Nabil Sanad, who turned 26 in jail, has been on hunger strike for nearly 50 days to protest his sentence. The retrial of Sanad was seen by activists as a reluctant nod to pressure for his release.

Coptic Church lashes out at military over deadly violence

Los Angeles Times (10.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Coptic Christian Church on Monday denounced Egypt's military leaders who it said allowed thugs to invade a protest, leading to violent clashes that killed at least 24 people, most of them Copts, and igniting sectarian tensions.

"Strangers got in the middle of our sons and committed mistakes to be blamed on our sons," a church statement said. It added that attacks and discrimination against Copts are "problems that occur repeatedly and go unpunished."

Photos: Deadly clashes in Cairo

Funerals for four Coptic protesters, killed in clashes Sunday with military police and thugs in plainclothes, kept the country on edge.

The ruling military council, which is steadily losing credibility among many Egyptians, called for an investigation into the deaths. Angry Christians hurled rocks at police outside a Cairo hospital where the bodies of other protesters awaited burial.

"This is a huge crisis that could end in a civil clash. It could end in dire consequences," said Amr Moussa, a former foreign minister now running for president.

Ultraconservative Islamists have burned churches and inflamed sectarian passions in recent months. Copts said that the attacks on protesters Sunday — the bloodiest unrest since February — also revealed the virulent anti-Christian attitudes held by many in the security forces. Others said the military was stoking unrest to justify further tightening its grip on the country despite its eroding stature.

The violence escalated quickly Sunday and jolted what had begun as a peaceful rally by Christians to protest the recent burning by Muslims of a church in southern Egypt. Copts began hurling bottles and rocks at security forces after military vehicles plowed through demonstrators as gunshots echoed overhead and crowds scattered.

Christians in peril

The Telegraph (10.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The violent clashes in Egypt that have resulted in at least 24 deaths have highlighted the deepening plight of the country's Coptic Christians. The Copts, who constitute about 10 per cent of Egypt's 85 million-strong population, have been subjected to a continuous campaign of sectarian attacks since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak last February. Islamist militants linked to Egypt's Salafist sect have been blamed for orchestrating the campaign of violence that has resulted in the destruction of several Coptic churches and led to hundreds of Coptic worshippers being killed or injured.

At a time when Christians throughout the Middle East find themselves increasingly under attack from radical Islamic groups, the failure of Egypt's interim government to afford the Copts adequate protection does not bode well for the country's future political development. The elections which are due to commence next month to elect a new parliament and president are supposed to herald a new beginning for a nation whose political institutions have been stifled by decades of authoritarian rule. But the prospects of Egypt developing into a modern, democratic state will be severely undermined if its Christian population feels too intimidated to participate in the electoral process. It is therefore very much in the interests of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the

body responsible for steering Egypt to democracy, to offer the Copts the protection they deserve.

Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, won plaudits this week for his robust condemnation of the "mindless and godless" violence that has brought misery to large swathes of Zimbabwe, not least the Christian community. This might also be a good moment for him and other world leaders to highlight the plight of Christians in the Middle East.

Egypt's delaying tactic

The Washington Post (10.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The attack by the Egyptian army as well as civilian thugs on Christians who were seeking to peacefully protest in the center of Cairo Sunday produced tragic and reprehensible results, including 26 deaths and more than 500 people injured. It also showed everything that is wrong with a military regime whose mismanagement of the country — and prolongation of its time in office — threatens to destroy Egypt's chances for democracy.

Several thousand members of the Coptic sect, which makes up about 10 percent of Egypt's population, were marching to protest the failure by the military government to prevent attacks on their churches. According to independent accounts, they were set upon first by civilians wielding sticks and stones and then by military vehicles, which deliberately drove over unarmed protestors and opened fire with machine guns.

The response to this violence by the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and its appointed civilian prime minister was shameful. On state television, calls were issued for citizens to take to the streets to defend the army — as if it, and not the Copts, was under attack. Meanwhile security forces intervened in the studios of independent broadcasters, including U.S.-financed al Hurrah, to prevent them from reporting. Prime Minister Essam Sharaf implausibly blamed the violence on a foreign conspiracy while saying it had "taken us back several steps." Egyptians took his remarks as a threat to postpone — once again — promised elections.

There's little doubt that the transition to democracy is in danger. But the fault lies not with protesting Copts, Islamic fundamentalists or others who have been organizing and agitating for change in Cairo, but with the military regime. The 24 senior officers on the ruling council have repeatedly said that they wish to hand over power to civilians as soon as possible. But they keep extending their time: Having at first promised to carry out a transition by last month, they now are talking about a timetable that would keep them in office for at least a year, and maybe much longer.

While they linger, the generals misrule. They have subjected thousands of civilians to unfair military trials, intimidated the media and spooked tourists and foreign investors with erratic economic decisions, including the rejection of much-needed foreign loans. They issue laws and even constitutional amendments, then abruptly change them. They have failed to protect Christian churches and the Israeli embassy, which was sacked by a mob of thugs as police stood by. They then cite such outbreaks of violence as justification for still more repression — including the extension of the previous regime's autocratic emergency law.

The scenes of chaos in Cairo may cause some to conclude that democracy should be delayed while order is restored. In fact, just the opposite course is needed: The generals should be pressed to accelerate the election of a civilian president to whom power can be handed over. A White House statement got it right: "These tragic events should not stand in the way of timely elections and a continued transition to democracy." The United

States should now use its leverage with the Egyptian military to drive home that message.

Peaceful protest ends with more than 40 dead

CSW (10.10.2011) / HRWF (11.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - At least 41 people were killed and hundreds were injured in Cairo yesterday when Egyptian police and armed forces fired tear gas and live ammunition at a peaceful march protesting the destruction of a Coptic church in Mari Nab, Aswan.

The Cairo protest was supported by members of the Muslim community, and was part of a series of simultaneous demonstrations that occurred in Alexandria, Luxor, Qena, Minya and Beni Suef. In addition to drawing attention to the attack on the church in Aswan, the demonstrators were also requesting an effective conclusion to investigations into a spate of sectarian attacks, and the passing of a new law governing the building of churches, which may serve to limit the frequency of these attacks.

According to local sources, members of the security forces surrounded and attacked the marchers as soon as they arrived at the state television station in Cairo's Maspero suburb. The marchers were also allegedly pelted by people within the TV station itself. Most of the casualties suffered gunshot wounds. Other victims were severely beaten. However, several died or were seriously injured when members of the security forces deliberately drove at the 150,000-strong crowd in armoured vehicles.

In a worrying development, while the attack was underway, the security forces are reported to have forcibly closed at least two independent media sources, while state television broadcast inciting statements against "Coptic protesters". These included claims that the security forces were protecting the TV station from "angry" Copts, that the allegedly armed marchers had killed one officer and injured 20 others, that "foreign agendas" were at work, and a call for people to take to the streets in order to "protect" the army. In a possible response to the latter, men in civilian clothing were later spotted amongst security personnel as they attacked protesters, and Cairo's Coptic Hospital, which received most of the dead and injured, came under a two-hour attack by a group of men who approached the premises chanting "Islamiya, Islamiya".

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said: "We are deeply saddened by yesterday's events, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the bereaved, and with those who were injured. This was effectively an attack by an interim regime that has overrun its mandate, on Egyptians of every creed who maintain a vision for a nation characterized by justice, freedom and equality of citizenship and opportunity, a vision which was the original driving force for change. What is particularly appalling is the premeditated nature of the violence, and the accompanying propaganda campaign by the state-run media. This no longer appears to be a case of official reluctance or inability to address sectarian violence. Instead, it increasingly resembles a deliberate campaign to ignite targeted ethno-religious violence that seems to enjoy significant official sanction. The international community must send a clear and strong message to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces that such unwarranted brutality against its own citizens will not be tolerated."

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact Matthew Jones, Public Affairs Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, on +44 20 8329 0045 / +44 7826 938 360, email matthewjones@csw.org.uk or visit www.csw.org.uk

Egyptians mourn massacre of Coptic Christians

Orthodox leaders call for three days of fasting, prayer, mourning

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (10.10.2011) / HRWF (11.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Funeral services were held today in Cairo for some of the victims of a military attack against a group of Christian protestors that left 26 dead and hundreds wounded.

In the wake of what could be the worst act of violence against Egyptian Christians in modern history, leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church have called for three days of fasting and prayer for divine intervention, along with three days of mourning.

Leaders from other faith traditions among Egyptian Christians reported similar efforts among their congregations.

Samia Sidhom, managing editor for the Coptic weekly Al Watani, said Copts across Egypt are distraught about the attack and the future for Christians across the country.

"At this point you can't even imagine what the future will be like," she said. Speaking specifically about the call for fasting, she added, "At this point, either God does something or you get nothing at all."

The attack started late Sunday afternoon (Oct. 9) when Christian protestors marching through Cairo began getting pelted with rocks and other projectiles near an overpass that cuts through downtown Cairo. By the time the protestors were able to make it to a television and radio broadcasting building commonly known as the Maspero Building, the army began shooting into the crowd and ramming riot-control vehicles into the protestors.

Witnesses at the scene reportedly said attacks left body parts scattered at the scene. Amateur video at the scene shows two riot-control vehicles plowing into the crowd of protestors.

The protest came in response to a Sept. 30 attack in Upper Egypt, where the Mar Gerges Church building was burned down along with several Christian-owned homes and businesses in Elmarenab village in Aswan.

The church building, which was being renovated, was attacked by local Muslims who claimed the congregation had no right to build it, despite legal documents parish priests put forth to the contrary. The local Muslims claimed the structure was a hospitality house.

Before the attack, parishioners of the church took down crosses outside the building. When it was being destroyed, contractors were removing domes that local Muslims held to be offensive.

The Mar Gerges burning was the third church in Egypt in seven months to be burned down by a mob.

Sidhom said Christian protestors were particularly upset about the church attack because the government blamed them for it, claiming the building was a hospitality house with illegal construction taking place.

Coptic Christians, once a majority in Egypt, now make up 7 to 10 percent of the country's 80 million people.

Hard-line Muslims in Egypt attack Coptic Church, homes

Throng of 3,000, including Salafists, burn Christian-owned houses, businesses

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (30.09.2011) / HRWF (04.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A group of hard-line Muslims attacked a church building in Upper Egypt this afternoon, torching the structure and then looting and burning nearby Christian-owned homes and businesses.

The 3,000-strong mob of hard-line and Salafi Muslims gutted the Mar Gerges Church in the Elmarenab village of Aswan, then demolished much of its remains, multiple witnesses at the scene said. The mob also razed four homes near the church and two businesses, all Christian-owned. Looting was also reported.

Michael Ramzy, a villager in Elmarenab, said the attack started shortly after Muslims held their afternoon prayers.

"Imams in more than 20 mosques called for crowds to gather and destroy the church and demolish the houses of the Copts and loot their properties," Ramzy told local media.

The Mar Gerges burning is the third church in Egypt in seven months to be burned down by a mob. Additionally, numerous other churches have been looted or otherwise attacked this year, including a New Year's Eve bombing at the Two Saints Church in Alexandria that left 23 dead and scores critically wounded.

No casualties have yet been reported in today's attack.

The tension in Elmarenab started the last week of August, when Muslim extremists, many of them thought to be members of the Salafi movement, which patterns its belief and practices on the first three generations of Muslims, voiced anger over renovations taking place at the church and anything perceived as a Christian symbol that could be seen from the outside.

To force the Copts to acquiesce to their demands, the Muslim extremists blockaded the entrance to the church and threatened Copts on the streets, in effect making them hostages in their own homes.

On Sept. 2, a meeting was held with military leaders and village elders in which the local leadership of the Coptic church agreed to strike all crosses and bells from the outside of the church. Normalcy returned briefly to the village, but by early the next week, the same people making demands for the removal of the crosses demanded the removal of newly constructed domes.

In subsequent meetings, known as "reconciliation meetings," the priests of the church said that removing the domes would cause the building to collapse. Unfazed, the group of hard-line Muslims called for the church building to be burned.

During the dispute, the Muslim group claimed that the renovations were illegal because the building in question wasn't actually a church, but a hospitality building – a claim cast into doubt as the original building on the site had existed as a church for roughly 100 years, and the parish received permission by the Aswan governor in 2010 to rebuild it as a church.

The attack is part of a larger and ever-increasing trend taking place in Egypt whereby a government official in a province or municipality grants permission for a church to be built or reopened, and hard-line Muslims threaten violence if services take place. Coptic leaders accuse the government of playing a colluding role in the violence by not enforcing the law, including a recently renewed and expanded Emergency Law, which stipulates imprisonment as a penalty for acts of sectarian strife, "thuggery" and vandalism of private property.

58% of Egyptians reject president of another religion

By Amira Saleh

Al Masry Al Youm (25.09.2011) / HRWF (30.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Cairo, Egypt - A survey by the cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center, published on Sunday, revealed that 58 percent of the sample said they would not vote for a president of a different religion than their own, while 36 percent said they would.

But the survey said that 60 percent said they would consider voting for candidates of a different religion in parliamentary elections, and 37 percent saying they would not.

It also said that 73 percent of Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, are religious and pray regularly.

The survey also found that 38 percent of the sample were willing to have friends of other religions, while 62 percent did not, 87 percent would not mind having a neighbor of a different religion, while 13 percent said they would, and 69 percent would buy from shop owners of other religions, while 71 percent would not.

It also said that 16 percent agree to omitting the reference of religion on ID cards, while 76 percent were against it, 82 percent believed the government does not differentiate between Muslims and Christians, while 25 percent said it responds more favorably to demands by Christians, and 24 percent said it does not appoint Christians to high posts, while 10 percent said it puts stifling conditions on the building of churches.

Concerning problems between Muslims and Christians, 78 percent said there were not any, while 19 percent said there were. Of these affirming the existence of sectarian problems, 50 percent claimed the existence of foreign elements were behind it, 43 percent blamed the former regime, while 9 percent blamed Muslims and 8 percent blamed Christians.

On political candidates endorsed by clerics, 65 percent said they would not be affected by a clerics' opinion, 16 percent said they would consider it, and 14 percent said they would follow their cleric's recommendation.

On clerics running for political positions, 29 percent were in favor, 22 percent rejected it, and 5 percent were undecided.

On the Muslim Brotherhood, 25 percent said they support it, 25 percent said they were indifferent to it, and 21 percent said they were against it.

On Salafis, 41 percent partially believed the negative image of them portrayed in the media, 40 percent did not, and 5 percent said they have never heard of the Salafis before.

Coptic Christian killed in attack on village in Upper Egypt

Muslim mob murders him in his home in assault on village

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (10.08.2011) / HRWF (17.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – A Coptic Christian was killed and several others were injured in Upper Egypt after Muslims on Sunday (Aug. 7) attacked a predominantly Christian village following an argument between a Muslim and Christian.

The attack at Nazlet Faragallah village in Minya, 218 kilometers (136 miles) south of Cairo, lasted until Monday morning (Aug. 8), Christians said. The attackers raided an unknown number of homes owned by Christian villagers and set eight on fire, area residents said.

The assailants killed Maher Nassif, 46, a civil servant and livestock farmer, when he tried to defend his home. The men burst into Nassif's house, shot him in the head and slit his throat while his teenage son watched from under a bed where he was hiding, Christian villagers said. The men looted the home and stole Nassif's livestock as his son escaped into the night, according to villagers who spoke with the boy.

One villager, Melad Thabet, a 25-year-old teacher, said he spent the night of the attack listening to gunfire and the sound of people "weeping and screaming in the village."

"Any [Christian-owned] house close to a Muslim house was looted and attacked," Thabet told Compass. "And if someone had stood up to them, they would have killed them as they did with Maher."

Initial reports on what sparked the attack varied widely, but as the dust settled, the general consensus was that on Saturday (Aug. 6) a Muslim man driving a three-wheeled taxi known across Egypt as a touk-touk had an argument with a Coptic woman in Nazlet Faragallah. The nature of the argument could not be confirmed, but several Coptic men came to the aid of the woman, ending the dispute.

Several hours later, a group of Muslims arrived at the village church and started pelting congregants with rocks as they left the building, villagers said. The Copts responded in kind. Several people suffered cuts and bruises, and some of the windows of the church building were broken.

According to Thabet, the leader of the Muslims attacking the church was the cousin of the man involved in the initial argument involving the Coptic woman. He is also a police lieutenant stationed in the village. The lieutenant was hit in the face with a rock, Thabet said.

In response to the villagers' claims, police have issued their own report about the incident, stating that it started on Sunday (Aug. 7) after a Coptic man began screaming insults and throwing rocks at Muslims exiting prayer at one of the two mosques near the village. Thabet said this version "doesn't make any sense."

One mosque is in a Muslim area, and any Copt going there "would be killed," he said. The other mosque near the village, he added, is located at the far edge of the community and only one Muslim attends it – the man who opened it.

Regardless of what triggered the incident, by Sunday groups of Muslim men carrying long knives and automatic weapons were seen gathering around the village.

"They went around all the neighboring villages spreading a rumor that 'the Christians burned the mosque and killed some Muslim people,' which isn't true," Thabet said. "And we suddenly found that the village was surrounded by Muslims from everywhere."

Late that night, after the Ramadan fast had ended for the day, the attacks began, Thabet and other sources said.

Waiting for the Army

Running through the community shooting rifles into the air and screaming, "Allahu Akbar [God is greater]," the Muslim villagers attacked houses and businesses isolated on the edge of the village, Thabet said.

They forced the victims out of their homes and then looted their property, he said, and not all homes were set on fire. Thabet named six different families whose homes were destroyed but said a total of eight homes were torched, and not all homes that were looted were set ablaze.

The house of the parish priest was razed. He hid on the upper floors of his home during the attack and somehow escaped the fire with only minor scrapes and bruises, according to Thabet.

Nazlet Faragallah is a Christian-majority village surrounded by a string of Muslim villages. The villagers are largely impoverished and make their living by farming and doing sporadic work at a nearby rock quarry.

During the attack, only 10 soldiers and one officer were posted to Nazlet Faragallah, an area with a combined population of about 10,000 people, according to 2006 United Nations population figures. Thabet said that in addition to a lack of manpower, the army isn't equipped to stop violence in the community. Because of this, he said, local soldiers are simply unwilling to get involved in any disputes.

It took some four hours for soldiers to get back up from other army units in the area, he said.

"Every time we asked him [a police officer] to get involved to stop what was happening, he kept saying he was 'waiting for the army,'" Thabet said. "Even when they [police] came, the number was very, very small. It didn't help at all. They weren't even able to protect themselves. They didn't even have weapons; they had sticks. Having sticks is not the right thing to face machine guns."

According to the Egyptian newspaper Watani, seven Muslims were arrested because of the incident. One Coptic man was arrested and charged with illegal possession of weapons. Some fear he was arrested to give officials a bargaining tool to force the Copts into a "reconciliation meeting" agreement with unfavorable terms.

Based on the concept of traditional tribal meetings, such reconciliation meetings are ostensibly meant for parties to come to amicable solutions outside of court. In reality however, the meetings are used to deny Copts their rights when they are attacked, human rights activists in Egypt say.

A reconciliation meeting took place on Tuesday (Aug. 9), said Zakaria, a Coptic villager who would only give his first name. He said Muslims and Christians involved apologized for the incident, and the council agreed to fine anyone else causing further trouble.

Nassif's killer has not yet been arrested, in spite of being identified by his son. Zakaria said the atmosphere in the village was so tense on Monday morning, after the attacks, that Christians buried Nassif's body outside of the village.

"They usually hold the funeral prayers in the village, but because of what happened they had to do it outside the village," he said.

Lawlessness

Thabet said relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt have gotten much worse since the Jan 25-Feb. 11 revolution. He blamed worsened relations on the increased radicalization of certain Muslims in Egypt who want to "complete their faith by killing Christians."

An incident like the one in Nazlet Faragallah can happen "for any silly reason," he said.

"What does it do if you just keep chanting 'Islam! Islam!' when there is a stupid problem between two ordinary people in the village?" he asked rhetorically. "There is no relation between two people just having an ordinary argument and having religion getting involved in it. Sometimes religion controls people. They don't think, they just do."

Thabet said he has fled his home in anticipation of other attacks. Keeping in touch with his neighbors by phone, he said that at night there are still skirmishes on the edges of the village.

"Any house near the fields and away from anything can get looted and attacked by the thugs and these people," he said. "A lot of the villagers have left to escape with their lives. All our young men have locked themselves in their houses and try to hide, just waiting for whatever is going to happen to them – either waiting for their house to be burned or for somebody to get in and attack them."

Zakaria confirmed that many residents have fled the village.

"In the beginning, the people who were leaving were the women and children," he said, adding that now "the people who live in the houses at the edge of the village" are leaving too.

Zakaria was unable to leave, he said, because it was still too dangerous to pass through the villages surrounding Nazlet Faragallah on foot.

Thabet said he doesn't think the village will be safe again.

"When I was in the village, I saw my family and friends getting shot at, and I couldn't do anything for them," he said. "I didn't know who to contact, who to call to protect us. I hope God protects us."

Constitutional freedoms for Egypt's religious minorities— Necessary and possible

By Anna Maria Shaker

Human Rights First (29.07.2011) / HRWF (17.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The future Constitutional Assembly—whose members the newly elected parliament will select to write Egypt's new constitution—will have the unique opportunity to guarantee constitutional freedoms and protections for every Egyptian, including members of

religious minorities. The inclusion of these constitutional safeguards would finally take on Egypt's structural problem of religious discrimination and address an underlying cause of the increasing trend of sectarian violence.

Incidents of sectarian violence—especially targeting Christians—became more frequent and violent in the latter years of former President Hosni Mubarak's regime. The 2010 drive-by shootings in Nag Hammadi and the 2011 New Years church bombing in Alexandria demonstrate this escalating trend. Rather than arrest Egyptian perpetrators of the latter incident, Mubarak blamed "foreign hands," implicating al-Qaeda. In addition, Christians, who constitute ten percent of Egypt's population, have been underrepresented in the government as well as in military and security forces. Christians also face discrimination in employment and state-imposed restrictions on worship. Mubarak's state-run television and newspapers exacerbated suspicion of and hatred against religious minorities.

Mubarak's regime failed to hold accountable those responsible for sectarian violence and to address ongoing discrimination. Yet, unlike the previous authoritarian regime, Egypt's emerging democratic state and its new constitution is taking steps to promote and protect religious freedom, which emulates the interreligious unity seen in Tahrir Square during the 18-day protest leading to Mubarak's resignation.

The Security Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has agreed to implement a unified list of supra-constitutional principles—comprised of the numerous proposals, like Sheikh al-Azhar's eleven-point program, that have been issued in recent weeks—to safeguard and guide the drafting of the new constitution. Despite their differences on certain issues, the various proposals and the current unified draft all endorse constitutional freedoms and protections for religious minorities.

Like the unity in Tahrir and the support for supra-constitutional religious freedoms, Muslim leaders' condemnation of and recent public protests against the May church attacks in Imbaba demonstrate a popular concern and discontent about the increasing trend of sectarianism. Therefore, it is likely that most Egyptians would welcome new constitutional principles protecting religious minorities, in turn allowing for a more democratic Egypt.

Freedom of religion or belief is a basic human right that should be protected for all individuals in every nation's most fundamental legal document—the constitution. Every Egyptian, regardless of their religion and whether Muslim or non-Muslim, deserves to be equal before the law and receive the equal protection of the law. Constitutional safeguards for religious minorities can prevent the future government from imposing restrictions on worship and condoning discrimination, as was prevalent in Mubarak's authoritarian regime. Egypt's new constitution should comply with Egypt's obligations as a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international human rights treaties to uphold freedom of religion or belief and to combat discrimination on the basis of religion or other grounds. After Egypt's parliamentary elections, the Constitutional Assembly should take advantage of its unique opportunity to foster an environment of peaceful interreligious coexistence and cooperation.

Muslim mobs attack Christian homes and threaten priest

Two separate anti-Christian incidents break relative calm in country

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (27.06.2011) / HRWF (28.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> -

Enraged Muslims burned down several Christian-owned homes, surrounded a church and threatened to kill a priest last week in two unrelated incidents in Upper Egypt.

On Saturday (June 25) in Awlad Khalaf village, just outside Sohag, 240 miles (386 kilometers) south of Cairo, local Muslims attacked Coptic Christian Wahib Halim Atteyah, robbed him of 32,000 Saudi Riyals (US\$8,530), and bulldozed his home along with the other structures on his property, according to local media. The group then raided six other Coptic-owned homes and burned them to the ground. Most of the stolen items were returned because of efforts of other Muslims in the area, according to Egyptian newspaper Watani.

Villagers had begun circulating a rumor that Atteyah was constructing a church building on his property. Atteyah was reportedly building a house but also built a barn and a livestock facility in violation of a permit that allowed him to build on 95 square meters of land.

Atteyah and another Coptic Christian, Ihab Na'eem, were later arrested. Reports of the specific charges varied, but all said they had to do with the Christians allegedly repelling the attack with firearms, a charge Atteyah said was untrue. Two Muslims accused of setting houses on fire also have been arrested.

At least five Muslims and one Copt were reportedly injured in the attack. Security forces have been deployed to protect the remaining Coptic homes in the area.

Efforts to reach Thabet and other members of the Minya Diocese were unsuccessful, as were attempts to contact Atteyah.

In a previous incident on Thursday (June 23) in Beni-Ahmed al-Gharbiya village near the town of Minya, 136 miles (220 kilometers) south of Cairo, a group of Salafi Muslims surrounded the Church of St. George and demanded that the parish priest, the Rev. Gorgy Thabet, leave the village or they would kill him and hold Muslim prayers in the church building. Salafis, who form a hard-line Islamic movement with extremist tendencies, pattern their belief and practices on the first three generations of Muslims.

Security police kept the mob from breaking into the church building, then removed the priest from the village. It was not known if there were any injuries in the incident.

Last week's problem at the St. George church had its roots in an incident that happened there more than two months prior. In March, groups of Muslims protested at the church site after learning the congregation had begun expanding a building on church property. After the Muslims forced the Christians into a "reconciliation meeting" by threatening to attack the church building, the expansion project was abandoned.

The group also demanded that Thabet leave. Church officials refused, but then removed the priest temporarily in an apparent attempt to appease Islamic extremists in the community.

Problems started afresh when the self-imposed banishment ended last week. In a press statement published in Watani newspaper, the office of the archbishop of Minya stated, "Crowds of hard-line Salafi Muslims, some of them carrying arms, have resumed their demonstration around the church of Mar-Girgis in the village of Beni-Ahmed al-Gharbiya, threatening to kill the priest, Father Gorgy Thabet, if he does not leave the village."

The statement added that the protestors in question had no right to make their demands. "Serving the congregation is a question which concerns the church alone, and no person or movement outside the church has any right to interfere in it," according to the statement.

The two attacks last week broke a relative calm that has existed in Egypt since late May, when a group of Muslims surrounded a church in Ain Shams, Cairo and prevented it from being reopened. The week before that, a group of Muslims attacked two church buildings in Cairo, setting one on fire.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded when members of the Salafi movement attacked two churches and surrounding Christian-owned homes and businesses in a poor section of Cairo on May 7. The Salafi Muslims set fire to one of the two church buildings, leaving most of it gutted.

The arson attack on the Virgin Mary Church in Imbaba was one of many recent assaults on Coptic Christians by members of the Salafist movement. The mob first attacked St. Mina Church in Imbaba on May 7 after a rumor spread that a Coptic woman who allegedly converted to Islam was being held in the church against her will. Clergy members of St. Mina allowed a group of Islamic imams into the church building to search for the woman, and the imams declared to the gathering Muslims that the woman wasn't in the building, according to witnesses at the scene.

After unsuccessfully trying to push through the barricades, the mob went to the Virgin Mary Church, an undefended building a 10-minute walk from St. Mina. A few men were in the building when it was attacked. All escaped except for one, Salah Aziz, the church attendant. A group of youths trying to extinguish embers from the fire discovered his body in a side room of the sanctuary that was used as a baptismal, said the Rev. Mittias Ilias, head priest of the Virgin Mary Church.

Salafis have made a series of attacks and threats against Coptic Christians since the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime on Feb. 11. The movement, some Copts said, is trying to incite violence between the Muslim majority and the Coptic minority, now estimated to be 7 to 10 percent of Egypt's population of 83 million.

Attacks on Christians: Can Egypt deal with extremist mobs?

By Abigail Hauslohner

Time (12.06.2011) / HRWF (27.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Cairo, Egypt - On the night of March 8 Yasser Makram was on his way home from work, his pick-up truck full of garbage as he turned up the winding dirt road on the edge of Egypt's capital, to approach his home in the crowded Cairo slum known popularly as Garbage City. As he inched around a curve, he saw a swarm of people running towards the truck in his rearview mirror. "I didn't know what was happening," he says. But before he could consider the possibilities, the mob had pulled him from the truck. "They demanded to know if I was Christian."

Makram's hospital report says the 27-year-old suffered "nerve damage" and "multiple deep wounds and fractures" that night. A long, sinister scar — a knife wound — now cuts across his face, ear to ear. And it will be at least a year before he can drive his garbage truck again. The mob stabbed him in the chest and beat him with pipes, breaking an arm and one of his ribs, before stripping him naked and dragging him, semi-conscious, up a dark and dusty road to the foot of the Citadel, a medieval Islamic fort.

Three months later, no one has been charged with the crime, the police apparently having shown no interest in filing a report while Makram was hospitalized. And Makram has no idea who his attackers were. But he remembers their response to the strangers

who finally intervened to help him: "This is a Christian son of a bitch," they said. "We're going to kill him."

Rising sectarianism has been one of the ugliest challenges to emerge since President Hosni Mubarak's downfall in February. The attack on Makram came as part of the first big wave (a second came in May) of religious violence that has exploited the country's postrevolution security vacuum. Days before, a church was destroyed in a village south of Cairo, after clashes erupted over a Muslim-Christian romantic relationship. The ensuing tensions sparked more days of Christian protest in and around Cairo, which erupted into clashes again on March 9, killing more than a dozen people.

Various political parties, including the popular Muslim Brotherhood, condemned the violence. The transitional government rebuilt the church. And in Tahrir Square, liberals and moderates briefly revived popular slogans for national unity in an effort to drown out the uncomfortable new voice of the minority Salafist Muslims — strict adherents to a conservative, purist sect of Islam — who have gathered strength since the revolution.

And yet, sectarian violence has continued to fester — fueling protests that blocked the instatement of a Christian governor in Egypt's south in April; and sparking a fresh round of clashes in May that destroyed another church and left 12 people dead. "No, the problem is not solved," says one Christian activist, Fady Phillip, even as he watched last week's re-opening of the second desecrated church. "We need whoever provoked the people to do it to be arrested. If they're free without punishment, what's to stop it from happening again."

Many in the Christian community, which make up roughly 10% of Egypt's 80 million people, say the Salafists are to blame. And indeed, in the post-Mubarak political free-for-all, the sect has enjoyed a new level of political and religious expression. Violent jihadists who were jailed under Mubarak have been released. Some have formed political parties, and others are calling for greater conservatism in mosques and on talk shows. One has called for a million Egyptians to grow beards by the time the holy month of Ramadan starts in August, according to a local newspaper. And the day after U.S. forces killed Osama Bin Laden, a Salafist preacher in Egypt openly called him a "hero."

The extremists may be a crucial part of the problem, but there's another endemic component that has allowed them to flourish. In late April, Makram's neighbors say they attended Easter services as Salafists pelted them with rocks from a nearby cliff and soldiers watched passively. In the May violence in Cairo's Imbaba slum, parishioners say the army and security forces watched the violence build for hours before intervening. "[The instigators] are well-known to the government, but the silence of the army is allowing the people to do whatever they want — like burning churches, and knocking them down," says Phillip. "The discrimination is not against the building," he adds. "It's against the people."

And indeed, that will be harder to remedy. Religious intolerance may be one of most daunting challenges on the revolutionary road ahead, but it also ranks among the issues that Egyptians, including their temporary military leaders, are least willing to talk about. In part, that derives from a Mubarak-era tendency to blame outsiders, or at most, a few trouble-makers, for domestic problems, rather than challenge Egyptian national pride. At last week's re-opening of the Virgin Mary church, which was set ablaze in May, many Muslim onlookers declared the problem resolved in its entirety. "It wasn't people from Imbaba who did this," said Mahmoud al-Attar, a 24-year-old Muslim. "It was outsiders. Because in Imbaba, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for a long time."

But they haven't, says Phillip. And failing to acknowledge that perpetuates the divide. "The funny thing is that as far as I can remember, from 1990 until now, we've had

thousands of fights and no one was brought to justice," he says. That was why he helped to rally Christians to protest outside of the state television building last month. The reconstruction of damaged churches is a positive step, he says. But until attitudes change and laws are enforced to guarantee equal rights, it will happen again.

For its part, the interim Egyptian government says it is making strides in protecting Christians, amid a myriad of other challenges that include meeting the demands of an emboldened population of protesters, and confronting a battered economy. Government funds paid for the speedy reconstruction of both churches.

And officials say a draft of a new law governing the construction of houses of worship is in the works. Previously Christians were required to seek presidential approval to build a church, a procedure that often involved a litany of hoops, bribes, and disappointments. The proposed legislation would shift that decision to local governors, and would mandate that permits be delivered within a set amount of time.

Inherently, Phillip says, the logic is still flawed: "Why do I need permission to build a church?" And it's unclear whether such a law would include any guarantees of freedom from discrimination. If the residents of Qena governorate could block the instatement of a governor, some activists reason, why not churches too?

To Girgis Sabr, a Christian cab driver from Makram's neighborhood, tweaking the legal discourse doesn't make a difference for his reality. "When people get in my car, they see the cross and the Virgin Mary and they ask me if I'm Christian. This is unacceptable," he says of the rudeness. "I'm a human."

Building a culture of tolerance may be the loftiest challenge yet, and it may take decades. Phillip worries about the influence that the Salafists have on previously neutral, but poorly educated ears — a legacy of Mubarak's decrepit education system. But at the very least, he says, confronting sectarianism needs to become a priority that extends beyond the facades of newly painted churches.

On the night of the Virgin Mary Church's re-opening in Cairo's Imbaba district, parishioners, Muslim residents, and journalists jostled for positions beneath strings of lights and banners bearing the images of saints. And yet, emblematic perhaps of sectarianism's place on the post-revolution to-do list, many of the Muslim attendees admitted they had come for different reasons. Several rows of picketers held signs bearing demands for the Prime Minister. Others waved documents listing personal grievances. One young man, Mahgoub Mahmoud, stood by the church entrance clutching a sign that called for better trash collection. He was indifferent to what had happened here, and to whether religious tolerance was an issue to consider for the future. "We're not here for the church," he shrugged. "We're here for the garbage."

How popular is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood?

Arab West Report (11.06.2011) / HRWF (24.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - In the early days of the Egyptian revolution, one of the significant fears, especially in the West, was that a transition to democratic rule would usher in an Islamic government headed by the Muslim Brotherhood. This has since been established as the conventional wisdom, even in Egypt. Liberal groups urge postponing anticipated September parliamentary elections, in order to gain more time to form viable political parties able to compete with the newly created and Brotherhood-backed Freedom and Justice Party.

Conventional wisdom was established following the results of the March 19 popular referendum on amendments to the Egyptian constitution. A yes vote was the adopted

position by Islamist groups, many of which portrayed the effort as a defense of religion. They won overwhelmingly with 77% of the vote, in an unprecedented 40% voter turnout.

Yet in recent days there have been a few contrarian indicators concerning widespread popular support for the Brotherhood. Gallup conducted a poll in which only 15% said they support the group. The poll does match the uncertain and contradictory state of Egyptian politics, however, for although only 1% support a theocracy, 69% believe religious leaders should have an advisory role in legislation. Depending on how campaign rhetoric is spun, the population may vote Islamist out of fear from godless liberals, or else run screaming out of fear of becoming a new Iran. Yet in terms of tangible support, if the poll is accurate, the Muslim Brotherhood is not inherently perched to assume political power.

Part of the assumption of Brotherhood popularity is built upon their reputation of providing support to the poor in social services. This is true from their inception, and in the 1940s they built a wide network of service provision throughout rural and urban Egypt. Yet in the more recent decades under Mubarak in which the Brotherhood was an outlawed, though tolerated, social presence and the only semi-legitimate opposition political force, measuring and verifying their welfare reach became more difficult. Nevertheless, the assumption remained.

This assumption has been challenged in research conducted by Daniella Pioppi. She argues:

The Muslim Brotherhood's social activities after the Nasser parenthesis have never reached the levels of diffusion and organization of the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, they are generally aimed at the middle to upper classes rather than the most disadvantaged social strata. Since the repression cycle that started in the 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood's social activities have been drastically reduced and do not seem to play a significant role in popular mobilization, not least for lack of a clear political and social project.

Her paper, and others, can be found at "Egypt: A neo-authoritarian state steering the winds of change"

http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/ct_publication_attachments/Egypt_final_May11_web.pdf;jsessionid=amcj_UcQeh-dsQbxVb

Excepting the previously stated referendum, Egypt has not had open, democratic elections for over fifty years. In the absence of criteria by which to judge, it is nearly impossible to forecast the electoral choices of over 80 million Egyptians, most of whom have been depoliticized their entire life. Will the "uneducated, religious masses" be swayed to vote Islamist, believing this to be a vote for God? Will the "taste of freedom and liberty" make them forswear the Muslim Brotherhood, widely known as an authoritarian organization in its own right? No one knows. Neither the Gallup poll nor the referendum should be taken as an accurate gauge of political currents.

Politics is always full of surprises. In all likelihood, an unfettered election process will produce nothing less, no matter what the end result may be.

Law of the land in Egypt

Galesburg.com (10.06.2011) / HRWF (27.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The majority of Egyptians (62 percent) believe new laws in the country should strictly follow the teachings of the Quran, according to a study by the Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life.

About 27 percent of Egyptians believe laws should adhere to the values and principles of Islam, but they should not strictly follow the Quran, while just 5 percent believe that new laws should not be influenced by religious teachings.

In terms of religiosity, 31 percent of Egyptian Muslims say they sympathize with Islamic fundamentalists, 30 percent sympathize with those who disagree with the fundamentalists and 26 percent have mixed views on the matter.

According to the Pew report, "Those who disagree with fundamentalists are almost evenly divided on whether the treaty with Israel should be annulled, while others favor ending the pact by a goodly margin."

When considering income disparities, low-income Egyptian Muslims agree with Islamic fundamentalists the least (20 percent) and disagree with fundamentalists the most (35 percent). Among middle-income Muslims, 35 percent agree with fundamentalists and 29 percent disagree. Among high-income Muslims, 35 percent agree with fundamentalists and 25 percent disagree.

Among Egyptians, 41 percent think it is very likely the next elections in Egypt will be free and fair, while 43 percent say it is only somewhat likely, 16 percent say it is not too likely and 8 percent say it is not likely at all.

Salafis found a party recognizing a civil state and granting Copts the right to refer to their religion

By Farrag Ismail

Al Arabiya (02.06.2011) / HRWF (06.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Egypt's Salafis founded a political party under the title Al Nour (Light) marking a drastic development in the Salafi doctrine, which does not acknowledge parties and does not believe in democracy in its modern concept. The Salafi doctrine also does not interfere in the ruling affairs and never allows disobedience to the ruler "in charge."

During President Hosni Mubarak's reign, the Salafis enjoyed freedom that was not given to other Islamists, only because of the above-mentioned principles. They even refused to take part in the controversial parliamentary election held in October 2010, which was dominated by wide-scale forgery organized by the then-ruling and now-ousted National Democratic Party, under the leadership of the party's secretary of organizing Ahmed Ezz. Such vote rigging was the main motivation that helped in the toppling of the Mubarak regime by the January 25 revolution.

Liberals, leftists and immigrant Copts name the Salafis "Wahabis" after the Wahhabi invocation. There is a hidden purpose in giving them this name—namely linking them to Saudi Arabia. That's why, more than once, they alleged that the Egyptian Salafis take the Saudi flag as their slogan during their protests and strikes, similar to what happened in the recent protests that took place in the southern governorate of Qena, where they demonstrated against the appointment of a Coptic governor.

Dr. Safwat Hegazy—who is considered as one of the most prominent leaders of the Salafi trend in Egypt after the January 25 revolution—argued that the green flag is not an imitation of Saudi Arabia, but it has always been the Muslims' flag along the history. The flag carries the phrase "No other God but Allah and Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah." It is then the flag of the Egyptian Salafis, similar to the Muslim Brotherhood Group who have their own flag.

Mr. Hegazy himself told Al Arabiya's talk show Wageh al-Sahafa (Meet the Press), anchored by prominent journalist Dawood Al Shirian of Saudi Arabia, that the Egyptian Salafism is not related to the Saudi Salafism.

Founding Al Nour political party came to achieve many goals at the same time, especially in light of the controversial arguments dominating the political arena. The Egyptian Salafi trend was always introduced as being conservative and non-democratic and always willing to dissolve all political parties and unifying them into one-flagged party only within the framework of the Islamic Caliphate (state). This same trend now renovates and reintroduces itself in the form of a political party that competes with other parties within the context of the state's civil constitution. This party might even reach presidency through the ballot boxes. Accordingly, it has to abide by the constitution, which regulates the society and its laws.

Until now I cannot figure out how would this step—carried out by the Egyptian Salafis— affect Salafism in general, but I regard it as a violent tremor that would amend a lot of Salafi concepts. It would affect Salafis who considered themselves as "jihadists" and used violence as their main means such as Al Qaeda and the Islamist groups in Egypt, Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula, the Arab Maghreb and North Africa. It would also affect "scientific" Salafis who depend on religious preaching and sticking to all rules and regulations laid by Almighty God and consider any disobedience to the ruler as corruption and chaos and, moreover, reject all modern concepts of democracy and elections.

What the Egyptian Salafis have done means that Salafism is not an unchangeable dogma that is derived from the ancient Islamic era, but they proved that Salafism is a changeable doctrine that could be developed according to modern times. Thus, there is no need to be afraid of the Salafis.

Announcing the creation of Al Nour Party couldn't have been done without the approval of the Salafi leaders and clerics, including Dr. Yasser Burhamy, Dr. Mohammed Ismail Al Moqaddem—the founder of the Salafi school in Alexandria, which is the main base of the Egyptian Salafis—and Eng. Abdul Muniem Al Shahhat as well as the influential clerics as Mohammed Hassan, Abu Ishaq Al Huwayni and Mohammed Hussein Yaqoub.

Adel Abdul Ghaffar, the acting deputy for the founders of al-Nour Party, highlighted the new party's goals in a way that should be studied carefully. He never said the party would be committed to the Islamic sharia (law), but he said "the higher reference will be for the Islamic sharia." This is exactly an imitation of the second article of the current constitution, which states that Islamic sharia is the main source of legislation. Also the phrase that says that Islam is the state's official religion has a clear indication that the higher reference will be for Islamic sharia.

The Salafi Al Nour Party even excels over the current constitution in dealing with the civil state, by securing "a religious freedom for the Copts" and giving them "the right to refer to their religion" as well as establishing a modern state and rejecting the model of religious state (the Islamic Caliphate as defined by mass media.)

Coptic Pope Shenouda of Egypt's Orthodox Church called for the controversial second article not to be cancelled, but to add the phrase "the followers of other divinely religions should refer to their doctrines." Here comes the newly-born party not only completely agrees on this part but also acknowledges the right of Copts—in particular—to refer to their church, indicating that churches should not be placed under any special regulations other than the ones to which all the sacred places are controlled by.

In another article, Al Nour Party pointed out that Copts should enjoy all the rights enjoyed by the Muslims (indicating full equality in citizenship.) Furthermore, the party

credited Al Azhar for its valuable role in leading Islam in Egypt. This is another turning point in the principles of Salafis, who were well-known for their opposition to Al Azhar teachings. Moreover, Al Nour Party calls for the independence of Al Azhar—away from the state—and the regain of all its financial resources, as well as calling for choosing the grand sheikh of Al Azhar through transparent and honest voting among the scholars and clerics of Al Azhar.

This means that they want a strong Al Azhar institution that would regain its past glories and effectiveness in Egypt and the whole Muslim world. Isn't the Salafi Al Nour Party a violent tremor?

Authorities, Islamists in Egypt stop church from re-opening

Egyptian officials bow to Islamic pressure to keep Orthodox building closed

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (20.05.2011) / HRWF (30.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - - Hundreds of Muslims, angered by the prospect of a government-closed church re-opening in their neighborhood, protested outside the church yesterday, causing the provisional military authority to back away from its promise to allow Orthodox clergy to reopen it.

Protestors started gathering on Thursday afternoon (May 19) outside the Church of the Virgin Mary and St. Abraam in Ain Shams, a poor section of northeastern Cairo. The church was scheduled to reopen that day, but protestors surrounded the building, preventing anyone from getting into it and trapping priests who were inside.

Several people were injured in fights between the Copts and the Muslims. Protestors threw rocks at each other, according a witness. One Coptic bystander was seriously injured, another witness said, when he took out a cell phone camera to record the protest and a group of Muslims surrounded and beat him. Several Copts were arrested, according to church officials.

It was unknown if any of the Muslim protestors have been arrested.

Peter Rizq, a lay minister at the church, said he, the priests and others trapped in the building found a way to sneak to safety after Muslims threatened to kill the head priest of the congregation.

"He [the priest] told us, 'We need to go home now,'" Rizq said. "He told us we couldn't stay any longer in the church because it would cause more problems."

The men left the church building one by one, but some of them were later arrested and charged with illegal possession of weapons, a charge Rizq said was untrue.

Intimidation

This is the second time the church has been closed because of local Muslim opposition. Three years ago, in November 2008, Egypt's State Security Intelligence service closed the church building after a group of protesting Muslims blocked the entrance.

Prior to their attempts to open the church building, members of the congregation held meetings in two rented apartments. Eventually the congregation gathered donations and bought a plot of land with a building, converting the inside of it into a worship place.

Other than signs outside the building, there were none of the structures traditionally associated with a Coptic Orthodox church, such as crosses or domes.

Problems started soon after the renovations began. A group of Muslims bought a piece of land across from the church building and hastily started constructing a mosque. When the mosque was still unfinished, the Muslims blocked access to the church building; on the day it was scheduled to open, they placed prayer mats in front of the makeshift mosque, extending the rows to the entrance of the church.

The church building has been closed since the confrontation in 2008.

Coptic Demand

In March, in response to an attack against the Church of the Two Martyrs St. George and St. Mina in Sool, protestors filled the front lot of the Radio and Television Building in Cairo, demanding among other things that the Church of the Virgin Mary and St. Abraam be reopened.

On March 4, a group of rioting Muslims set the Church of the Two Martyrs on fire to punish the Christians for a relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. The church building was left in ruins but rebuilt by the military one month later.

Military officials conceded to the demands of the Christian protestors in March but were slow to fulfill promises to allow the church to reopen. The issue was given new impetus after a set of attacks in Imbaba, Cairo on May 7 in which 15 people were killed and two churches were attacked, one of which was nearly gutted by the fires set by members of the Salafi movement.

The rioters claimed they were attacking the churches to free a woman they said had converted to Islam from Christianity and was allegedly being held against her will by Coptic priests.

Salafi Muslims claim to pattern their beliefs and practices on the first three generations of Muslims. They have attacked Christians increasingly since the Jan. 25-Feb. 11 uprising that led to the ousting of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Rizq said normally relations between Copts and Muslims in his community are peaceful.

"In general, they are very friendly, as neighbors and friends and invite each other for weddings and celebrations," he said. "But when it comes to building a church, they all stand up and disagree with it."

Rizq said all the congregation wants is equal protection under the law.

"We want the law to take place," he said. "A decision was taken by the government and the prime minister, so we want everything to be official, done according to the law."

Rizq added that all was quiet at press time but still very tense. Imams were walking through the area surrounding the church building "calling for jihad," but the army had cordoned off the area. A meeting convened by the army is scheduled tomorrow (Saturday) between the priests of the church and the Islamic elders of the community.

Despite this overture, Rizq said he has little hope the church will ever open.

"I 100 percent don't think they will open the church there, because they [the Muslims] are completely against the idea of having a church there," he said. "Even yesterday someone [a protestor] said, 'You can open up the church, and I will go and blow myself up inside it.'"

Egypt's Christian leader calls for end of sit-in

Worldwide Religious News (15.05.2011) / HRWF (18.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Egypt's top Christian leader called on his followers Sunday to end a weeklong sit-in in front of a government building on the Nile after a mob attacked the Christian protesters and their supporters, injuring 78.

The sit-in aimed to draw attention to the plight of Christians, who have been the target of several attacks by Muslim fundamentalists in the weeks since Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was forced from office by a popular uprising.

The head of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, said in a statement that outsiders have infiltrated the sit-in of largely Christian demonstrators, making the situation even more explosive.

"This has exceeded the mere expression of opinion," the statement said, "harming Egypt's reputation and your reputation."

He warned that Egypt's military rulers and interim civilian government were losing patience with the protesters and that they "will be the losers if this sit-in continues."

It was not immediately clear if the protesters - many of whom have been camping out on the riverbank in front of the state TV building - would heed his call.

Christians, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population, have felt increasingly insecure since 18 days of street protests brought down Mubarak, who led the country for nearly 30 years until he was forced to resign on Feb. 11.

The Christians, many of whom are Coptic, have complained that the interim government and security forces have failed to protect them and have allowed extremist Islamic groups to attack with impunity.

Earlier this month, mobs of Muslims, apparently urged on by the ultraconservative Salafi sect of Islam, stormed the Virgin Mary Church in the Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba and set it ablaze. The attack was sparked by a rumor that a Christian woman planned to marry a Muslim, which some religious purists consider to be forbidden.

A short distance away, the mob tried to storm the Mar Mina Church, but were held back by Christians who formed a human shield around the church and fought for hours.

Fifteen people were killed and more than 200 were injured in the melees. No trial date has been set for those arrested in the attacks.

Several weeks before the attacks on the churches, Egyptians led by hard-line Islamists repeatedly rallied and marched to protest the appointment of a Coptic Christian governor in the southern Egyptian province of Qena.

Violence against the sit-in in Cairo erupted late Saturday night, when a mob of more than 100 people lobbed rocks and firebombs and charged dozens of people sleeping in the area. Some 15 Vehicles were also set on fire.

Armored military vehicles later blocked cars and pedestrians from going to the state TV building. More than 35 people were arrested, security officials said.

Some of the Christian protesters fled, but others said they would continue their sit-in.

Girgis Atef, who was injured in the melee, blamed the attack on thugs and complained that it took three hours for Egyptian security forces to respond. The violence didn't end until early Sunday morning.

"What is behind this military reluctance? Is it semi-collaboration?" he asked.

Medhat Kalada, head of the Geneva-based United Copts organization, criticized the sit-in and said that attention should be directed to political process, not street protests.

"Egypt is passing through a critical phase, and we should pay attention to the political process," said Kalada who was part of a Christian delegation that met recently with Egypt's military rulers and said that the group received assurances that Christian needs would be met.

"I understand that the youth are angry, but we need wisdom now, not anger," he said.

'Blasphemy' laws in Egypt and Sudan threaten converts

Statutes stand amid change in Islamic countries with Christian populations

By Wayne King and Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (11.05.2011) / HRWF (12.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Shifting political winds in the north African countries of Egypt and Sudan will leave their mark on history, but local attitudes ensure one thing remains unchanged: the laws against defaming Islam will stand like granite in a sandstorm.

As Egyptians continue to grapple with a revolution and seek freedoms commonplace in other parts of the world, there is no sign that Egypt's version of an anti-blasphemy law will be changed. And in Sudan, where the non-Islamic south is set to split from the Islamic north on July 9, Christians remaining in the north are more vulnerable than ever to baseless accusations of defaming Islam.

The law in Egypt, in theory meant to discourage people from offending others' religious sensitivities, is instead used to stifle free speech and punish and intimidate those who do not subscribe to the standard, Orthodox version of Sunni Islam practiced by most in Egypt, human rights advocates and religious dissident groups said.

"In general in Egypt, things are in flux, but because these particular issues are so hot button, I would not expect, even with a new regime, any changes in these laws," said Paul Marshall, a senior fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute.

Still, Marshall said that after the national demonstrations of Jan. 25-Feb. 11 that led to the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, there may be changes coming in the way the statutes are applied; there is hope that they won't be used "simply to shut people up."

Crushing Non-Conformity

Article 98(f), known to Egyptian attorneys as the "contempt of religion" charge, states, "Whoever exploits religion in order to promote extremist ideologies by word of mouth, in

writing or in any other manner, with a view to stirring up sedition, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity shall be punished with imprisonment between six months and five years or paying a fine of at least 500 Egyptian pounds [US\$85].”

Strictly speaking, Article 98(f) is not an anti-blasphemy law, but it is used in much the same way as other anti-blasphemy laws throughout the Middle East and the greater Islamic world. Violating this statute is known as having “defamed a heavenly religion.” Others have been charged under the statute with “insulting Islam.”

Ashraf Thabet, 45, knows all too well about being charged with defaming a heavenly religion. The Port Said import merchant was a committed Muslim most of his life until an economic downturn and a canceled business deal gave him the spare time to investigate Islam more closely. What started as a quest to find deeper meaning within his religion led him to embrace Christianity. As he expressed his struggle and his newfound ideas to others, Thabet found himself on the losing end of a battle with Egypt’s State Security Intelligence service (SSI).

During an early morning arrest on March 22, 2010, SSI agents kicked down the door of his apartment, assaulted him in front of his family and dragged him off to prison. Accused of violating Article 98(f), Thabet spent 132 days in solitary confinement but was never brought to court.

Thabet said he believed the SSI left the charges unresolved to harass and pressure him to convert back to Islam. His case, still unresolved, is typical of the way the law is used to punish people not for actually insulting any religion but for choosing a spiritual path not accepted by the government. It is what is known as a “status crime,” where one isn’t punished for doing something, but rather for being something. Status crimes have been stricken from the legal codes of most countries.

“If you become a Christian, you are likely to be accused of insulting Islam on grounds that you left, and therefore you are [supposedly] saying it’s bad,” Marshall said.

By comparison, no convert from Christianity to Islam has ever been charged with Article 98(f) for defiling Christianity.

Converts to Christianity aren’t alone in falling prey to the law. People in Egypt who follow the Baha’i faith, adherents to the Islamic Shia tradition and numerous other non-Sunnis have all been brought up on defamation charges. In some cases, Sunnis who have expressed non-conformist opinions have been accused of defamation. Several Sunni journalists, bloggers, lawyers, university professors, at least one renowned poet and a Nobel laureate have all been accused of religious defamation – not for actually insulting Islam or any other tradition, but merely for exploring non-orthodox ideas about religion.

“Muslims who hold unorthodox views are held to be insulting Islam or insulting a heavenly religion,” Marshall said.

Perhaps the most famous defamation case in Egypt against a Muslim was that of Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, a Sunni Islamic scholar. Abu Zaid’s work dealt with interpreting the Quran in a historical context. Accused by officials at Al-Azhar University of defaming Islam, he was ruled in court to be an apostate. Because a non-Muslim man cannot be married to a Muslim woman, a court issued proceedings to nullify his marriage. In 1995, he fled to the Netherlands with his wife.

Later returning to Egypt, Abu Zaid died in August 2010 in Cairo of a cerebral infection.

"Generically, I would call that a blasphemy case because he wrote about Islam in a way Al-Azhar and others did not like," Marshall said.

According to Azza Taher Matar of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, cases of a Muslim accused of defamation for holding a dissenting view are the most common ones.

"Most cases result from Muslims debating Islam or Islamic history and the Arabic empire," Matar said. "When [religious] debates or conflicts heat up, they are usually solved in a political way."

Human rights advocates say it is nearly impossible to find out how many people are charged under the defamation statute in Egypt. It is not pandemic, but it is certainly not uncommon. Matar said her group is not defending any defamation cases.

Unequal Enforcement

Another aspect of the law is that it is enforced unequally and in a way that is seemingly meant to protect the sensitivities of the majority from the minority, but not the other way around. In effect, the majority is given free rein to insult or even vilify religious minorities in the country.

While Judaism and Christianity are considered "revealed" religions under the Quran, no other religious traditions are, and therefore the defamation statute offers them no protection under the law. Using the Baha'i and Zoroastrian traditions as examples, Marshall said they are "not regarded as heavenly religions, so you may insult them all you want."

Even the protections that in theory are extended to Judaism and Christianity are tenuous at best. Anti-Semitism is rife in Egypt. People insult Judaism and its adherents in the media and in the public arena "everyday and every way in Egypt" without anyone being called to task under 98(f), according to Marshall.

"The law is in principle insulting any one of those religions. In practice, you can insult Judaism all you want, even on state media," he said.

On a few rare occasions, the state has intervened when media professionals have insulted Christianity on television, but by and large, people "defame" Christianity and its core ideas in the public sphere with no recrimination.

"You can hear it on loudspeakers in the street," Marshall said. "You will find it on school television programs. You will find it in school textbooks. You will find that in books issued by government ministries."

After a church bombing in Alexandria last New Year's Eve, when at least 22 people were killed, Coptic Christians complained that it is commonplace in Alexandria for imams to launch into anti-Christian tirades during Friday afternoon prayers. In several instances in southern Egypt, rioters have attacked Christian-held businesses on prompting from imams during Friday prayers. In Egypt, imams' salaries are paid for in part by government-approved Islamic institutions.

No Public Outcry

Outside of human rights groups and a few religious groups, there has been no large outcry to reform the law.

According to a survey conducted in 2009 by WorldPublicOpinion.org, 71 percent of Egyptians agreed with the statement, "The government should have the right to fine or imprison people who publically criticize a religion because such criticism could defame the religion." WorldPublicOpinion.org is run by the Program on International Policy Attitudes by the University of Maryland.

Part of the reason the laws are unlikely to change is that Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution states, "Islam is the Religion of the State. Arabic is its official language, and the principal source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence."

Although the Egyptian Constitution also has laws enshrining freedom of religion and expression, Article 2 supersedes those laws, rendering them ineffective. There has been widespread pressure from Coptic and secular groups to do away with Article 2, but the recent national referendum to reform the constitution did not include any language to strike the article.

The referendum passed with 77 percent voting in favor of its reforms; defamation laws remained intact.

Offense of the Cross

In Sudan's Sunni Muslim-majority north, where apostasy (leaving Islam) is punishable by death, the maximum sentence for violating the country's blasphemy law is milder than Egypt's maximum of five years in prison, but potentially more painful.

Violation of Section 125 of the Sudanese Criminal Act, which prohibits "insulting religion, inciting hatred and showing contempt for religious beliefs," is punishable by imprisonment of one year, a fine, and 40 lashes.

As in Egypt, the law can be used as a pretext for taking legal action against anyone who leaves Islam, since conversion to Christianity itself can be interpreted as "insulting" or "showing contempt" for Islam.

"This article is being used by the police to crush any person who leaves Islam for Christianity," said one Sudanese convert to Christianity.

One Sudanese lawyer, a Muslim, said the law is seen as protective.

"The importance of this section is that it helps protect Islamic religion from being insulted, and it also discourages those who do not want to respect other religions," said Nasour Badr in Khartoum.

The Christian convert said that sentiment can be easily manipulated.

"This article is important to Muslims in Sudan since it gives the right to any Muslim to file cases against converts from Muslim backgrounds and other Christians as well," he said. "The law can also be used by the government to arrest individuals who may oppose the government."

Christians remaining in the north are particularly vulnerable, and the U.S. Department of State's latest International Religious Freedom Report describes Khartoum as having a "significant Christian population," due in part to migration during the long civil war.

"The Roman Catholic Church of Sudan and the Episcopal Churches of Sudan estimate they have 6 million and 5 million baptized followers, respectively, although active churchgoers are far fewer," the report notes, adding that there are also small but long-

established groups of Orthodox Christians in Khartoum and in other northern cities, including Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox communities.

"There are also Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, largely made up of refugees and migrants, in Khartoum and the east," according to the report.

While convictions may be rare, Christian converts from Islam said they continue to be victims of Sudan's blasphemy law.

"In many cases this law continues to be used by the police to harass everyone who tries to express his or her belief in public," said another convert from Islam on condition of anonymity.

He said police arrested one such convert in downtown Khartoum in 2009; not until the convert arrived at the police station did he find out, to his surprise, that authorities were opening a case against him under Article 125 for offense against any religious belief.

"He was falsely accused of insulting Islam, even though at the time of his arrest he was speaking only about his faith in Jesus," the Christian said of the other arrested convert. "The police were angry with that move, so they arrested him and jailed him for few hours before they released him for lack of enough evidence against him. He was basically arrested because of his faith."

While one church leader noted that Article 125 is "a weapon in the hand of the government to file accusations against Christians," Christians are not the only ones vulnerable within the Sudanese population. In November 2007, a British teacher was jailed in Khartoum under the article for insulting Islam by letting her class of 7-year-olds name a teddy bear Muhammad as part of a school project.

Gillian Gibbons, 54, was charged under Section 125 and convicted on one of three counts, "insulting religion," on Nov. 29, 2007. She was sentenced to 15 days in prison and deportation.

She had suggested to her students that they name their teddy bear, the new class mascot, "Faris," but 20 of the 23 children decided they wanted to name it "Muhammad," after one of the class's most popular boys.

Most Sunni Muslims forbid any depiction of Muhammad. An office assistant at the school, Sara Khawad, had filed the complaint and was the primary witness in the prosecution.

The day after her sentencing, some 10,000 protestors in Khartoum demanded death for Gibbons after imams denounced her during Friday prayers. Ultimately, after intervention from British officials, she was granted a presidential pardon and released into the security of the British embassy in Khartoum.

In December 2007, the section was used against two Egyptian booksellers, Abdelfatah Al Sadani and Maharous Mahammad Abdelazeem, both 30. They were sentenced to six months in prison because they sold a book that the court deemed an insult to Aisha, one of Muhammad's wives.

The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2010 notes that while Sudan's Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the country, it establishes *sharia* (Islamic law) as a source of legislation in the north. The official laws and policies of the Government of National Unity favor Islam in the north, while the constitution, laws and policies of Southern Sudan provide for freedom of religion "contributed to the generally free practice of religion."

The South has no penalties for apostasy or defaming religion, and evangelism is common. And while the State Department report notes that laws against blasphemy and defaming Islam in the north were rarely enforced last year, the threat they pose can be enough to restrict freedom of speech and freedom of religion – especially for converts.

“Those who leave Islam know they may be victims of this article,” a source in Khartoum told Compass.

Islamic extremists attack Churches in Cairo

As chaos grows, Christians increasingly vulnerable

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (09.05.2011) / HRWF (17.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – At least 12 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded when members of a conservative Muslim movement attacked two churches and surrounding Christian-owned homes and businesses in a poor section of Cairo on Saturday (May 7).

Salifis, a hard-line Islamic movement with extremist tendencies, set fire to one of the two church buildings, leaving most of it gutted. The arson attack on the Virgin Mary Church in Imbaba was one of many recent assaults on Coptic Christians by members of the Salafist movement, and the second time in two months that a church building in the country has been set ablaze.

The Rev. Mittias Ilias, head priest of the Virgin Mary Church in Imbaba, said the attack was senseless and beyond trying to explain with words.

“We don’t talk – the church screams for itself,” he said. “The church has five floors, and there is no space where the fire didn’t reach. The floors, the ceiling, the pillars, the church box, the chairs, the icons, all of it – everything was burned. Just give me one reason for all that. There is no reason for all that, nothing.”

The first attack started early Saturday evening (May 7) at St. Mina Church in Imbaba, one of the poorest districts of Cairo. A rumor spread that a Coptic woman who allegedly converted to Islam was being held in the church against her will. No one contacted by Compass in Imbaba could say definitively how the rumor got started, but by 7:30 p.m., according to one victim of the attack, crowds of Muslims chanting Islamic slogans and shouting Osama bin Laden’s name began marching down the streets.

Coptic community members began calling each other about a potential attack, and many started to gather at the church building. The Coptic men dragged pews and other furniture out of the building and built barricades on the streets that access it.

In attempts to dispel the rumor, the head clergy members of St. Mina allowed a group of Islamic imams into the church building to search for the woman. The imams declared to the gathering Muslims that the woman wasn’t in the building, according to witnesses at the scene.

Reports of who struck the first blows were contradictory, but the Salafist crowd was not dissuaded by the imams’ report, and by 8:30 p.m. the fight had started.

Christian witnesses of the attack said the Salafis, carrying knives and other weapons, attacked the men on the barricades, eventually hurling Molotov cocktails at them. There were numerous reports that the Salafis were armed with military-style assault weapons.

Muslim community members and at least one Egyptian Army officer said the Copts had weapons, a charge that all Copts interviewed vehemently denied.

Ramses Roushdy, 43, was injured in the attack. He said a piece of glass went into his eye from an exploding Molotov cocktail while he was defending his father, a lay leader in the church.

"It wasn't like a rock or a stone hit me," he said. "It was like there was an explosion, and a bunch of fragments hit me all over my body."

The mob also attacked Coptic-owned business in Imbaba and apartments adjacent to the church. Roushdy's cousin, Nashaat Ratieb, who lived close to the church, was killed in those attacks. According to local media reports, another man whose apartment was raided jumped to his death rather than face his attackers.

Second Attack

After unsuccessfully trying to push through the barricades, the mob went to the Virgin Mary Church, an undefended building a 10-minute walk from St. Mina. According to Ilias, the mob shot through locks on the church doors, went in and set the building on fire.

A few men were in the building when it was attacked. All escaped except for one, Salah Aziz, the church attendant. A group of youths trying to extinguish embers from the fire discovered his body in a side room of the sanctuary that was used a baptismal, Ilias said.

"We are believers. We believe that whoever dies goes to heaven to be with Christ," Ilias said. "But myself and all of us personally, we get upset and feel bad for his family, his wife and children."

The fire gutted the five-story structure except for a small chapel on the top floor of the building, which sustained substantial smoke damage. A few items scattered throughout the church building – mostly charred pews and one icon – were unscathed.

Ilias said he didn't know how long it would take to reconstruct the building. The congregation will continue worshipping in the gutted building and hold services in shifts between renovation stints; they have no choice.

"Where are we going to go?" Ilias said. "Where are the people going to pray?"

Government Response

The army and security forces did not arrive on the scene until two hours after the attacks had almost fizzled out, according to witnesses.

Fire crews were deployed to the scene but did not get the fire under control for four hours. By Sunday (May 8), officials had cordoned off the area around both church buildings, established a curfew and blocked all media access the scene of the St. Mina attack.

The army allowed partial access to the Virgin Mary Church. Local media reported today that the army has pledged to rebuild the damaged building.

Demonstrations about the attacks continued to surge through areas of Cairo today, with reports of several demonstrators being arrested or injured.

Saturday's attacks were most serious of a string of attacks and threats made by Salafis against Coptic Christians since the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime earlier this year. Since the government collapse, members of the movement have ratcheted up their attacks and their rhetoric against the Copts, going as far as to cut off the ear of a Coptic man in Qena they accused of renting an apartment to prostitutes.

The movement, some Copts said, is trying to incite violence between the Muslim majority and the Coptic minority, now estimated to be 7 to 10 percent of Egypt's population of 83 million. On Friday (May 6), several thousand Copts gathered at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo in response to threats made by Salafis, who pattern their belief and practices on the first three generations of Muslims.

The Salafis demanded the church hand over a woman they say converted to Islam from Christianity; they claim the church is hiding her. There is no proof the woman ever converted. She has appeared publicly twice, once in a recorded statement in October and once on live TV on Saturday stating she wasn't a Muslim and had never converted.

The Salafis had declared they were going to protest outside the church building after making a week of threats against Christians, including a threat to kill the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III. The leaders of the Salafi protest later canceled the demonstration so they could protest the killing of Bin Laden at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. Fady Phillip, 25, a member of the church at the counter-protest, said he thought the Salafis were trying to provoke a civil war in Egypt along religious lines.

"They are going to deny they are provoking a civil war," he said. "They can claim that as much as they want, but who can understand that they would break into my church in order to take the pope as a hostage and ask all the Christians to be silent?"

Poll finds Egyptians full of hope about the future

By David D. Kirkpatrick and Mona El Naggar

The New York Times, (26.04.2011) / HRWF (10.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Egyptians are looking forward with extraordinary confidence and enthusiasm to their first free and fair elections this fall after the defining revolution of the Arab spring, according to the first major poll since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. But they remain deeply divided over the role of Islam in their public life.

The poll, conducted by the Pew Research Center and based on face-to-face interviews with 1,000 Egyptians, is the first credible survey since the revolution lifted many restrictions on free expression. It is also the first to directly address Western debate over whether the revolution might drift toward Islamic radicalism.

The poll found about 30 percent of Egyptians have a favorable view of Islamic fundamentalism and about the same number sympathize with its opponents. About a quarter have mixed views.

That range was exemplified by attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the previously outlawed Islamist group.

Many in the West have assumed that as the best-organized nongovernmental organization in Egyptian society, the Muslim Brotherhood might quickly dominate

Egyptian politics — a view long espoused by the Mubarak government. The poll shows the Muslim Brotherhood is indeed regarded favorably by about three in four Egyptians, receiving very favorable ratings from 37 percent of respondents and somewhat favorable ratings from an additional 38 percent.

But that put the group roughly at a par with the April 6 Movement, a new and relatively secular and progressive youth group that played a leading role in organizing the revolution. Seven in 10 viewed that group favorably, with 38 percent viewing it very favorably and 32 percent viewing it somewhat favorably. The poll's margin of sampling error is plus or minus four percentage points.

Only 17 percent of respondents said they would like to see the Muslim Brotherhood lead the next government. Al Ghad, a liberal party led by Ayman Nour, a formerly jailed presidential candidate, was favored to lead the new government by roughly the same number. And one in five supported the New Wafd Party, a secular liberal party that was recognized under Mr. Mubarak.

Nearly two-thirds of Egyptians said civil law should strictly follow the Koran, but then the existing Constitution of Egypt's largely secular state said that it is already based on the Koran.

Sobhi Saleh, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a former parliamentary candidate, dismissed the poll's findings as wildly overstating the support for other parties. Only the Brotherhood has a broad organization and a well-known platform, he argued, predicting success at the polls. "These findings are wrong, and it's only a matter of two months until you see that," he said.

Amr El Shobaki, a political analyst in the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, said the results reflected an Egyptian habit of shrugging off apparent contradictions between a traditionalist faith and modern lifestyles. "That's why people can have a favorable impression of the April 6 Movement and like the Brotherhood at the same time," he said. "Average people enjoy a high degree of reconciliation between Islam and modern ideas. So they are conservative but not extreme."

The poll also found that a majority of Egyptians, 54 percent, want to annul the 1979 peace treaty with Israel that has been a cornerstone of Egyptian foreign policy and the region's stability. The finding squares with the overwhelming anecdotal evidence that Egyptians feel Israel has not lived up to its commitments in its treatment of the Palestinians. But more than a third of respondents, 36 percent, favored keeping the treaty, and the poll did not ask the more controversial question of whether Egyptians wanted to sacrifice the three decades of peace they have enjoyed along the border.

Mr. Saleh of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, said he supported maintaining the treaty. "There is a difference between the people's feelings toward Israel and their political assessment," he said "Those who want to maintain the treaty are motivated by Egypt's interest. It is not because they accept Israel."

The poll found the military extraordinarily popular, reflecting its decisive role in ultimately pushing Mr. Mubarak aside, and 9 in 10 approved of the work of Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mr. Mubarak's former defense minister and the current head of the interim military council running the country.

But it was conducted in the two weeks that ended April 7, before recent controversies over the military's use of force against demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Still, the results may raise concern for Egyptian liberals anxious to see the military relinquish power to civilian authority. Only 27 percent of respondents called that very important.

Among presidential candidates, the poll confirmed the widespread belief that Amr Moussa, the head of the Arab League and a former Mubarak foreign minister, is the front-runner. About 9 in 10 have a favorable view of him, including 41 percent who have a very favorable view. Seven in 10 had a favorable view of Mr. Nour, another candidate known for challenging Mr. Mubarak and going to jail, with 32 percent viewing him very favorably. And 57 percent had a favorable view of Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Prize winner and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency. But many complain that he has spent most of his career outside his native Egypt, and 39 percent of Egyptians reported an unfavorable view of him.

None of the three is considered an Islamist.

Mr. Shobaki, the political analyst, argued that the core of Mr. Moussa's support was the majority who did not participate in the revolution but voted for a constitutional referendum. "These are the people who are looking for stability, want their economic conditions to be improved and do not necessarily want to see drastic changes," Mr. Shobaki said.

The poll found Egyptians remarkably bullish on their revolution and, in its aftermath, their future. Nearly two-thirds said they were satisfied with their country's direction, and 6 in 10 were optimistic about the future. Although open political elections would be a novelty in Egyptian history, most had some degree of faith that they had won democracy. Forty-one percent said a free and fair choice in the next election was very likely, and 43 percent said it was somewhat likely. Only 16 percent said it was unlikely.

Fifty-four percent said a democratic government was worth the risk of political instability, while only 32 percent held the opposite view, the Mubarak government's mantra that stability was more important.

But asked about their most important concerns for the future, the broadest majority — 82 percent — said improving economic conditions was very important; 79 percent said a fair judicial system was; 63 percent said law and order, the same portion that said freedom of speech; and only 55 percent said honest elections.

Slightly fewer, 50 percent, said it was very important for religiously based parties to be able to participate in government.

Islamist group is rising force in a new Egypt

By Michael Slackman

The New York Times, (24.03.2011) / HRWF (10.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – CAIRO — In post-revolutionary Egypt, where hope and confusion collide in the daily struggle to build a new nation, religion has emerged as a powerful political force, following an uprising that was based on secular ideals. The Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group once banned by the state, is at the forefront, transformed into a tacit partner with the military government that many fear will thwart fundamental changes.

It is also clear that the young, educated secular activists who initially propelled the nonideological revolution are no longer the driving political force — at least not at the moment.

As the best organized and most extensive opposition movement in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was expected to have an edge in the contest for influence. But what surprises many is its link to a military that vilified it.

"There is evidence the Brotherhood struck some kind of a deal with the military early on," said Elijah Zarwan, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. "It makes sense if you are the military — you want stability and people off the street. The Brotherhood is one address where you can go to get 100,000 people off the street."

There is a battle consuming Egypt about the direction of its revolution, and the military council that is now running the country is sending contradictory signals. On Wednesday, the council endorsed a plan to outlaw demonstrations and sit-ins. Then, a few hours later, the public prosecutor announced that the former interior minister and other security officials would be charged in the killings of hundreds during the protests.

Egyptians are searching for signs of clarity in such declarations, hoping to discern the direction of a state led by a secretive military council brought to power by a revolution based on demands for democracy, rule of law and an end to corruption.

"We are all worried," said Amr Koura, 55, a television producer, reflecting the opinions of the secular minority. "The young people have no control of the revolution anymore. It was evident in the last few weeks when you saw a lot of bearded people taking charge. The youth are gone."

The Muslim Brotherhood is also regarded warily by some religious Egyptians, who see it as an elitist, secret society. These suspicions have created potential opportunities for other parties.

About six groups from the ultraconservative Salafist school of Islam have also emerged in the era after President Hosni Mubarak's removal, as well as a party called Al Wassat, intended as a more liberal alternative to the Brotherhood.

In the early stages of the revolution, the Brotherhood was reluctant to join the call for demonstrations. It jumped in only after it was clear that the protest movement had gained traction. Throughout, the Brotherhood kept a low profile, part of a survival instinct honed during decades of repression by the state.

The question at the time was whether the Brotherhood would move to take charge with its superior organizational structure. It now appears that it has.

"The Brotherhood didn't want this revolution; it has never been a revolutionary movement," said Mr. Zarwan of the International Crisis Group. "Now it has happened; they participated cautiously, and they realize they can set their sights higher."

But in these early stages, there is growing evidence of the Brotherhood's rise and the overpowering force of Islam.

When the new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, addressed the crowd in Tahrir Square this month, Mohamed el-Beltagi, a prominent Brotherhood member, stood by his side. A Brotherhood member was also appointed to the committee that drafted amendments to the Constitution.

But the most obvious and consequential example was the recent referendum on the amendments, in the nation's first post-Mubarak balloting. The amendments essentially call for speeding up the election process so that parliamentary contests can be held before September, followed soon after by a presidential race. That expedited calendar is seen as giving an advantage to the Brotherhood and to the remnants of Mr. Mubarak's National Democratic Party, which have established national networks. The next Parliament will oversee drafting a new constitution.

Before the vote, Essam el-Erian, a Brotherhood leader and spokesman, appeared on a popular television show, "The Reality," arguing for the government's position in favor of the proposal. With a record turnout, the vote was hailed as a success. But the "yes" campaign was based largely on a religious appeal: voters were warned that if they did not approve the amendments, Egypt would become a secular state.

"The problem is that our country will be without a religion," read a flier distributed in Cairo by a group calling itself the Egyptian Revolution Society. "This means that the call to the prayer will not be heard anymore like in the case of Switzerland, women will be banned from wearing the hijab like in the case of France," it said, referring to the Muslim head scarf. "And there will be laws that allow men to get married to men and women to get married to women like in the case of America."

A banner hung by the Muslim Brotherhood in a square in Alexandria instructed voters that it was their "religious duty" to vote "yes" on the amendments.

In the end, 77.2 percent of those who voted said yes.

This is not to say that the Brotherhood is intent on establishing an Islamic state. From the first days of the protests, Brotherhood leaders proclaimed their dedication to religious tolerance and a democratic and pluralist form of government. They said they would not offer a candidate for president, that they would contest only a bit more than a third of the total seats in Parliament, and that Coptic Christians and women would be welcomed into the political party affiliated with the movement.

None of that has changed, Mr. Erian, the spokesman, said in an interview. "We are keen to spread our ideas and our values," he said. "We are not keen for power."

He would not comment on whether the Brotherhood had an arrangement with the military, but he said the will of the people to shift toward Islam spoke for itself and was a sign of Egypt's emerging democratic values. "Don't trust the intellectuals, liberals and secularists," Mr. Erian said. "They are a minor group crying all the time. If they don't work hard, they have no future."

But the more secular forces say that what they need is time.

"I worry about going too fast towards elections, that the parties are still weak," said Nabil Ahmed Helmy, former dean of the Zagazig law school and a member of the National Council for Human Rights. "The only thing left right now is the Muslim Brotherhood. I do think that people are trying to take over the revolution."

Egypt is still a work in progress. Ola Shahba, 32, a member of a group in the youth coalition behind the protests, said, "After the results of the referendum, we need to be humble."

The coalition and others have said they see the overwhelming approval of the amendments and the rise of the Brotherhood as worrisome, and as evidence that more liberal forces need to organize in a more effective outreach campaign, and fast.

"Freedom is nice; so is democracy," said Rifaat Abdul Massih, 39, a construction worker. "But I'm a Christian, and we are a bit worried about the future. I voted 'no' to give more time to the secular parties. I don't want to have the Muslim Brotherhood here right away."

In Egypt's democracy, room for Islam

By ALI GOMAA

The New York Times, (02.04.2011) / HRWF (10.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Last month, Egyptians approved a referendum on constitutional amendments that will pave the way for free elections. The vote was a milestone in Egypt's emerging democracy after a revolution that swept away decades of authoritarian rule. But it also highlighted an issue that Egyptians will grapple with as they consolidate their democracy: the role of religion in political life.

The vote was preceded by the widespread use of religious slogans by supporters and opponents of the amendments, a debate over the place of religion in Egypt's future Constitution and a resurgence in political activity by Islamist groups. Egypt is a deeply religious society, and it is inevitable that Islam will have a place in our democratic political order. This, however, should not be a cause for alarm for Egyptians, or for the West.

Egypt's religious tradition is anchored in a moderate, tolerant view of Islam. We believe that Islamic law guarantees freedom of conscience and expression (within the bounds of common decency) and equal rights for women. And as head of Egypt's agency of Islamic jurisprudence, I can assure you that the religious establishment is committed to the belief that government must be based on popular sovereignty.

While religion cannot be completely separated from politics, we can ensure that it is not abused for political gain.

Much of the debate around the referendum focused on Article 2 of the Constitution — which, in 1971, established Islam as the religion of the state and, a few years later, the principles of Islamic law as the basis of legislation — even though the article was not up for a vote. But many religious groups feared that if the referendum failed, Egypt would eventually end up with an entirely new Constitution with no such article.

On the other side, secularists feared that Article 2, if left unchanged, could become the foundation for an Islamist state that discriminates against Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

But acknowledgment of a nation's religious heritage is an issue of national identity, and need not interfere with the civil nature of its political processes. There is no contradiction between Article 2 and Article 7 of Egypt's interim Constitution, which guarantees equal citizenship before the law regardless of religion, race or creed. After all, Denmark, England and Norway have state churches, and Islam is the national religion of politically secular countries like Tunisia and Jordan. The rights of Egypt's Christians to absolute equality, including their right to seek election to the presidency, is sacrosanct.

Similarly, long-suppressed Islamist groups can no longer be excluded from political life. All Egyptians have the right to participate in the creation of a new Egypt, provided that they respect the basic tenets of religious freedom and the equality of all citizens. To protect our democracy, we must be vigilant against any party whose platform or political rhetoric threatens to incite sectarianism, a prohibition that is enshrined in law and in the Constitution.

Islamists must understand that, in a country with such diverse movements as the Muslim Brotherhood; the Wasat party, which offers a progressive interpretation of Islam; and the conservative Salafi movements, no one group speaks for Islam.

At the same time, we should not be afraid that such groups in politics will do away with our newfound freedoms. Indeed, democracy will put Islamist movements to the test; they must now put forward programs and a political message that appeal to the Egyptian mainstream. Any drift toward radicalism will not only run contrary to the law, but will also guarantee their political marginalization.

Having overthrown the heavy hand of authoritarianism, Egyptians will not accept its return under the guise of religion. Islam will have a place in Egypt's democracy. But it will be as a pillar of freedom and tolerance, never as a means of oppression.

Some wary of black-listing Egypt for rights violations

Human rights activists, clergy believe designation would be counter-productive

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (05.05.2011) / HRWF (09.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Placing Egypt on a U.S. State Department list that penalizes countries for their lack of religious freedom would be a mistake, according to some Egyptian human rights activists and Christian leaders.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issued its annual report on April 28, recommending that Egypt be placed on the list of "Countries of Particular Concern," or CPCs. While many in Egypt agree with the report's assertion that religious persecution and sectarian violence are serious issues in Egypt, some said the designation would be counterproductive and would give the burgeoning government a black eye before it has a chance to address the issues.

"We don't think it is helpful to add Egypt to any black list this year," said Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "It sends a negative message that Egypt is worse off this year now that it is not being ruled by a dictator."

The USCIRF report covers the time period from April 1, 2010 to March 31, 2011. The Egyptian revolution beginning Jan. 25 culminated in President Hosni Mubarak stepping down on Feb. 11 of this year.

The USCIRF is a governmental advisory board that was created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The body advises the U.S. State Department on the status of religious freedom in countries around the world, and among its statutory responsibilities is issuing an annual report recommending certain countries be designated as CPCs. The designation can lead to a range of actions against the listed country, including diplomatic censure, forbidding the transfer of military technology and ending economic aid.

Egypt has been on the USCIRF's "Watch List" since 2002, but this is the first time the commission has recommended Egypt be placed on the CPC list, a sign of the deteriorating state of religious freedom in the country, USCIRF Chairman Leonard Leo said in a press statement issued with the report.

"CPCs are nations whose conduct marks them as the world's worst religious freedom violators and human rights abusers," Leo stated. "In the case of Egypt, instances of severe religious freedom violations engaged in or tolerated by the government have increased dramatically since the release of last year's report, with violence, including murder, escalating against Coptic Christians and other religious minorities. Since President Mubarak's resignation from office in February, such violence continues

unabated without the government's bringing the perpetrators to justice. Consequently, USCIRF recommends CPC designation for Egypt."

Bahgat said that although there is no evidence that the number of attacks has increased from this time last year, there have been "qualitative changes" in the attacks that he finds "very disturbing."

"For the first time, we saw the complete demolition of a church," Bahgat said, referring to the March burning of a church building in Sool. "Attacks against churches are common, but this is first the first time we have seen the destruction of a church."

Along with the arson attack, Al Qiddissin Church in Alexandria was bombed at the close of a New Year's Eve celebratory mass. Twenty-three people were killed and scores injured. Eleven days later, in an unrelated incident in Minya Province, an off-duty police officer attacked a group of Christians, shooting one to death and injuring five others. The motivation behind the killing is still unclear.

In March a group of Salafi Muslims cut off the ear of a Coptic man for allegedly renting an apartment to a group of prostitutes. The Copt denied the allegations. The Salafis, who according to the victim tried to force him to convert to Islam, said they were executing justice under Islamic law.

With the exception of the Minya shooting, Bahgat said all the incidents have one thing in common; there has been no criminal persecution of anyone involved, including last month's attacks in Minya.

On April 19, a mob set numerous Christian homes and businesses on fire after a dispute between a Christian and at least two Muslims over the placement of a speed bump led to a riot.

"There is no one in jail or on trial for the destruction of the church or the attack on the man in Qena," Bahgat said.

Other rights advocates, as well as clergymen, agreed with Bahgat that placing Egypt on a blacklist would be counter-productive, although they would not comment for the record. An Episcopal priest who requested anonymity because he is not authorized as a church spokesman said placing Egypt on a blacklist would not lead to the changes the U.S. government desires, but possibly the opposite.

Athanasious Williams, secretary general of the Justice and Freedom Program, which provides legal assistance to Christians whose human rights have been violated, said that the military-run government may be both unable and too worried about public opinion to stop sectarian problems.

"The Ministry of the Interior hasn't been working; it collapsed," he said. "The government's hands are tied. They don't want to work against the people."

No one from the Obama administration has commented publicly on the USCIRF recommendation, but the CPC list has remained the same since he took office. There are eight countries designated as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan. The commission recommended those countries retain their CPC status and, along with Egypt, recommended that Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam be added to the list.

The State Department has taken various punitive actions against CPCs, the most common being limits on the transfer of weapons and associated technology to the

designated countries. The president has waived the requirements of any such punitive actions against Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, two key allies of the United States.

Church building in Egypt reconstructed in time for Easter

Muslim rioters who torched it had declared mosque would be built on site

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (27.04.2011) / HRWF (17.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Fewer than 40 days after a mob of Muslim villagers in Egypt left a church's building in ruins, the congregation celebrated Easter on Sunday (April 24) in a reconstructed building at the same site.

The reconstruction of the church building by the Egyptian military gave Christians in Egypt cause to celebrate, but it came during a new outbreak of sectarian violence across the country.

The Rev. Balamoun Youakeem, head parish priest for the Church of the Two Martyrs St. George and St. Mina in the village of Sool, located in Helwan 35 kilometers (22 miles) south of Cairo, said the reconstruction was finished in "amazing time."

"Everything is back to normal," he said. "They even did nice decoration work, wood work, on the altar cover. It cost them a lot of money; the church looks beautiful at the moment."

Youakeem said the rebuilding was carried out over the objections of villagers who protested outside a meeting of military leaders and traditional village elders. The villagers stood outside the meeting chanting, "We don't want the church," according to Youakeem.

Riots and Burning

The church was attacked on the evening of March 4, after an imam told Muslim villagers to "Kill all the Christians" in response to a rumor of an affair between a Muslim man and a Christian woman, both married to other people. The rioters set fire to the church and demolished a large part of what was left by hand and with sledgehammers.

They then set up a sign declaring the site to be the "Rahmah Mosque" and held a prayer service inside the church ruins.

The villagers had rampaged through the area attacking Christian-owned homes, and some sexually assaulted several Christian women, according to area residents. Many Christians fled their homes in fear of further attacks.

Two days later, 2,000 Coptic Christians gathered outside the Radio and Television Building in Cairo to protest the lack of government response to the attack. On March 6, at a protest outside an area of Cairo commonly known as Garbage City, groups of Coptic men and teens blocked traffic and eventually pelted passing cars with rocks. Government troops moved in to stop the protest, and in the ensuing melee with Muslim counter-protestors, 13 Copts were killed and between 50 and 100 people were injured. Around this time, the army committed to reconstructing the church building.

Youakeem said he initially didn't think the church building would be rebuilt. While mosques are often built without permission and the government pays the salaries of

approved imams, it is notoriously difficult to get a permit to do even the most basic of repairs on church buildings.

"When the church was demolished, the hope to rebuild it was so small," he said. "This is our miracle."

An example of how hard it can be to repair a church building in Egypt can be found in an incident surrounding the Virgin Mary and Archangel Church in Omraniya, Giza. In November 2010, two Copts were killed and dozens were injured in a protest after local authorities stopped construction at the church site claiming renovations did not match permits the government had granted.

Church officials said repeatedly that they had permits for the construction but never publically addressed the issue of the alleged discrepancy.

Also, on Feb. 17 in the village of El-Hathatah near Minya, 231 kilometers (144 miles) south of Cairo, a group of townspeople attacked the congregation of St. George's Church with bricks and rocks. Townspeople were angry about a roof the congregation was constructing next to the church building with local government permission. Eventually area police had to step in to stop the attacks.

Wide-spread Troubles

No one has been criminally charged for attacking the church in Sool, and Youakeem said he is fearful of what would happen if any arrests were made.

"I personally think if someone gets arrested, it will start up the anger again," he said. "God will sort it out in His own way."

The residents that fled have since returned to their homes, Youakeem said. The Easter services at the church went peacefully, thanks in part to a large army presence in the village. But other towns haven't been so lucky. In Minya, a fight on April 19 between a Copt and a Muslim over the placement of a privately placed speed bump spread, and two Muslims were killed. Groups of Muslims retaliated, attacking Christians along with their homes and businesses.

Samia Sidhom, managing editor of the weekly Al-Watani newspaper, which caters to the Coptic population, said group punishment such as what occurred in Minya is common in Egypt. Copts are targeted not for their connection to any alleged incident, but merely for their identity as Christians.

"It's the way that Muslims punish Copts," she said. "If one person does something, they feel they should all be punished."

In Qena, a city in the heart of southern Egypt, crowds protested for almost two weeks starting on April 14 over the appointment of a governor who is Coptic Orthodox. Protestors blocked roads and the rail system serving Qena. Salafis, a sect of Muslims who want to impose an austere form of Islam over Egypt, led the protests.

The protestors demanded that Emad Mikhail not be installed, claiming that as a Christian he wouldn't be able to properly execute Islamic law. A concurrent theme in the protests was the claim that Mikhail had connections to the police forces of the now-deposed Hosni Mubarak regime. Sidhom said the protestors created this reasoning after the fact.

"I think it was because he is a Christian," Sidhom said. "His history is okay. He has no history [with Mubarak]. Actually, he worked with the ministry that deals with tax evasion. The Qena residents didn't want him there because he was a Copt."

Yesterday [April 26], the government suspended Mikhail's appointment to the governor's post for three months.

Contributing to tensions, Sidhom said, is an unwritten quota system in Egypt whereby a certain number of Copts are placed in positions of government authority. The previous governor of Qena, a Copt, was roundly opposed by both Muslims and Copts, as he was considered largely inept at addressing numerous attacks against Christians.

"The Muslims didn't like him because he was a Copt, and the Copts didn't like him because they thought he was a coward," Sidhom said.

Although the Muslim majority's attitude toward the Christian minority hasn't changed in the aftermath of the recent revolution in Egypt, Sidhom said, the nascent government is unable or unwilling to oppose the public about anti-Christian violence.

"The official line is they don't want to go against the wishes of the crowd," she said. "Of course, this means the Copts get more and more unjust treatment."

Soul, first Mass in the Coptic church burned down by Islamic extremists

AsiaNews (14.04.2011)/ HRWF (19.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Coptic Christians of the village of Soul (30 km south of Cairo) once again have their church, destroyed on March 4 by Islamic extremists (pictured) and rebuilt in exactly one month thanks to 'support of the army. Yesterday morning, more than 700 people attended the first Mass and the ceremony of raising the cross on the roof of the building.

Adel Medhat, Coptic Christian from the village, thanked the soldiers who allowed him to pray again in his church. Many Christian activists have praised the work of the army, which last March 13 had promised the reconstruction of the building before Easter, after protests by tens of thousands of Copts and moderate Muslims.

The simple reconstruction of the church, however, has not satisfied many of the villagers, who accuse authorities of not doing anything to prosecute the perpetrators of the fire, preferring to informally resolve the conflict between Christian and Muslim communities. For tomorrow, Coptic activists will stage a demonstration to demand the arrest and conviction of extremists responsible for the attack and the release of more than 17 Christians arrested during the protests which took place last March 11.

Christian-Muslim tension in Egypt: Religious freedom must prevail

By Elizabeth Prodromou and Leonard Leo

Washington Post (18.03.2011)/ HRWF (21.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - While the world remains focused on how Egypt's court of public opinion drove an autocrat from power, an Egyptian court of law recently rendered a verdict that is dismaying for those seeking a more democratic future.

Late last month, an Egyptian emergency court acquitted two of the original three men accused of the religiously motivated murder of six Coptic Orthodox Christians, along with one Muslim guard, in the town of Naga Hammadi on Coptic Christmas eve in January 2010.

While Hosni Mubarak's resignation could be the first step toward advancing the rule of the majority, the Naga Hammadi verdict could signal a regrettable step backward in the fight for protecting the rights of individuals and minorities, especially the pivotal right of freedom of religion or belief.

Clearly, if Egypt is to build a stable democracy, then human rights, including religious freedom, must be protected for all citizens.

For years, Egypt's government failed to provide such protection. The Mubarak regime neglected to curb repression and discrimination against vulnerable religious minorities, such as Christians and Baha'is, or to punish those responsible for the worst violations, including heinous acts of violence.

The Naga Hammadi decision continues this pattern. The ruling underscores the need for further steps, including greater protection of places of worship for Christians and other minorities, as well as bringing to justice those responsible for the New Year's bombing in Alexandria which took at least 23 lives and injured scores more.

Moreover, the fact that an emergency court decided the case is itself problematic. Such courts operate under Egypt's Emergency Law, which restricts religious freedom and related human rights and prohibits any right of appeal. All too often, emergency courts have detained and tried people whose only crime is embracing religious beliefs or practices that differ from the government-approved version of Islam.

Enacted in 1981, the Emergency Law is the legacy of the Mubarak government's flawed strategy of countering radicalism by restricting religious freedom. The regime viewed dissident Sunni and Shi'a Muslims alike, including Koranists and Ahmadis, with suspicion. It filled Egypt's jails with these and other citizens, torturing or detaining them for long periods without charging them with any crime.

Restrictions on religion in the name of stability aggravated the very conditions the regime was trying to avoid. They turned millions against the government, driving some into the hands of violent extremists. Worst of all, government repression of mainstream Muslims and non-Muslim minorities crippled their ability to compete for Egyptian hearts and minds against the radicals, who learned to operate effectively underground.

As Egypt's most powerful ally, the United States backed the Mubarak government, viewing it as a bulwark against Islamist extremism. Rather than advocating religious freedom, and nurturing democratic forces within Egypt, U.S. foreign policy historically has turned a blind eye to freedom in the name of stability. Instead of stability, Mubarak's regime has imploded, and it remains unclear whether a truly effective democratic movement can emerge to oppose a radical Islamist option.

It is not enough to advocate that Egypt's demonstrators be heard and heeded. That alone could usher in a new form of tyranny. The United States must support actions to strengthen universal human rights, including the individual right to freedom of conscience or belief.

The U.S. should encourage the new Egyptian government to lift the state of emergency; prosecute the perpetrators of sectarian violence in regular criminal courts; pass a unified law on building and maintaining places of worship; remove religious affiliation from identity documents; end discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities;

repeal bans on Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses; revoke Egypt's blasphemy law; and ratify a constitution that enshrines rule of law and ensures robust protection for religious freedom.

The will of the majority should not be ignored. But the rights of individuals and minorities, including the right to religious freedom, must also be protected. That should be the response to the recent court verdict. Both messages are critical to a stable, democratic future for Egypt.

Leonard Leo is chairman and Elizabeth H. Prodromou is vice chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Egyptians blame army and state security for Coptic, Muslim deaths

EarthTimes (10.03.2011) / HRWF (15.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Cairo, Egypt - A number of Egyptians on Thursday pointed the finger at the country's own forces for the death of 13 people during conflicts between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Cairo this week.

Samy Roushdy, a Coptic resident who was at the protest, told the German Press Agency dpa that the army is to blame.

"I just came back from the funeral of a man I saw shot dead by the army," he said.

Roushdy said an army general attended the funeral and apologized for the violence, vowing investigations were underway.

But, according to Roushdy, Coptic Christians yelled and protested against the general's presence at the funeral, forcing him to leave the funeral shortly after arriving.

"I don't understand why the army would come in and fire like this. We could see them firing at us," said Roushdy.

According to the website of the newspaper al-Masry al-Youm, 27-year-old Samaan Nazmy, a garbage man, was shot in the heart and killed on the way back from work earlier this week.

"He was definitely shot with government-issued bullets," according to his brother, who left in distress before giving his name, the newspaper reported.

The violence, which left some 140 injured, erupted on Tuesday evening after more than 1,000 Christians gathered in the slum neighbourhood of Manshiyet Nasr to protest against the burning of a church south of Cairo.

Homes and factories were torched in the unrest and the Egyptian military fired shots in a bid to control the riots.

An anonymous military expert and former soldier said the chaos may have been carried out by thugs with stolen weapons.

"The army would never open fire on people like this. If these people have bullets that were actually from government issued weapons then they must have been stolen," according to the source quoted in al-Masry al-Youm.

However, others blame thugs from within Egypt's controversial State Security services for the unrest.

During Wednesday evening's popular evening programme on the satellite channel Dream2, a caller said that the way in which the church was burnt could only have been carried out by an organized body from within the State Security services.

The allegations come after widespread reports suggested that, during the anti-government protests that led to the ouster of president Hosny Mubarak, a number of security officers torched police stations and stole weapons in a bid to create chaos and strike fear among people calling for reform.

While these reports could not be independently verified, the country's attorney general charged 15 people on Wednesday with illegal possession of weapons and destruction of private and public property.

Pope Shenouda, the patriarch of the Coptic Christian church, has requested an investigation into the events, Matta Sawiris, a member of the council of Coptic Orthodox Churches, told dpa.

The cabinet drafted on Wednesday a law criminalizing thuggery and intimidation of civilians. It includes a provision allowing the death penalty if such crimes result in deaths.

Religious tensions occasionally lead to violence in Egypt, where Christians comprise 10 to 15 per cent of the population.

Military rebuilding Coptic church destroyed by Muslims

AsiaNews (14.03 2011) / HRWF (15.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Cairo, Egypt – The Egyptian armed forces have begun rebuilding the Saints Minas and George Coptic Church set on fire by Muslims in Soul on 5 March, sources, anonymous for security reasons, told AsiaNews. Reconstruction began today and is being paid by the government.

"The church will be built on the same location and will be as big as the old one, despite opposition by radical Muslims," the source said.

Copts welcomed the news, but announced that they would continue to demonstrate in front of Egyptian TV to demand equal rights for Christians, a principle still denied by Egypt's constitution.

"The rebuilding of the church is a sign of good will on the part of the military," the source said. "Recently, a delegation from al-Azhar University came to visit Christians in Soul to express their closeness to them."

The torching of the Coptic church in Soul, a town some 30 kilometres south of Cairo, was followed by clashes between Copts and Muslims that caused the death of 13 people with more than 50 wounded. However last Friday, Copts and Muslims, brandishing their

respective religious symbols (cross and crescent), gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square to show the interfaith unity of the Egyptian people.

According to the source, a positive atmosphere now prevails in the capital as no Christian-Muslim clash has been reported. Nonetheless, fear of Islamic extremism remains high.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is the only organised armed group in the country," the source said. "Despite internal divisions, they are united in pushing the ideas of radical Islam in the upcoming parliamentary elections".

Germany strips Egyptian imam of asylum rights over hate speech

EarthTimes (09.03.2011) / HRWF (14.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - An Egyptian-born imam lost a court fight Wednesday to stave off his expulsion from Germany after he was accused of preaching hatred towards Christians and Jews.

The superior administrative tribunal in Muenster, northern Germany, agreed to a federal government demand to strip his political asylum. A lower tribunal must now review whether to order his actual deportation to Egypt.

His lawyer said he would appeal, adding, "This may take years."

Germany ordered him stripped of asylum rights in 2006 but the Muslim preacher fought the order in the courts.

He has filed papers insisting that he ceased preaching in favour of jihad, or holy war, in 2000. He asserts that a German transcript of him calling for violence against Jews and Christians is a mistranslation of what he said in Arabic.

But the Muenster judges said he had lost his right to asylum through past actions that breached the United Nations prohibition on terrorism.

Chaos deepens as clashes kill 13

By Hamza Hendawi

AP (09.03.2011) / HRWF (14.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Cairo, Egypt - Clashes between Muslims and Christians in Egypt left 13 dead and 140 wounded, deepening a sense of chaos as the police and ruling military struggled to maintain order barely a month after a popular uprising ousted longtime leader Hosni Mubarak.

In a sign of how much security has broken down, the pitched battles - the deadliest in years - went on for nearly four hours Tuesday night as both sides fought with guns, knives and clubs. Army troops fired in the air to disperse the crowds to no avail.

The new Cabinet sought to reassure Egyptians on Wednesday night, ordering police to immediately take back the streets.

The spasm of violence offered a glimpse of what has gone wrong in a one-time police state that now finds itself with less than half of its security forces back to work and a military that does not have enough troops on the ground.

The fighting began when a Muslim mob attacked thousands of Christians protesting the burning last week of a church in Soul, a village just south of Cairo.

The Muslims torched the church amid escalating tensions over a love affair between a Muslim woman and a Christian man. The relationship set off a violent feud between the couple's families. The woman's father and a cousin of the man were killed.

At one point in the battles, Christian protesters blocked a vital highway, burning tires and pelting passing cars with rocks.

Security officials said seven Christians and six Muslims were killed. The wounded were 72 Muslims and 68 Christians, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Troops later arrested 20 people, they said.

Even before the uprising that toppled Mubarak, tensions had been growing between Christians and Muslims.

The Coptic Christian minority makes up 10 percent of Egypt's 80 million people and complains of widespread discrimination that they say relegates them to second-class citizen status.

A Jan. 1 suicide bombing outside a Coptic church in the port city of Alexandria killed 21 people, setting off days of protests. Barely a week later, an off-duty policeman shot and killed a 71-year-old Christian man, and wounded his wife and four others.

Last November, police halted construction of a church, and Christians clashed with the authorities. Two Christians were killed and 68 people were hurt in the fighting.

Sworn in Monday, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and his government issued a statement Wednesday saying security forces would return "in full force to carry out its national duties."

The statement also appealed to Egyptians to put the interests of the nation above all else.

Egypt's ruling generals pledged last week to rebuild the torched church in Soul. The head of Al-Azhar, Egypt's most prominent Islamic institution, promised that Muslims would help in the reconstruction as a gesture of solidarity.

Sharaf also met Christians who have been protesting outside the TV building in Cairo to reassure them that his interim government would not discriminate against them.

In the meantime, the difficulty of keeping order continues.

Egypt's 500,000-strong security forces pulled out of Cairo and several other major cities three days into the uprising that began Jan. 25. They have yet to fully take back the streets.

Their still-unexplained withdrawal left space for a wave of violent crime and lawlessness in parts of the nation, especially in Cairo, a city of 18 million people that at the best of times looks chaotic.

Additionally, some 25,000 prisoners, including hardened criminals and drug barons, escaped from prisons during the uprising. Only 13,000 of them have been recaptured or surrendered voluntarily.

Attacks on police stations freed another 25,000 suspects, most of whom remain at large, according to security officials.

Only last week, inmates at prisons in two Nile delta towns - Damanhour and Shibeen - attempted jail breaks before guards regained control, killing three of them.

Over the weekend, crowds stormed at least six offices belonging to the hated State Security Agency, including its main headquarters in a Cairo suburb, clashing with officers inside and seizing documents.

The attacks followed reports on Facebook that State Security officers were destroying documents that could incriminate them if court cases were brought against them for human rights abuses. Dissolving the agency, blamed for the worst human rights abuses under Mubarak's 30-year rule, is a key demand of the youth groups behind the 18-day uprising.

The continuing security vacuum has prompted residents in some Cairo districts to form their own neighborhood protection groups to guard buildings. In some places, civilian volunteers are directing traffic after nightfall when traffic police disappear.

Cairo residents report robberies on highways, unheard of less than two months ago. Motorists driving against incoming traffic on one-way roads is not uncommon in Cairo now.

In a separate incident, at least two people were wounded when rival crowds threw rocks in Cairo's central Tahrir Square, the uprising's epicenter, according to an Associated Press Television News cameraman at the scene.

The violence pitted youths camped in the square to press their demand for a complete break with the ousted regime against another group opposed to their continued presence.

Later, army soldiers forcefully removed the protesters and their tents, scuffling with some and making several arrests.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Washington was concerned about the violence against the Coptic Christians and protesters. He said the U.S. had no indication that Egypt's military supported the attacks.

U.S. officials were talking to their Egyptian counterparts and urging them "to act swiftly and to bring the perpetrators of that violence to justice," he said..

"It's important for Egyptians to remember the sense of unity in Tahrir Square just a few weeks ago and to refrain from any kind of violence, and to go back to that sense of peaceful demonstration and expression," he said.

Christian and Muslim killed in sectarian clash

RFI (05.03.2011) / HRWF (10.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Sol, Egypt - Two men were killed in Egypt during clashes on Saturday between Muslims and Christians. Muslims set fire to a church in the village of Sol, south of Cairo, a security official said.

The violence was triggered by a feud between two families. It erupted over a romantic relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim.

It culminated in fighting on Friday in which both of the couples' fathers were killed, another security official said.

After the funeral for the woman's father on Saturday, a group of Muslims headed to the village church and set it on fire.

The army, managed to put the fire out and restore calm to the area, the official said.

Coptic Christians make up about 10 per cent of Egypt's population and have been subject to sporadic sectarian violence. Marriage between a Christian man and a Muslim woman is illegal in Egypt unless the man converts to Islam.

A Coptic Christian asylum-seeker calls upon the European Court

M.E. v. France (no. 50094/10)

Strasbourg Consortium (08.03.2011) / HRWF (09.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – The applicant is an Egyptian national, a Coptic Christian. He claims that beginning in 2007 he and his family were targets of attacks because of their religious beliefs. He was struck on two occasions by persons of Muslim persuasion, resulting on one occasion in hospitalization. Shortly thereafter he was arrested and placed into custody. He was released on bail, but when proceedings were opened against him he failed to appear and fled Egypt on 21 September 2007. In 2009 he was condemned in absentia to three years in prison for proselytism. He was arrested in France in August 2010 and placed in a detention center awaiting deportation. His appeal for asylum was rejected. The Court asks whether there is reason to believe that the applicant faces a real risk of treatment in violation of Article 3 if he is deported, because of his Coptic religion and particularly because of his religious activities and his prison sentence for proselytism. The Court further inquires into the procedures of the applicant's detention in France and the effectiveness of his remedies, in the sense of Article 13.

Islamic mob burns down Church in Egypt

'Kill all the Christians,' local imam tells villagers

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (08.03.2011) / HRWF (09.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Cairo – A Muslim mob in a village south of Cairo last weekend attacked a church building and

burned it down, almost killing the parish priest after an imam issued a call to "Kill all the Christians," according to local sources.

The attack started on Friday evening (March 4) in the village of Sool, located in the city of Helwan 35 kilometers (22 miles) from Cairo, and lasted through most of Saturday. A local imam, Sheik Ahmed Abu Al-Dahab, issued the call during Friday afternoon prayers, telling area Muslims to kill the Christians because they had "no right" to live in the village. The attack started several hours later.

The Rev. Hoshea Abd Al-Missieh, a parish priest who narrowly escaped death in the fire, said the clamor of the church being torn apart sounded like "hatred."

"I was in the attack, but I can't describe it," he said. "The sound of the church being destroyed that I heard – I can't describe it, how horrible it was."

According to villagers, the mob broke into the Church of the Two Martyrs St. George and St. Mina, and as they chanted "*Allahu Akbar* [God is greater]," looted it, demolished the walls with sledgehammers and set a fire that burned itself out the next morning. Looters removed anything valuable, including several containers holding the remains of venerated Copts – most of whom were killed in other waves of persecution – then stomped and kicked the containers like soccer balls, witnesses said.

After the fire went out, the mob tore down what little remained of the church structure. The group of Muslims then held prayers at the site and began collecting money to build a mosque where the church building once stood, said the assistant bishop of Giza the Rev. Balamoun Youaqeem.

"They destroyed the church completely," he said. "All that was left is a few columns and things like that. As a building, it's all gone."

During the fire, Al-Missieh was trapped in a house near the church building that was filling up with smoke. He faced a difficult dilemma – choke or burn to death in the house, or face an angry mob of thousands screaming for blood.

"When the smoke was too much, I told myself, 'I am dying anyway,' so I decided I would go out and whatever happened, happened," Al-Missieh said.

When he went outside, a man with a rifle told the priest to follow him. At first Al-Missieh was reluctant, he said, but the man fired off two rounds from the rifle and told the crowd to step away.

"No one will touch this man, he is with me," the priest remembered the man yelling at the mob. Al-Missieh was taken to a house where he met three other workers who were at the church when it was attacked. The men all relayed stories similar to the priest's.

Friday's attack was another in a long list of disproportionate responses in Egypt to a rumor of an affair between a Muslim and a Copt. Earlier this month, Sool villagers accused a Muslim woman in her 30s and a Coptic man in his 40s, both of them married, of being involved with each other. On Wednesday (March 2) a village council of Coptic and Muslim leaders convened and agreed that the man should leave the village in order to avoid sectarian violence.

The next day, the woman's cousin killed the woman's father in a fight about the honor of the family. The same day, the cousin died of wounds he sustained in the fight. By Friday, Al-Dahab, the local imam, had blamed the entire incident on Christians in the village and called on all Muslims in Sool to kill them.

Because of the attack, Copts in Sool fled to adjacent villages. The women who remained in the village are now being sexually assaulted, according to Youaqeem, who added that he is receiving phone calls from women in the village begging for help. Those reports have not yet been independently confirmed.

"Everybody tried to find a way to get out," Youaqeem said.

Groups of Muslims have set up blockades around Sool, declaring they intend to turn it into an "Islamic village," Youaqeem said.

On Sunday (March 6), roughly 2,000 people gathered outside the Radio and Television Building in Cairo to protest the attack and what Copts see as a long-standing government refusal to address or even acknowledge the persecution of Christians in Egypt. Protestors also accused the government of not sending enough troops to the village to control the situation. Holding up crosses and signs, the protestors shouted the name of Jesus and chanted, "We need our church."

Soldiers armed with AK-47s with fixed-sheathed bayonets held the crowd back from the building as several priests took turns addressing the crowd. When the Giza parish priest, Bishop Anba Theodosius, said the army had pledged to rebuild the church but would not give a written guarantee of the promise, the crowd became enraged and pushed through the line of soldiers.

No one was injured in the push. More protests about the attack continued Tuesday in Cairo.

Youaqeem said the attack has devastated and enraged the Coptic community, but he sees hope.

"As they say - 'All things work to the good of those who love the Lord,'" he said.

Monk, workers shot in monastery attack

Two people in critical condition, five others hurt, after assault by Egyptian military

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (28.02.2011) / HRWF (01.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - One monk and six church workers were shot and wounded last week when the Egyptian Army attacked a Coptic Orthodox monastery in order to destroy a wall monks had built to defend their property from raiders, sources said.

The attack with small arms, heavy machine guns and armored personnel carriers happened Wednesday afternoon (Feb. 23) at the Anba Bishoy Monastery in Wadi Al-Natroun, 110 kilometers (68 miles) north of Cairo. After a brief argument with monks and workers outside the monastery wall, soldiers opened fire on the crowd, sending them running for cover, sources said.

The soldiers then used armored personnel carriers to bulldoze the wall, they said, as the monks sang a prayer in unison, declaring, "God is merciful."

A monk who witnessed the attack said on condition of anonymity that the scene resembled "a war zone."

"It was a miracle nobody died," the monk added.

Seven people today remained in the Anglo American Hospital in Cairo, two of them in critical condition. Reporters were unable to talk to the wounded because soldiers have been posted in their hospital rooms.

The attack took place in the wake of the political riots that swept through Egypt beginning Jan. 25, culminating in the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on Feb. 11. As the army and other security officials from around the country either shifted to Cairo or simply abandoned their posts, the Anba Bishoy Monastery had come under increasing attacks from raiders and criminals set free from prisons.

When the monks had asked for protection, the military told them to fend for themselves, according to public statements made by the monastery leadership. The monks then built a brick wall with a metal gate to control access to the monastery grounds. The army later claimed the monastery had not acquired the proper permits and issued a deadline for the wall to be torn down. The monks refused to demolish the wall, and the army moved in.

At least two monks were arrested in the attack but have since been released, according to monastery leaders.

The army denied conducting the attack, despite a video widely circulated on the Internet in which Egyptian soldiers can be seen firing AK-47 assault rifles and .50-caliber machine guns from atop U.S.-supplied M-113 armored personnel carriers. The same armored personnel carrier, joined by one other, then demolished the wall and the gate. It was unclear if soldiers were using standard bullets or "Less-Than-Lethal" munitions, commonly known as rubber bullets.

On the same day, the army also attacked the Anba Makarios Al Sakandarie Monastery in Al Fayoum, 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest from Cairo. In much the same fashion, the army knocked down a wall the monks had built during the national demonstrations. The monks said they built the wall also to protect themselves from attacks. The army claimed the wall was built on land set aside for a nature preserve.

There have been other scattered incidents throughout Egypt in which anti-Christian persecution has been, at minimum, a contributing factor in the attack. On Feb. 17, in the village of El-Hathatah near Minya, 231 kilometers (144 miles) south of Cairo, a group of townspeople angered about construction at the Church of St. Georges pelted the congregation with bricks and rocks.

Hany Malak, a lay leader at the church, said the attack was terrifying.

"It was very scary for everybody, for the Christians who were in the church, and the ones who were in their homes," Malak said. "The ones in the church couldn't leave, and the ones who were in their homes couldn't get out. All were scared and tried to hide."

For years the small church held services with a large part of the congregation forced to stand outside under a tarp. After the forced resignation of Mubarak, the leadership of the church saw an opportunity to build a roof to replace the tarp. They applied for and got permission from both the village elders and the village mayor to build the structure, but as church members placed support beams for the roof, a group of Muslims attacked, Malak said.

The attacks shifted back and forth from different streets surrounding the church as members of the mob tried to force their way into the church buildings. A group of congregants fought them off, Malak said.

After several hours the village mayor, along with the head of the Samalout police force and several officers, came to the church and with great effort were able to move the crowd away, Malak said. Christians in El-Hathatah were concerned that after Friday prayers new riots would break out, but they never materialized.

Finally, the governor of Minya Province, Ahmed Diaa Al Deen, pledged that the church would be allowed to finish the roof, as long as everything was done legally. It was uncertain exactly what his comment would mean.

Five days before the El-Hathatah attack, on the morning of Feb. 12, gunmen broke into and then looted The Virgin Mary Church in El-Arish, located in the northern Sinai Peninsula. The looters escaped, so the motivation behind the attack – to intimidate Christians, or simple larceny – was unknown.

The attack was the second church attack in the Sinai in less than two weeks. On Feb. 5 someone set a fire inside a church building in Rafah, located on the border between Egypt and the Palestinian-controlled Occupied Territories. The church sustained minor damage and a large cross was stolen, local media reported.

During the same time, a gas station in El-Arish was reportedly torched, and at least one other building in the area was attacked, No one was hurt in any of the attacks.

Bomb detonated in empty church

By Ashraf Sweilam

AP (05.02.2011) / HRWF (21.02.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - El-Arish, Egypt - Assailants detonated a bomb Saturday in an empty church in a small town in northern Egypt, causing little damage and no injuries, security officials said.

Smoke billowed from the windows of the church and the assailants also snatched a cross from outside the building, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the incident with reporters. They said the assailants escaped. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

The attack in the town of Rafah, on the border with the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, comes amid unprecedented political unrest sweeping Egypt. For nearly two weeks, protesters have staged mass rallies to demand the ouster of longtime Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Rafah is located in the Sinai Peninsula, where Bedouin tribesmen have clashed with security forces during the popular revolt.

Earlier Saturday, an explosion went off in a gas terminal in the Sinai town of El-Arish, causing a massive fire but no injuries. Energy officials blamed a gas leak, while security officials said an explosive device was detonated in the terminal. As a result of the fire, the flow of gas to Jordan and Israel was stopped.

Even before the uprising, there had been growing tensions between Egypt's Muslims and large Christian minority. On New Year's Day, a suicide bombing outside a Coptic church in the port city of Alexandria killed 21 people, setting off days of protests.

Barely a week later, an off-duty policeman boarded a train and shot dead a 71-year-old Christian man and wounding his wife and four others.

Egypt's uprising stirs fears of persecution of minority Coptic Christians

By Michelle Boorstein

Washington Post (03.02.2011) / HRWF (21.02.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - With attacks on Christians already increasing in the Middle East, the populist uprising in Egypt has triggered fears among some that the region's largest non-Muslim population - Egypt's 7 million Coptic Christians - could be at risk.

Copt leaders in the United States said they are terrified that a new Egyptian government with a strong Islamic fundamentalist bent would persecute Christians. They are quietly lobbying the Obama administration to do more to protect Christians in Muslim countries and are holding prayer vigils and fasts, such as one that ended Wednesday evening at Copt churches across the country, including four in the Washington area.

"The current situation for the Copts stinks, but [longtime Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak is the best of the worst for us," said the Rev. Paul Girguis of St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax County, which has about 3,000 members. "If Muslim extremists take over, the focus will be extreme persecution against Copts. Some people even predict genocide."

Some major U.S. Christian figures, including well-known evangelical leaders and representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, declined to publicly discuss the situation in Egypt, saying they wanted to avoid bringing dangerous attention to the country's Christians by appearing to complain or to advocate for a particular political outcome.

Their trepidation stems from repeated attacks on churches in Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled in recent years, and from the New Year's Day bombing of a Coptic church in Egypt that killed almost two dozen worshipers and wounded nearly 100. The Coptic Church is one of the oldest Christian institutions in the world and is based in Egypt.

"Egypt is the bellwether because its Christian community is so large and is the strongest in the Middle East," said Paul Marshall, a global religious freedom expert and a fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute. "What happens to Christians in Egypt is very significant. Everyone is watching."

But not all American faith leaders are bracing for the worst. Joel Hunter, an evangelical pastor of a Florida megachurch and a frequent adviser to President Obama, said he's hearing a lot of optimism from Egyptian Christians who believe the uprising will lead to more freedom and religious liberty.

Many younger Christians in the United States also see the protests as something to celebrate, Hunter said, and older, more politically conservative Christians tend to be more skeptical of Islam generally and are worried about how a new Egyptian government will treat Israel.

So far, the protests have focused on jobs, free speech and democratic elections, not religion, so it's unclear what the end of Mubarak's rule would mean for religious minorities. But in recent years, Iraq has lost about half its historical Christian population because of persecution, and Christians have been leaving Iran and Lebanon in lesser numbers.

After last month's bombing of the Coptic church in Alexandria, Pope Benedict XVI publicly urged the Egyptian government and other leaders in the region to protect religious minorities. Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman said the pope's comments were "an unacceptable interference" in the country's internal affairs, and Egypt withdrew its ambassador to the Vatican in response.

Some U.S. Christian leaders said the situation in Egypt might put the issue of religious persecution abroad back on the radar of American Christians. A decade ago, the freedom of Christians to worship in such places as Sudan was a top agenda item for American Christians, particularly evangelicals. But this week, experts said that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have absorbed people's attention.

At a congressional hearing last month about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, Christian leaders urged the administration to lean harder on Egypt's leaders to investigate violence against religious minorities and to lay out a clear strategy in Iraq for their protection.

A 2009 survey by the nonprofit Pew Forum that measured governmental and societal restrictions on religion found that a number of the world's least tolerant countries are Muslim-majority. The list included Iran, Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan as well as India, which is majority Hindu. Concerns include bans on public preaching and conversion and the lack of prosecution for religion-based violence.

Some advocates for religious freedom note that moderate Muslims and non-majority Muslims also suffer attacks and that the problem is extremism, not Islam.

Trauma grips survivors of Church blast in Alexandria

Blinded Christian transported to Germany amid political riots clings to faith

By Wayne King

Compass Direct (31.01.2011) / HRWF (01.02.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The last thing Osni Naim Michael remembers seeing on New Year's Eve was more than a dozen people standing in front of him who instantly disintegrated in a brilliant flash of light.

In the split second that followed, the shock wave of the bomb threw the 57-year-old Michael to the ground. As he lay there – bleeding, blind, deaf and unable to get up – he could feel people hurrying over him, fleeing the blast site. His daughter eventually found him, pulled him from the scene and took him to the hospital.

Several days after the attack, while recovering from injuries, Michael learned that the place he was standing when the bomb detonated marked a macabre line of demarcation; everyone between him and the bomb is now dead, and almost everyone behind him lived.

"I remember the flash and everything exploding around me," Michael said. "The 18 people were between me and the bomb ... the 18 were killed, and I was only wounded. I thank Jesus Christ for this."

In the early-morning hours of Jan. 1, after a New Year's Eve Mass celebration in Alexandria, Egypt, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the Coptic Orthodox church of St. Mark and Pope Peter, or "(Two) Saints Church," according to the Egyptian government. At least 22 people died in the blast or later as a result of their injuries; the remains from

one or two others are still unidentified and unclaimed. Another 97 people were reportedly injured from the explosion, which witnesses initially said came from a car-bomb; area Christians suspect more than one assailant.

The latest victim to succumb to his injuries was Samuel Girgis. In his 30s, Girgis died on Jan. 21 in a London hospital after an infection from the burns that covered more than half his body, according to doctors from St. Mark's Hospital in Alexandria. He was married and had an infant child.

The explosion left the church smeared with blood, and it shattered windows throughout the building. The damage to the structure is largely repaired or cleaned, but now the people who make up the church are left to struggle with injuries, unanswered questions and their faith.

Wounds seen and unseen

Michael was one of more than 70 patients who were treated at St. Mark's Hospital for various injuries sustained during the bombing. The tall, burly Michael was largely unscathed by the explosion with one major exception – the shockwave from the blast shattered his left eye and severely damaged the other. The left eye had to be removed, and the right eye is essentially useless. His eardrums were damaged in the explosion but have almost healed.

For weeks, Michael needed constant care. His family members took turns staying with him in his hospital room – his wife during the day, and his son sleeping in a bed next to his at night. Doctors said he will probably never see again. But Michael, a manager at a petroleum factory, holds on to hope that he will see one day, either through medical or divine intervention.

On Saturday (Jan. 29), while the rest of his country was locked in political riots, Michael was placed on a plane with five others to Germany for medical treatment. Although his treatment options are now better, his prognosis is still uncertain.

"I am sure that Jesus Christ will not leave me," he said in the days before he was transported.

St. Mark's Hospital, a facility adjacent to and run by the Saints church, was overwhelmed after the bombing, according to Dr. Mena Michael, a cardiologist at the hospital. Police closed the bombing site and the hospital for several hours after the attack, and when the doors reopened, the hospital was deluged with people suffering burns, lacerations and crushed or missing limbs; they were full of fragments that the terrorists packed into the explosive device.

Doctors still have a large envelope full of bolts and bits of wire, which they call "foreign objects" that they removed from the wounded.

Possibly the hardest thing doctors had to face was documenting and processing the bodies of friends and colleagues who worked at the hospital. One doctor who ran the laboratory at St. Mark's was killed with her two daughters and sister. Her husband returned to the front of the church after retrieving his car to find his entire family dead.

Michael said the whole thing was a "nightmare."

"You have two hands, you just have two hands to work in [the body of] one patient – not in two, not in three, not in four [patients]," Michael said. "Imagine about 10 at a time, 15 at a time. What can you do?"

Doctors were also tasked with correcting medical procedures that they said were done improperly at a nearby state-run hospital, such as one patient whose legs were left full of fragments. That patient was Girgis.

Promises made by state officials to pay for the medical treatment have only materialized in part, doctors said, so Christian business leaders have promised to pay for the remaining costs. Still, some victims are uncertain how they will pay for their medical treatment. In spite of how medical bills will eventually be paid, most of the seriously wounded have been moved to hospitals scattered across Europe, with the bulk being in Germany.

As the bodies of the wounded continue to heal, many are now left to deal with the unseen emotional scars. A 7-year-old girl whose face was badly burned, legs were broken and had one toe amputated lay in a bed all day next to the bed of her mother, who was also injured. Michael said the girl was having an especially hard time dealing with the emotional trauma of the attack, and doctors are worried about her.

Culprits

On Jan. 23, Egyptian Interior Minister Habib al-Adly said his ministry had conclusive evidence that a Palestinian terror group, the Army of Islam, was responsible for the church bombing. The group has publicly denied responsibility for the act, and other Palestinian groups normally in conflict or even open combat with the Army of Islam have said they don't believe the Egyptian government's accusations.

The Palestinian groups are not alone.

From the beginning, the Egyptian government asserted that the attack was carried out by a group from outside Egypt and not by Egyptians themselves. Many Coptic leaders have publically voiced their doubts about the government's declaration; they said the Jan. 23 announcement was just the latest example of the government refusing to admit that there is a problem with anti-Christian attitudes and violence within Egypt.

Asked about the culprits, all of more than two dozen members of the Saints church said they thought a group of Egyptians were responsible for the attack and not any outside group. They said they also didn't believe the attack was a suicide bombing, but rather a car bombing, based on eyewitness reports. The congregation members said the bombing was part of a larger problem of Coptic Christians being persecuted and discriminated against by an Egyptian society that is increasingly hard-line Islamic and intolerant.

"Most of us believe it is something internal, not from anywhere outside," said one woman at the church who requested anonymity. "And the government is trying to say it's from somewhere outside to show that our country is really stable and nothing is harming us from inside."

In the wake of the bombing, several Facebook sites and other Web sites sprang up in Egypt in support of the violence. The sentiment was echoed in the comments sections of the online versions of several Egyptian newspapers.

As if to add emphasis to the arguments of Coptic Christians, two days after the bombing a police officer boarded a train in southern Egypt and, upon seeing a group of Christians, shot at the group, killing one man. The police officer was later arrested. The same week, Mohamed Ahmed Hussein was sentenced to death for last year's shooting outside a church in Nag Hammadi that left six Christians and one Muslim security guard dead.

One woman visiting a victim at St. Mark's Hospital, a co-worker who is several months pregnant, said the hatred against Christians in Egypt is palpable.

"We are four out of 200 workers, and you can tell by the way they look at us now, they are happy about what happened," said the woman, who also didn't want to be identified for security reasons.

One man, the son of a Christian whose abdomen had been ripped open in the blast, said that Egyptians are taught in school that Christians are "liars and thieves and bad people."

A new shrine

Whatever the bombers hoped to accomplish on the night of the attack, the site has now become a shrine and a rallying cry for Egyptian Christians. Copts from the Orthodox Church and other denominations are traveling hundreds of miles to visit the church.

The visitors said the bombing has increased the faith and spiritual commitment of the Copts.

The congregation has set up several displays honoring the victims. One billboard is covered with crowns representing the "crown of life" promised in the Bible to Christians who persevere "under trial." Another display, a vinyl poster, is covered with the photographs of faces of the deceased.

Possibly the most poignant display is that of a life-size portrait of Jesus, arms outstretched, painted on a piece of plywood. After the bombing, congregants gathered the body pieces of the victims and, using the picture as a stretcher, brought them inside the church. The image of Christ, protected by glass, is smeared with the blood of those who died.

Some who came to the church stood in front of murals of the victims, posing for photographs taken with cell phone cameras. Others followed priests as they explained what happened the night of the attack. Still others wander aimlessly, dabbing tears from their eyes, or touching the faces of the photographs of the people who were killed.

A woman from St. George's church in Giza, a suburb of Cairo two hours away by train, said the bombing has forced many Copts to re-examine their faith. Before, she said, the news of attacks and unrest would lead members of the Coptic Orthodox Church to commit themselves to their faith, "But in a couple of days everything would go back to normal."

This time, it is different, she said. People are truly shaken.

"Most have come back to church, have repented and are praying to God," she said. "We can go to God any time, so each one of us should be prepared to go anytime."

Violence in Egypt claims another life and injures five

CSW (14.01.2011) / HRWF (15.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A 71 year-old Christian man was shot dead and his wife and four others injured after a 23 year-old off-duty policeman opened fire on an Assiut train bound for Cairo on 11 January 2011. The Egyptian Interior Ministry has blamed the attack on the gunman's mental instability, and said that his motive was not sectarian.

The shooting came hours after Egypt recalled its envoy to the Vatican and accused Pope Benedict XVI of "meddling" in Egypt's internal affairs after he had urged Egypt, Iraq and Nigeria to do more to allow Christian citizens to practice their faith in safety. In another

response, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, imam of Al Azhar University, said in a statement that the treatment of Christians should be as citizens of Egypt and thus an internal affair. Abdel Rahman Shaheen, spokesman for Egypt's Ministry of Health, added that the ministry sent a plane to Christians wounded in the Assiut train shooting. Such treatment is usually reserved for foreign tourists.

This latest shooting comes less than two weeks after the bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve in which 23 people died and 80 were injured. Tensions are further heightened by the long-awaited announcement of the outcome of the Nag Hammadi trial, scheduled for 16 January. The sectarian shooting claimed the lives of 6 Copts and 1 Muslim security guard in January 2010.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "Christian Solidarity Worldwide is encouraged by the Egyptian government's treatment of victims in the aftermath of the latest tragic loss of life in Egypt. We call for more measures to be taken to stem sectarian violence and to tackle the extremism at its heart. We ask for the release of all protesters unfairly detained in Egypt at this time and for justice for victims of sectarian attacks."

Policeman shoots Christian dead in southern Egypt

Hamza Hendawi

AP (11.01.2011) / HRWF (13.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An off-duty policeman boarded a train and opened fire on Tuesday, killing a 71-year-old Christian man and wounding his wife and four others, the Interior Ministry said. The attack, less than two weeks after the suicide bombing of a church killed 21, sparked new demonstrations by enraged Christians who pelted police with stones in southern Egypt.

The church attack on worshippers leaving a New Year's Mass in the Mediterranean port of Alexandria touched off three days of riots and demonstrations by furious Christians who criticized the government for failing to protect them and vented over what they see as persistent discrimination.

All of the casualties in the latest attack were Christians - four of them women - raising concerns it will ignite a new wave of protests by a community still traumatized by the suicide bombing.

Soon after the attack, hundreds of angry Copts gathered outside the hospital where the wounded were being treated in the central Egyptian province of Minya and stoned police.

It was not immediately clear whether the gunman knew his targets were Christians. But four of the five wounded were Christian women who stand out in the conservative south as they would probably not have been wearing headscarves as most Muslim women do.

The ministry statement identified the policeman as Amer Ashour Abdel-Zaher, a 23-year-old Muslim, and said he boarded the Cairo-bound train at the town of Samalout in Minya province and opened fire on the passengers with a handgun.

The statement added that Abdel-Zaher, who was not wearing a uniform, was on his way to work at a town near Samalout. Police arrested him at his nearby home after he fled the scene and he was being questioned, according to the ministry statement.

The train originated in Assiut which, like Samalout, is home to a substantial Christian community.

The Health Ministry said an air ambulance has been dispatched to airlift any critical cases to the capital. Initially the wounded were taken to a government-run hospital, but the families insisted they be transferred to the church-run Good Shepherd Hospital in Samalout, said spokesman Abdel-Rahman Shahine.

Shooting attacks against Christians occasionally take place in Egypt's impoverished south, usually over commercial disputes, church building or allegations of cross-sectarian relationships.

In January 2010, gunmen opened fire on worshippers leaving a Coptic Christmas Eve church service in southern Egypt, killing six Christians and a Muslim guard.

Many Christians charge that the authorities are not doing enough to protect them and in fact allege some members of the security services turn a blind eye to anti-Christian incidents.

The attack comes as Egypt was bristling at international expressions of concern over the safety of its Christian population and recalled its ambassador to the Vatican following comments by Pope Benedict XVI.

In a speech Monday, Benedict cited recent attacks on Christians in Egypt, Iraq and Nigeria, and said governments must take effective measures to protect religious minorities.

Hossam Zaki, Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman, described Benedict's remarks as "unacceptable" and charged him with interfering in the country's internal affairs.

"Egypt will not allow non-Egyptians to interfere in its internal affairs under any pretext," he said.

Sheik Ahmed el-Tayyib, the imam of the Al-Azhar, the premier institute of Islamic learning in the Sunni Muslim world, also blasted the Pope's remarks.

"Protection of Christians is an internal affair and should be carried out by the governments as they (the Christians) are their citizens like other citizens," he said in a statement.

President Hosni Mubarak has repeatedly said that the government will do its utmost to protect Egypt's Christians and has accused foreign groups of being behind the New Year's church attack.

The New Year's suicide attack on the church reopened long festering wounds in a Christian community that says its members feel like second class citizens in their own country due to widespread discrimination.

Coptic Christians demonstrated around the country, including Assiut, in the aftermath of the bombing and called for better protection and equal rights.

Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's nearly 80 million people.

Blast kills 21 outside church in Alexandria, Egypt

Bomb explodes as Christians leave New Year's Eve mass

By Wayne King

Compass Direct (03.01.2011) / HRWF (04.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At least 21 people were killed and scores were wounded on Saturday (Jan. 1) when a bomb outside a church in Alexandria, Egypt exploded as congregants were leaving a New Year's Eve Mass celebration.

The explosion ripped through the crowd shortly after midnight, killing instantly most of those who died, and leaving the entrance-way to the Church of the Two Saints, a Coptic Orthodox congregation, covered with blood and severed body parts.

The blast overturned at least one car, set several others on fire and shattered windows throughout the block on which the church is located.

Egyptian authorities reportedly said 20 of the victims have been identified. At least 90 other people were injured in the blast, 10 seriously. Among the injured were eight Muslims. Many of the injured received treatment at St. Mark's Hospital.

Burial services for some of the victims started Sunday (Jan. 2) in Alexandria, located in northern Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea.

Witnesses reportedly said a driver parked a car at the entrance of the church and then ran away seconds before it exploded. Government officials have claimed they found remnants of the bomb, filled with nails and other make-shift shrapnel, at the site; they suspect an unidentified suicide bomber, rather than a car bombing.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the attack comes two months after an Islamic group known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) issued a threat stating that, "All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers are legitimate targets for the muhajedeen [Muslim fighters] wherever they can reach them."

Claiming they would open "rivers of blood" upon Christians, the group specifically threatened Egyptian Christians based an unsubstantiated rumor that two Coptic women, both wives of Orthodox clergy, were being held against their will after converting to Islam. The statement came after ISI claimed responsibility for an attack on a Baghdad church during mass in which 58 people were killed.

The Egyptian government continues to suspect foreign elements mounted the Alexandria attack, but an unconfirmed report by The Associated Press, citing anonymous government sources, said an Egyptian Islamic group is being investigated.

Bishop Mouner Anis, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, said in a written statement that he thinks the attack was linked to the Iraqi threats. He added that his church has taken greater security measures at its downtown Cairo location.

"We pray with all the people of Egypt, Christians and Muslims, [that they] would unite against this new wave of religious fanaticism and terrorism," he said.

For weeks before the ISI issued its threat, Alexandria was the site of massive protests against the Orthodox Church and its spiritual leader, Pope Shenouda III. Immediately after Friday prayers, Muslims would stream out into the streets surrounding mosques, chant slogans against the church and demand the "return" of the two women. Before that, as early as June, clerics from at least one central Alexandria mosque could be heard broadcasting anti-Christian vitriol from minaret loudspeakers during prayers, instructing Muslims to separate themselves entirely from their Christian countrymen.

The Alexandria bombing comes almost a year after a shooting in Nag Hammadi, Egypt left six Christians and one Muslim security guard dead. In the Jan. 6, 2010 attack, a

group of men drove by St. John's Church, 455 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo, and sprayed with gunfire a crowd leaving a Coptic Christmas Eve service.

Three men were eventually charged with the shootings, but the case has yet to be resolved.

Egypt wasn't the only place in the Middle East plagued with anti-Christian violence over the holiday season.

The day before bombers struck the Alexandria church, an elderly Christian couple in Baghdad was killed when terrorists placed a bomb outside of their home, rang the doorbell and walked away, according to media and human rights reports. The bombing happened at the same time other Christian-owned homes and neighborhoods throughout Baghdad were being attacked.

Estimates of the number of people wounded in the attacks in Iraq range from nine to more than 13.
