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The Copts, the Nation, and the Revolution

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As Egypt faces rising tensions following the ousting of Mohamed Morsi, the Coptic community once more finds itself in the crossfire. The Coptic Patriarch's stance in support of the June 30, 2013 protests has been linked to the killing of a Coptic priest in Sinai days after Morsi's fall.[1] This incident is the latest in a series of developments in Egyptian history in which the country's Coptic community has played the role of a litmus test for the national ideal.

The January 25th revolution was notable for its representation of unity of Egypt's Muslims and Christians. During the transition period that followed, Images such as those of the two famous martyrs, the Copt Mina Daniel and the Muslim Imad Iffat,[2] as well as slogans, were used to affirm this unity. Slogans like "the Unity of the Cross and of the Crescent" and "religion for God and the nation for all" have been prevalent in Egypt since the 1919 national movement and until today. Such slogans and images of martyrs standing side by side aim at embodying the core value of Egyptianness.[3] However, such an *allegory* also reveals the division and the denial of the division, as well as the contemporary collapse of the national ideal.

Indeed, it is the affirmation of unity that first implies division. It even raises the division itself to the rank of a founding principle, as if this very division and its denial defined the Egyptian "identity", an identity that becomes characterized by negative rather than positive associations. Hence, Samer Soliman wondered why, in 1919, Egyptians established the national movement on the basis of unity of Christians and Muslims.[4] After all, Christians only account for 6%-10% of the Egyptian population.[5] Why did Egyptians not evoke the prosperity or the gender gap, or any other of the numerous divisions existing in Egyptian society? Because, Samer Soliman answered, Egypt was, and is, a sectarian society.

Although the sectarian divide has been partly inherited from the administrative and juridical categorization of the population implemented by the Ottoman rulers, the building of the modern Egyptian nation-state led to the transformation as well as to the renewal of sectarianism. While Copts enjoy the same rights of citizenship as Muslims according to the state, the practices governing their public life have not always been equitable. Up to this day, state institutions and its agents

enhance the multi-layered subjugation of Coptic citizens through several daily practices often circumventing or even violating the existing laws (and previously, the constitution) of the Egyptian state.[6] These practices and discourses put to work in several fields of Egyptian social life form "processes of minoritization", which produce and reproduce a coherent system of meaning structured by the logic of identity, or sectarianism. In other words, sectarianism constitutes a structuring principle in the Egyptian social and political order as it regulates the discourses and practices of social and political actors that, in turn, sustain this order

Nevertheless, the very existence of this order is often denied. For example, when, in 1994, Saad Eddin Ibrahim attempted to organize in Cairo a conference entitled *Minorities in the Middle East* which would include the Copts, he caused a public outcry in Egypt. The mere evocation of a Coptic minority led most Egyptian public and political figures to assert that Copts and Muslims formed a single fabric, and that dissent and supposed exceptional occurrences of violence[7] between them were but the result of a foreign hand.[8] On several occasions, political and public figures affirmed the unity of Egyptian people and denied the very existence of tensions, even when they gathered especially to discuss the so-called sectarian problem, as it happened, for example, during the "dialogue" organized by the Muslim Brotherhood after the 2005 legislative poll.[9] This affirmation of unity reveals at the same time one thing and its counterpoint: sectarianism as a founding principle of Egyptian social and political dynamics, as well as the fierce denial of sectarianism.

This paradoxical feature also appears in the discussions on the participation of Coptic citizens in the national political scene. During the twentieth century, this debate regularly raised the question of the establishment of an apportionment system to enhance Coptic representation in Egyptian political life.[10] Although the Copts and the Egyptians mostly oppose the establishment of an apportionment system, the four former Egyptian presidents have de facto constantly ensured a minimal Coptic (as well as a gendered) representation in the Assemblies and Ministry offices through nomination.

However, processes of minoritization of Coptic citizens do not establish themselves as a matter of course. Although state and governmental actors have contributed to the reproduction of those processes,[11] countless Egyptians have continued to fight against discrimination. Indeed, within the Coptic community as well as at the national level, several contests have attempted to change the sectarian order. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Copts have raised demands such as the declaration of the main Christian feasts national statutory holidays, the inclusion in textbooks the history of Christianity, and of Egyptian Christianity specifically, in a substantial way, and the promulgation of a unified law regulating the building of churches and mosques. Nevertheless, up to this day, the Egyptian Parliament has not examined any of the several proposals that have been drafted.[12] From the 1970s onwards, former Patriarch Chenouda III and Coptic activists abroad—mainly from the US and Canada—have organized different kinds of collective actions in order to protest against discrimination and violence towards Copts.[13] By one way or another, these actions were addressed to the governments. Although they were held only occasionally and often following a violent episode and mainly focused on Coptic demands, they contributed to the emergence of a new culture of protest in the 2000s, especially in the wake of Hosni Mubarak's announcement in February 2005 to hold pluri-candidate presidential elections. Thereafter, several taboos were broken one by one, and among them the Coptic file, which stood at the very core of Egyptian activists' demands for the entrenchment of political and civic rights and for the establishment of the

rule of law.[14] Priests and Coptic lawyers created associations dedicated to the defence of Coptic rights,[15] while Coptic youth appeared in the foreground. Not only did the youth protest inside the Church but, from 2005 onwards, some Coptic demonstrations took place in public space as well.[16] Furthermore, youth protests often linked the denunciation of the regime to the critique of Chenouda's indefectible support of Hosni Mubarak. Nevertheless, as some of those initiatives all too often expressed a sectarian stance (pretending, for example, that the Copts are the true and single owners of the country), they hardly challenged the mere logic of the sectarian order.

On the other hand, other modes of contest deserve attention as their actors engaged in the fight at the grassroots level and addressed specific problems. For example, over the last decade, hundreds of citizens wishing to officially recover their initial Christian identity after converting to Islam took legal action against the Ministry of Interior whose employees refused to issue national IDs or related documents reflecting the requested religious identification. This decision did not rely on a legal basis.[17] People were denied documents not on the basis of any Egyptian law prohibiting such conversion but on what officials understood to be the prohibition in Sharia against conversion from Islam, seen as a form of apostasy. These cases received extensive media coverage as well as the support of civil, religious, and personal rights advocacy groups. As a matter of fact, among the advocacy groups that proliferated in Egypt since the 1990s, some associations bringing Christians and Muslims together work on a regular basis to entrench civic and political rights. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) has worked since 2002 on strengthening and protecting basic rights and freedoms in Egypt, among them religious freedom and liberty of conscience, considered as personal rights and not as components of a communal identity. As such, EIPR has supported the legal actions of the converts—as well as those of Bahais—not only in the courts, but also through research and publications in order to increase public awareness of the problem and better inform the population on these topics. The group Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination (MARED, Misriyun Against Religious Discrimination), created in 2006, also aims at raising public awareness through conferences and publications on specific problems. However, as their main objective is to require the government and state institutions to implement existing Egyptian laws, these organizations encounter several difficulties in achieving their tasks. Not only do state bodies exercise tight control over their activities and keep them under the constant threat of repression, but, and correlatively, they crucially lack the tools allowing them to get out of Cairo's activist network in order to raise awareness among people living in remote areas of Upper Egypt.

The main feature of these associations is that they do not use Egyptian nationalist discourse to fight against sectarianism but instead demand the establishment of the rule of law. Indeed, how could the affirmation of the unified Egyptian nation be the antidote to the sectarian "sickness", since sectarianism is but the other face of nationalism? Both were historically produced from the same matrix of meaning relying on the logic of identity. The Nasserite state has been the crystallization of the nationalist ideology,[18] which previously implied that new states born out of the Ottoman Empire refer to religion to define themselves against colonial powers. Religion became an identity marker for the state, while identity worked as the structuring principle governing the modes of participation in, or subjection to, the sanctified nation-state. January the 25th was the beginning of a revolution precisely as it marked the end of the legitimacy cycle which started with the Nasserite republican era, and meant the collapse of the national ideal. However, revolutionary discourses and practices have not yet created a coherent system of meaning that would replace the old one,

governed by the very logic of identity. In fact, the post-June 30 nationalistic fervor seems to have reconstituted Nasserite identity tones to a degree.

Despite the work of civil society associations demanding the establishment of the rule of law, which has contributed to the revolutionary process, the identity trap has limited the scope of their activism. Most people have not yet managed to transcend the confines of local, communal or national identities. For example, one of the main features characterizing electoral dynamics during Mubarak's rule became even more salient in the post-January 25th political landscape: as the reference to Islam *and* to democracy becomes a necessary requisite of political discourse, both concepts work as empty signifiers. In this context, the Coptic issue serves to attest political actors' commitment either to Islam or to democracy, sometimes simultaneously but in front of different audiences.

Therefore, what is to be done to entrench the social and political inclusion of Coptic citizens, as well as to ensure that they enjoy the right to freely practice and express their faith, or any other belief?

The January 25th revolution, followed by the "brotherhoodization" of the state apparatus, and the new leadership in the Church, broke the unwavering alliance between the Church and the regime. This is an important change. Indeed, among the several things to be done in order to enhance the position of Copts in Egypt, most have to be undertaken by the Church itself and by the Copts. Starting from the 1940s, the Copts had progressively retreated on the communal level. This tendency was enhanced by Nasser's willingness to silence all expression of sectarian specificities and to consider the Coptic patriarch as the sole political representative of the Copts. Under President Sadat's and Mubarak's rules, the relative pluralization of the electoral process and of the media nurtured the growing social and political polarization. Meanwhile, the developing Coptic Church incorporated not only the religious practices but also most of the social and cultural activities of the Copts. Although the number of Coptic candidates since the 1995 parliamentary elections rose significantly, and fierce criticism was directed at Pope Chenouda's unconditional support for the regime, most Copts did not pay attention to the events occurring on the national stage and simply implemented the patriarch directives to vote for the ruling party's candidates. The January 25th revolution exacerbated and brought to light these two trends in the Coptic world as well as in the whole Egyptian society: While a minority of Copts became involved in the revolutionary struggle, demanding the establishment of the rule of law, most of them remained behind the Church's walls that allegedly protected them against the Islamist threat.

Though Patriarch Tawadros (2012-) sometimes adopted a critical stance towards the government formed after the fall of Mubarak, he nevertheless did not seem to initiate a radical change in the Church attitude and institutional structure. Heir to Patriarch Chenouda, the new Patriarch followed the same political orientation, although he proved to be more open to oecumenical exchanges. There is therefore much scope for a more active role to be played by reformist Coptic actors vis-à-vis political control by the Church. But they currently remain a divided minority without constituency in the Egyptian Coptic community.

The Egyptian government bears the responsibility of directing actions and practices of institutional actors, concerning, for example, the ways to interpret and implement laws and administrative rules. One thing that should be done for example is the promulgation of a unified law regulating the

building of mosques and churches. But this would mainly represent a symbolic measure, since the greatest difficulties occur after the authorization to build a church has been obtained, due to harassment from neighborhood and local officials. Yet, the most pressing thing is not to enact new laws: Violence, discrimination, arbitrary arrest and torture of converts—and even most of the obstacles to church building—result from the circumvention, the misinterpretation or the violation of current Egyptian laws and constitution.

Regarding the issue of political representation, it is also not appropriate to think about establishing an apportionment system to provide for a political representation of the Copts as such. Pertaining to the fierce denial of sectarianism, the proposal to establish an apportionment system faces massive opposition and the mere act of pronouncing the word *minority* all too often results in widespread condemnation. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Copts are not made of a homogenous group: From an economic, social, and professional standpoint, they spread across the complete spectrum of political parties. Contrary to the Iraqi, the Syrian and the Lebanese cases, one cannot delineate in Egypt a distribution of resources and of political powers along sectarian lines. For this reason, an apportionment system providing for a political representation of the Copts as such would hardly make sense.

Let us finally distinguish two kinds of actions.

First, as discrimination occurs in all spheres of Egyptian society, the only way to combat it is to engage in long-term struggles, at several sectoral levels, and to address specific topics on a daily basis. The above-mentioned civil society organizations as well as several scholars have already clearly identified the main problems. One of the most pressing actions that should be undertaken is the organization of common activities for Egyptian youth from all religious backgrounds. Indeed, the most striking feature of the last thirty years lies in the increased segregation of youth, due, on the one hand, to the huge development of the Church which currently incorporates most social and cultural activities of the Copts, and on the other hand to the expansion of Islamist trends and activities also offering material and symbolic goods to young Muslims.

Second, entrenching the rights and inclusion of the Copts in Egyptian society should not be separated from the revolutionary struggle itself. As several observers have already argued, three key issues lie at the core of the political conflict between the components of the government and the revolutionary forces: economic policy; repression related to government practices; and the government's authoritarian trend, that is the several attempts to legalize freedom-suppressing policies (both under Morsi and after his ousting). Therefore, not only should revolutionary trends set-up cross-partisan forums and working groups in order to formulate political alternatives allowing to engage in these fronts of political confrontation, but they should also do their best to rally the Copts around these common causes.

The current Egyptian turmoil does not allow us to be optimistic concerning this issue and, more broadly, regarding the democratization of Egypt on the short term. Egypt will go through a long winter, and January 25 was not springtime. It was the beginning of a revolution. Due to several economic and political factors, the winter might last for a long time. The main obstacle remains the fast deterioration of the economic conditions that nurtures discontent but forbids the development of an organized and powerful political opposition at the grassroots level. However, movements like

Tamarrod[19] have shown that the revolutionary struggle is continuing and is able to gather a huge number of supporters pertaining to the indecisive majority. Moreover, the slow, fuzzy, and still unorganized advent of the younger generations is the highlight of the Egyptian revolutionary movement. Despite the diverse profiles of the youth involved in the revolution, most of them share a common refusal of authoritarian rule. As the two years since the January 25th revolution have shown, though the police represented the worst, Egyptians have been targeting all authoritarian organizations and institutions, from the Coptic Church to traditional parties to the Brotherhood. Although following June 30, Egypt has witnessed a return of a degree of popular support for authoritarian state institutions—which indicates that revolutionary discourses and practices have not yet invented a coherent system of meaning that would replace the old one—the future of Egyptian politics, as well as the outcome of the reconfigurations of the political and religious spheres, partly lies in Egyptian youth's current experiments.

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[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/06/egypt-coptic-priest-killed-sinai. The pope also issued a statement in support of the military on July 26, 2013.

[2] Mina Daniel was a young Egyptian activist fighting for the respect of citizenship rights (member of *Harakat Shabab min Agl al-Hurriyya wal-Adala*, meaning "the Youth for Justice and Freedom movement" and *Hizb al-Tahaluf al-Sha`bi al-Ishtiraki*, "the Socialist Popular Alliance Party"), who was killed during a demonstration at Maspero (Cairo) in October 2011: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3022/the-maspero-crime_accounts-against-the-counter-rev ; http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-egyptians-death-some-see-spark-for-a-second-revolution/2011/10/17/gIQAwKo2sL_story.html. Also see Paul Sedra's articles, especially his paper on martyrdom and Maspero : http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7782/martyrdom-at-maspero_searching-for-meaning. A Facebook page was created after his death https://www.facebook.com/We.Are.Mena.Daneal. Imad Iffat was killed one month later http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9053/remembering-emad-effat

[3] For example, on street art and dissent during and after the revolution, see the articles of Mona Abaza on Mohammed Mahmoud street, especially her analysis of the work of Alaa al Awad http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5978/the-revolutions-barometer- ; http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5725/the-buraqs-of-tahrir ; and Soraya Morayef http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4776/the-seven-wonders-of-the-revolution

[4] Samer Soliman, "Al-haraka al-dimuqratiyya tijahu al-taifiyya", *Al-Bosla*, 2005. Also see Nabil 'Abd Al-Fattah, "Al-muʾassasa al-dîniyya al-qibtiyya al-urthuduksiyya wa qadâyâ al-muwâtana wa al-wahda al-wataniyya " in 'Umrû al-Chubakî (ed.), *Al-muwâtana fî muwâjaha al-tâ îfiyya,* Cairo, *Al-Ahram* Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2009, p. 93-121.

[5] Percentages vary according to different estimates, though academic studies seem to confirm the validity of the official figure of 6%.

[6] See Laure Guirguis, *Les Coptes d'Egypte : Violences communautaires et transformations politiques (2005-2012*) [Egyptian Copts: Sectarian Violence and Political Transformations (2005-2012)], Paris, Karthala, 2012.

[7] On the spread of violence and its changing features see EIPR report http://eipr.org/en/report/2010/04/11/776.

[8] On this debate, see *Rûz al-Yûsif*, 1994, May the 2d, the 9th, the 16th and the 23th, as well as Dina El-Khawaga's article on media and public figures strategies during this debate: « Le débat sur les coptes : le dit et le non-dit », in Alain Roussillon (ed), *L'Égypte en débats. Égypte/Monde arabe*, n° 20, Cairo, CEDEJ, 1994, p. 67-76.

[9] *Al-aqbât wa al-suʿûd al-siyâsî li al-ikhwân* [The Copts and the Political Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood], Cairo, Sawasiyya Center for Human Rights and against Religious Discrimination, 2006. The Sawasiyya Center is close to the Brotherhood. On the Brotherhood's positions and tactics towards Copts: Sâmih Fawzî, "Al-ikhwân al-muslimûn wa al-muwâtana… Qirâ´ fî al-mawqif min al-aqbât" [The Muslim Brotherhood and

Citizenship. Reading on their Positions towards Copts], in 'Umrû al-Chubakî (ed.), *Azma al-ikhwân al-muslimîn* [Crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood], Cairo, *Al-Ahrâm* Center for Political and Strategical Studies, p. 179-221, and Laure Guirguis, "The Brotherhood, the Copts, and the Egyptian Revolution: Identities and the Ballot Box." in Nelly Van Doorn-Haarder (ed), *Reconsidering Coptic Studies*, Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, NC, USA, (to be published, 2013).

[10] The first discussion on this issue in an institutional context was raised during the 1922 debates on the writing of the 1923 Egyptian Constitution. See Târiq Al-Bichrî, *Al-muslimûn wa al-aqbât fî itâr al-jamâ'a al-wataniyya* [Muslims and Copts in the National Movement]*,* Beirut, Dâr al-wahda, 2004 (1983).

[11] For discriminations entrenched in and through official bodies, see Laure Guirguis, *op. cit.,* as well as the publications of Egyptian Against Religious Discrimination coordinated by Muhammad Mounir Megahed, focusing respectively on the legal and on the educational spheres: *Misr li kull al-misriyûn. Al-mu'tamar al-watanî al-awal li munâhada al-tamyîz al-dînî fî Misr, 11-12 ibrîl 2008, al-Qâhira*, Markaz al-mahrûsa li al-nachr wa al-khadamât al-sahafiyya wa al-ma'lûmât, January 2009, and *Al-ta'lîm wa al-muwâtana. Al-mu'tamar al-watanî al-thânî li munâhada al-tamyîz al-dînî*, Cairo, s.e., January, 2010.

[12] For more details on the subject see: Samir Morcos, "Cultural Citizenship: Integration and Pluralism, the Construction of Churches as Example," study presented at the first annual conference on citizenship organized by the National Council for Human Rights, 2007.

[13] On Patriarch Chenouda's relationship with Sadat, the most important references remain: Musa Sabri, *Al-Sadât, al-haqîqa wa al-astûra* [Sadat: Truth and Legends], Cairo, al-maktaba al-masrî al-hadîth, 1985 ; Ghâlî Shukri, *Egypt : Portrait of a President, 1971-1981. The Counter Revolution in Egypt. Sadat's Road to Jerusalem*, London, Zed Press, 1981 ; Usama Salama, *Masîr al-aqbât fî Misr* [The Fate of Egyptian Copts]*,* Cairo, Dâr al-khayyâl, 1998. On Coptic Diaspora activism, Muhammad Zayan, *Aqbât al-mahjar,* Cairo, s.e., 2008 provides a detailed overview of the several Coptic associations abroad since the 1970s up to this day.

[14] Alain Roussillon, "Visibilité nouvelle de la "question copte" : entre refus de la sédition et revendication citoyenne" [The New Visibility of the 'Coptic Question': Refusing sectarianism and Demanding Citizenship],   in Florian Kosthall (ed), *L'Égypte dans l'année 2005,* Cairo, CEDEJ, 2006, p. 137-175. More recently, one can refer to Anthony Shenoda's article dealing with the "(in)visibility of Copts in Egypt" http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1624/reflections-on-the-(in)visibility-of-copts-in-egyp

[15] For example, before the revolution, the church sponsored association and journal *al-Katiba Tibiyya,* founded by the Coptic priest Mattias Nasr Manqarius, that called for demonstrations in Cairo's streets starting from 2010 onwards ; the associations created by lawyers Mamdûh Nakhlah, Naguib Gubra'il, Nabil Gabrial and so on ; after the revolution, let's mention among other the association created by Cairene Coptic youth *Ittihad Shabab Maspero* (Maspero Youth Union).

[16] Samer Soliman, "The Radical Turn of Coptic Activism: Path to Democracy or to Sectarian Politics", *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, vol. 29, n° 2/3, Cairo, American University Press, Summer-Fall 2006, p. 135-155.

[17] EIPR and Human Rights Watch, *Prohibited Identities,* Cairo, EIPR and HRW, 2007 (eipr.org).

[18] On identity, the Nasserite State and the People, see the excellent study of Sherif Younis, *Nidaa Al-Sha'b*, (The Call of the People), Cairo, 2011.

[19] *Tamarrod*, meaning "Rebel", is the name of a campaign calling for early presidential elections. Opposition activists inaugurated this campaign by launching a petition: "I, the undersigned, of my full volition as a member of the National Assembly of the Egyptian people, hereby announce that I withdraw confidence from the President of the Republic, Dr. Mohammed Morsi Isa al-Ayyat, and I call for the holding of early presidential elections. I hold fast to the goals of the revolution, and working toward attaining them and spreading a campaign of insurrection among the ranks of the public so that together, we can bring about a society of dignity, justice and freedom."