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Book Reviews

The Coptic Issue: A Historic Call for Egyptians

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Book Title: Is there a Coptic issue in Egypt? (First edition, Beirut, 2012)

Author: Dr. Azmi Bishara

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Dr. Azmi Bishara has recently composed a valuable study entitled: “Is there a Coptic issue in Egypt?” The study dissects the issue with wisdom and caution, applying a scientific approach in attempting to resolve the question raised in the title.

I read with great passion Dr. Bishara’s study published in a booklet, noting that the author succeeds in clarifying the issue on three levels. First, he introduces a worthy analysis of the historical origins of the Coptic presence in Egypt, noting its inclusion in the country’s ancient population. He helps the reader to gain an understanding of Coptic history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the Alawite dynasty, and the natural status they enjoyed prior to 1952. Also analyzed are developments in the Coptic situation, as well as the problems that accompanied it, throughout the eras of Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. The study concludes with an assessment of the Coptic issue in the context of modern-day concerns and developments.

Significance and characteristics

In relying on credible resources and reputable references as the basis for his study, the author avoids the pitfalls of dependence on the analyses of contemporary journalists and political scientists. Furthermore, Bishara does not merely approach the issue from a political standpoint. He also addresses the social and economic ramifications of the Coptic presence in Egypt, noting their vital contributions toward the building of modern Egypt and the evolution of its renaissance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most importantly, perhaps, are the neutrality and objectivity used in dealing with the issue, as well as the vision presented by the author in his reading of the Coptic situation within the structure of the modern Egyptian society. He seeks to understand how transformations happened in the midst of events and their consequences, and to explain the change in public sentiment toward the Coptic community - a community which has coexisted peacefully with the rest of the Egyptian population from the days of Muhammad Ali Pasha, and throughout the subsequent eras of his children and grandchildren. This peaceful coexistence has gradually evolved into a state of suffering marked by internal conflicts and disharmony, beginning with the Revolution of July 23, 1952 and continuing to the present day.

Copts are not guests in Egypt

This issue cannot be addressed effectively through analysis of numbers or by comparison of majorities and minorities; rather, one must first understand the sense of marginalization and indifference that eventually evolves into a state of internal conflict. Perhaps the most important point the author diagnosed concerning Egypt - which can be applied to what happened in Iraq as well - is the following: “the transformation of the country to adopt religious positions, and to encourage a particular Islamic trend against politics, has produced an accompanying phenomenon. Copts started to feel alienated from this game. In fact, they are not guests, but they are native Egyptians. In our view, the accumulation of this emotional dimension, not the discrimination that is measured in numbers alone, is the most important factor in the crystallization of the Coptic identity, and in the level of politicization of identity” (p. 27). This phenomenon is the most dangerous product of two extremely important phases in contemporary Arab history: the first stage was the Arab nationalism that reached the height of its power in Nasserite Egypt (1949 - 1979) and its aftermath. The second important phase consisted of the rise of political Islam in the Muslim world, which began in 1979 and continues to this day. In both phases, the Coptic issue in Egypt crystallized “in the light of two important developments, namely: the growing sense of sectarian injustice among large groups of Egyptian Copts, and the major Egyptian Revolution and what it can do to reshape the relationship between Muslim and Coptic Egyptians in the context of a common national identity” (p. 7).

Complexities of the issue and its foundations

Bishara’s study was based on a report prepared by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies which posed the question: is there an open Coptic issue in Egypt that needs to be addressed? The preparation of this dossier was motivated primarily by the Coptic protests that began in mid-2010, in the wake of the bombing of the Saints Church in Alexandria. The publication of the Center’s report was delayed because of the outbreak of the Egyptian Revolution on January 25, 2011, during which Egyptian citizens, both Muslims and Copts, united against the regime. Bishara notes that "we reached a conclusion that there is a Coptic dossier in Egypt, and that it is real and not the product of a foreign conspiracy or Islamic instigation, nor is it purely a product of isolationism followed by the Church. Treating this dossier is a condition to face all the other factors that exploit and thus intensify it. This also means that any future democratic regime in Egypt cannot simply emphasize the ‘sectarian twinning’, and will have to address the real issues" (pp. 8-9). Thus, the author provides glimpses of the keys to a solution from the outset of his study, a study in which subtle attention is paid to both historical and political concerns. On what does he focus specifically? Several key points are emphasized:

1. The elements of conflict and strife that have arisen are basically civil in nature; individual disputes have quickly developed into collective conflict, as evidenced by recent events. The author warns that “the sectarian strife is the shortest way to abort the Revolution of January 25th” (p. 10). This point was exploited by the anti-revolution forces and leaders of the former State Security apparatus (p. 11).
2. Rights for Copts are national and legitimate, justifying the demand that Copts become "first class citizens" (p. 12). This is a legitimate right after three political eras during which the Coptic community suffered from marginalization and exclusion.
3. Coptic satellite channels and other media outlets have been instrumental in inciting Christian anger (p. 13), a role they had not assumed in previous years. Media sources have actively urged thousands of Copts to participate in recent demonstrations and protests.
4. There has been a crystallization in the structure of the revolutionary youth movement, a central feature in the Egyptian community. The youth sector has rejected sectarian strife and violence, and become a force to be reckoned with in the Revolution (p. 14).

Citizenship: A collective entitlement

In the introduction, the study outlines certain significant points of information, contextualizing them with explanation of related historical insights. For example, the term “Coptic” is discussed, as is the authenticity of Coptic community; given that they are indigenous Egyptians, their classification as a minority becomes problematic. Similarly problematic is their designation as "Copts" rather than simply "Egyptians", as they cannot accept the monopoly of citizenship by others. They should be able to enjoy all national rights from the state and within the community, as they have historically maintained the identity of Egypt and of their own Coptic Orthodox Church, based in Alexandria (to which all Copts in the world symbolically belong).

Here a question arises: why do Copts in Egypt feel a sense of nostalgia toward the history of the Alawite Dynasty, which ruled Egypt for approximately 150 years? Bishara addresses this question in his study, stressing that, under the Alawites, the conditions of the Copts were balanced in the state and the community. Coptic citizens and other Egyptians were treated equally and had the same rights and duties (p. 21). They were allowed to assume natural roles in society, held appropriate positions and often pursued advanced academic degrees. They were exempted from paying a tribute, allowed to be engaged in military service, and no longer regarded as non-Muslims living in a Muslim land. Copts regularly fulfilled official duties in the judiciary and military (p. 22) and were free to explore and develop their religious beliefs through education. Two Copts became prime ministers, and several others held various ministerial positions. Members of the Coptic elite enjoyed great freedom in economic and educational endeavors. Copts could be found at all levels of the diverse Egyptian social structure, from the

rising bourgeoisie, to the feudal professionals, to the lower classes who suffered marginalization alongside the less affluent members of the Muslim community (p. 23).

The year 1952 has served as a watershed between two eras in the Coptic collective memory - a sharp dividing line between the status they had previously enjoyed, and what they would face during the eras of three presidents in the latter half of the twentieth century: Abdel Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. The historic foundations of peaceful coexistence that had been in place since the beginning of the nineteenth century began to crumble, and with them the collective rights of the Coptic community. Copts were now faced with myriad contradictions, their hopes were crushed, and the economic pursuits of the Coptic elite lost momentum very quickly. They faced two significant dynamics: Abdel Nasser's revolution after the year 1956 and the intense Arab nationalism of the era, followed by the tyranny of the tide of Islamism beginning in 1979. Dogged by a sense of exclusion and the absence of democracy, Copts retreated from political life in the wake of the Free Officers' Revolution in 1952, Nasser's elimination of political parties and the political marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian society encountered a series of turning points: for example, making the subject of religion a norm in public schools, the establishment of the University of al-Azhar (which quickly became a tool for manipulation by the government), and the establishment of the House of Qur'an. These among other policies endured essentially unchanged throughout the subsequent regimes of Sadat and Mubarak (p. 27).

After 1980, the gap between the Copts and the state increased, thanks to extremist religious discourse and the insertion of religious principles into the Constitution. Among other reasons for the widening of this gap was the state's increasing reliance on Islamic law as a source of legislation, as well as the tightening of government regulations related to building and even restoring churches. Copts were also routinely excluded from holding public office. Perhaps, however, some in the Coptic community enjoyed slightly more breathing space during the Mubarak era, (as compared to the time of Sadat) with the minor thaw that accompanied Mubarak's regime yet stopped short of repealing any of the practices that had been implemented under Sadat. At the time of the recent toppling of Mubarak's regime, there were two Copts serving as government ministers in Egypt. The author invites the reader to compare the number of Coptic representatives in the Egyptian parliament before and after the 1952 Revolution with a series of tables that speak eloquently of the dramatic shift that took place at this time (pp. 31-32).

Integration and disunity

One of the fundamental elements analyzed in Bishara's study is the economic situation of Egyptian Copts. The role of the members of this community in the country's economy has not historically been limited to a particular profession or a specific class, elite or otherwise. The social patterns of Egyptian Copts do not, in fact, differ in any notable way from those of Arab

Christians in either the Levant or Iraq. Copts occupy positions across all social classes: from land and property owners and influential politicians, to middle-class employees, businessmen, professors, top officials, businessmen, traders and contractors, farmers, craftsmen, and artists; indeed, even in marginalized groups (p. 32). The author concludes from this that: “in this respect, there is no substantial difference in the class distribution of Copts and the rest of Egyptians. Copts are integrated into social classes and groups all over Egypt” (p. 33). Copts are the owners of a quarter of the total national wealth, with their valuable investments in transportation, industry, banks and agriculture. Three Egyptian Copts were included in a list of the world's richest tycoons. Despite all this prosperity, they feel a sense of frustration and loss of dignity as a result of the suffering that they have undergone in recent years. They are disappointed and torn between their Egyptian identity on one hand, and their yearning to be recognized as citizens on the other.

In Bishara’s words, "in this context, another fact becomes evident that some important positions in the state, are still closed for Coptic Egyptians, and the percentage of representation in the fields of judiciary, media, diplomatic missions, the army and police do not exceed 2%" (p. 34).

There are a variety of factors provoking complaints of injustice and inequality from the Coptic community, primarily in the perception of a bias in school curricula that tend to ignore their historical significance and religious beliefs. Sectarianism is thus exacerbated, with the Egyptian lifestyle being fundamentally defined by its Islamic nature. Copts face discrimination in the military service. The idea of changing the national salute to an Islamic oath has been proposed. The government puts restrictions on building and maintenance of churches, and Copts are increasingly becoming victims of displacement. Added to all this, Copts endure many of the same difficulties experienced by Muslims. There have been killings as well as bombings of churches, and the repercussions have reverberated throughout the fabric of Egyptian society. These and other factors have led to the formation of associations and lobbies abroad to promote the rights of Copts and the restoration of their status of equality with other citizens (pp. 42 - 43).

Vision for the future

In his approach to the historic transformation in Egypt after the last revolution, the author points out that, with the demise of the former regime, the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups have been offered a momentous opportunity to review and clarify their principles concerning civil matters. Will a new era begin in Egypt, where everyone is equal? Can corruption be eliminated along with sectarian strife? Will there be an end to conflicts and internal divisions in the structure of Egyptian community? Will Egypt’s new paradigm be one of division or separation?

Bishara's study identifies the nature of reforms necessary in order to dismantle the tension associated with the Coptic issue in Egypt following the revolution, which include ensuring the legal status of Copts and maintaining a concept of identity based on nationality rather than religion (p. 49). Also necessary are developments in legislation relating to personal affairs and inheritance, which should specifically address the issue of Coptic personal status. Bombings that target churches should be dealt with immediately and conclusively, and a correct sense of citizenship should be restored, one that emphasizes the universal Egyptian identity. Inflammatory media coverage and political campaigns that incite division between Copts and Muslims should be discouraged, and the growing climate of hostility on the Internet curbed. The flood of advisory opinions (*fatwas*) issued by the Salamis groups against Copts in Egypt should be stopped; these are the most dangerous of weapons that the community wields against itself, yet on this point the state has remained obstinately silent (pp. 50-70).

Conclusion

The study concludes with the author stressing that the situation of Copts in Egypt needs to be addressed both urgently and sincerely. Though the former regime ignored this, any new regime will be obliged to recognize it as a serious issue related to the identity of the state. It is not enough to express tolerance in dealing with Copts; discrimination must be abolished and full rights granted to members of the Coptic community as indigenous citizens who are closely connected with the Egyptian culture, history, and geography. "Hence, the key to dealing with this issue is equal citizenship. Democracy is the appropriate framework for such an approach" (p. 70).

The author extends his hand in brotherhood to citizens of Egypt, exhorting them to establish a civil structure that will save their nation from falling prey once again to the maladies that afflicted it during the Republican eras of the past decades. Egypt is in urgent need of civil legislation that takes into account the interests of all members of the society. The Egyptians should take heed from the Iraqi experience, one of great suffering through the harsh division of the community and its fragmentation into mutually hostile sects. The future of Egypt is potentially worrying, inspiring prayers that it may find the right path in the thirty years to come. Dr. Azmi Bishara's message should serve as a milestone on the road to constructing the future of Egypt, addressing as it does the most dangerous political and social phenomenon currently facing us. His humanitarian and cultural message should also provide a significant landmark in the path toward progress and development for our future generations.