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**Research Paper**

## **The Copts of Egypt: State Discrimination and Exclusion**

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***Series (Research Paper)***

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## Introduction

The relationship between a state and any given religious group represents one of the more difficult aspects of the relationship between a government and religion: whenever a country adopts a religion, it will inevitably be put on a collision course with any citizens who do not belong to the adopted religion. The situation becomes more complicated still when the adopted religion takes up a prominent place in society.

With regard to the Copts in Egypt, we need to retrieve an old truism: the Coptic identity is not an exclusively religious identity. Even the word “Copt” refers to all Egyptians, being a corruption of the Ancient Greek *Aigyptus*, from which the modern name “Egypt” comes. The Ancient Greek word, in turn, comes from the Ancient Egyptian *Hakaptah* or “House of Petah”, Petah being the Ancient Egyptian god of creation<sup>1</sup>. [With the elimination of the first two letters, the word became \*Gypt\*](#). Since the hard g does not exist in the Arabic language, the word became *Copt*.<sup>2</sup> More to the point, the Coptic identity even pre-dates Christianity, and the word itself was used to define all those who lived on the land of Egypt. Following the Arab conquests of Egypt in the seventh century CE, a new nomenclature was established: native Egyptians who embraced Islam were no longer known as Copts, but as Muslims, while those who stuck to the indigenous faith continued to be known as “Copts”<sup>3</sup>.

All notwithstanding, Coptic Orthodoxy remains the most important Christian faith in Egypt, having a patriarchal line stretching back to St Mark, and more possessions, followers and institutions than any other Christian group in the country.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, this paper shall use the phrase “Copt” and “Coptic” to describe those Egyptians who are members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, a group which comprises 95% of Egypt’s Christians.<sup>5</sup> The Coptic Orthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Abdulmasih, Yusri, *The Coptic Language of the Epistle of the Miraculous Saint Mina Alexandria*, (Arabic), The Society of the Miraculous Saint Mina, 1970, p. 13

<sup>2</sup> Al Maqrizi, Taqiuddin Abu al Abbas Ahmad Ben Ali, *Sermons and Lessons* (The Maqrizi Manuscript, Part 1), (Arabic), Beirut: Sader Press, p 18-19

<sup>3</sup> Atallah, Zubaida Mohammed, *A Copt in the Christian Age*, The Higher Council for Culture, (Arabic), Cairo, 2004, p. 15

<sup>4</sup> There is no definite figure on the number of Copts in Egypt, but the results of decennial censuses in the country (1897-1947 and then again 1966-1996) seem to show a steady proportion of between 6% and 8% of Egyptians being Coptic.

<sup>5</sup> Ajaiby, George, *Preliminary Sketches on the Church and Human Rights in Egypt*, *Arabic Riwaq*, (Arabic), Volume 5, p. 113-120, April, 1997

institutions are also the oldest surviving institutions in the entire country, having been founded around the time of the arrival of Christianity on the Nile .

Before going on to examine the relationship between the Egyptian state and the Copts as a religious group, we need to first distinguish the phrase “the Copts” in its religious sense, embodied by the membership of the Coptic Orthodox Church, from the idea of the Copts as a sociological grouping who have an unhindered relationship with the state. One important consequence of this type of thinking is acceptance of the idea that the political positions of the Coptic Church do not necessarily reflect those of individual Copts. Given the diversity of Copts’ societal and political backgrounds, it is impossible to view the Copts as a unitary, homogeneous group. Instead, there is a wide range of issues related to an individual’s social status, educational attainment and personal awareness which lead to an identification with the Coptic identity.<sup>7</sup> We cannot overlook, however, how the political and societal turmoil of recent decades has led to a situation in which many individual Copts channel their interactions with the state and the public sphere at large through the Church leadership.

In the same spirit, we can distinguish two distinct blocs which come under the Coptic umbrella. The first represents both the “official” camp, including the organs of the Church, and the “traditional” religious elements; both of these look to the Coptic patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, for leadership. There is, separate from this wide group, a “secular” or “temporal” (some would say “rational”, in Arabic *aqlani*) faction of Copts who are represented by various protest groups or individual intellectuals and political figures.<sup>8</sup> Our attention is thus turned to the question of the factors which gave birth to a common Coptic identity in opposition to the state. Have the Copts been compelled to adopt this common identification to resist the state’s policies towards them as a group? Is it really true that the state has, since 2000, pushed the Copts away as a group, thus driving them towards a more insular self-identification? Did this increasingly insular attitude supposing it exists – have an impact on the otherwise calm and cordial relationship between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state? Or was the change in this relationship merely a reflection of a normal fluctuation, in response to extraneous factors? Is it also true that the Copts see in Pope Shenouda III a political figure who can present all of the grievances of Coptic Egyptians to the authorities? What contributes to the overall context of the discourse whereby the Copts adopt

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<sup>7</sup> Najjar, Said, The Concept of Citizenship in the Modern State, *Letters of the New Calling*, (Arabic), Volume 64, May 2003

<sup>8</sup> Labib, Hani, The Mapping of Political and Intellectual Trends Amongst Egyptian Copts unpublished, (Arabic), September, 2006

a Coptic identity?<sup>9</sup> This paper will attempt to respond to these questions in line with the methodological approach presented below.

## Methodology

This study shall make use of previous works which seek to understand the relationship between states and societies in a dualistic way, from both theoretical and practical aspects, dealing with overlapping identities in addition to the diversity of societal blocs and their interconnections. This study's approach is in line with the descriptions of Joel Migdal, who describes a direct relationship between the strength of societies and the strength of states<sup>10</sup>. Migdal defines a strong state as one which has the ability to intervene in and control societal relationships, in a bid to promote the overall good. Strong societies, on the other hand, are those in which there is a prominent role for civil society groups which enjoy "lateral" relationships with each other, such as political parties and advocacy groups capable of representing sections of public opinion and becoming involved in governmental decision-making. Weak states, on the other hand, will fail to achieve the aims and aspirations of the societies which they govern because they will be put into a conflict with the civil society groups which represent public opinion. This kind of situation will lead to heightened distrust between the two sides, and allow for the festering of sundry types of corruption. The net result of all of this is that it will produce feelings of distrust between the state authorities and the social sector, ultimately leading to economic and social stagnation.

Of course, there can never be one indicator which encapsulates all of the dynamics of state-society interaction, but we could try to summarize a few general rules. For example, in modern states, one finds that there is a more open and cooperative relationship as the state is led, as a rule, by the needs of civil society. In traditional or authoritarian states, meanwhile, these normal relations are disturbed due to the nature of the state and how its tyranny impedes societal development. The first case produces a harmonious relationship between the two sides, and allows for the peaceful resolution of internal contradictions, while the second case serves only to deepen the chasm which exists between state and society; an authoritarian state on the one hand,

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<sup>9</sup> Abdulfattah, Nabil, Islam and Religious Minorities in Egypt: Trends and Difficulties Faced, *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi [Arab Future]* (Arabic), Volume 30, 1981, pp. 92-113

<sup>10</sup> Joel Migdal, "Developing a State-in-Society Perspective", Introduction in "State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World", Part I: Theoretical And Methodological Considerations, Cambridge University Press, 1994

and a tribal, sectarian society on the other. This in turn feeds feelings of social deprivation, and the internal contradictions within any society which would normally be worked out peacefully come to be expressed violently, sometimes in situations similar to a civil war. The state itself then begins to resemble a sect or a tribe of its own, and people will retreat into their own well-guarded, and historically deep-rooted groupings.<sup>11</sup>

In his book, *State Power and Social Forces*, Migdal represents the situation thus: that a state is inherently a part of its own society, and that any state, regardless of the form of government it uses, cannot be studied in isolation from the society which gave birth to it.<sup>12</sup> He bases this thesis on the following criteria:

- 1) As Migdal makes clear, each state has its own characteristic ways of building ties with the society of which it is a part. In Migdal's opinion, the idea of a state which exists in isolation from and independent of the society of which it is a part is a falsehood, there being limits to each state's power.
- 2) When trying to understand the power of a state, it is important not to ignore all of the social forces which operate within it; in other words, we need to consider not only state apparatuses, but also civil society institutions, whether they are focused on issues on the periphery of the state or on national-level matters.
- 3) The inter-play between the state ruling over a country and the social forces within that country is not necessarily a zero-sum game: both sides could benefit from certain agreements. In certain other cases, a situation might arise where the state allies itself with one group of social forces against others.

Throughout this paper, we will use the terms "societal blocs" and "societies" to describe not only political parties and those entities traditionally described as civil society organizations, but also religious sects and tribes/clans.<sup>13</sup> The term "state" is further used to describe the body of ultimate

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<sup>11</sup> Ghalyoun, Burhan, *The State and World Order in The Controversy Surrounding State and Society in Morocco*, East Africa Publishing, (Arabic), Casablanca, 1992, p. 49

<sup>12</sup> Joel S. Migdal (Editor), *State Power and Social Forces :Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, Introduction, 1994, pp. 1-4

<sup>13</sup> Societal blocs is used to indicate those special relationships between citizens which allow them a measure of internal cohesion and solidarity, and which prepare them to behave as a single unit in pursuit of common goals. These societal blocs take the form of class-, sectarian- or clan-based formations. The study uses religion-based societal blocs as a way of understanding the role of an individual in society, one of the most important features of which is dynamism. These blocs are influenced by both domestic and foreign factors, as well as relations between the blocs and the state at large. In addition to these blocs, there are a number of civic organizations which are independent of the state and which are formed willingly by free individuals. These latter groups include trade unions

sovereignty within the borders of a country and includes those official bodies which it uses to exercise that power, to legislate power and to arbitrate legally – e.g., the judicial system – in so far as all these can be described as distinct from societal groupings. We will need to look at the inter-play between the state and non-state players before we can define the concepts of “exclusion” and “ostracism”, and understand the power of the state to resolve disputes in society.

The state serves as the symbolic manifestation of authority; it enjoys a monopoly of violence against those who threaten the peace of the state or its society; it also forms the institutions which govern people’s lives. In this sense, it is the political sphere in which people have their dealings with each other as citizens. Society, on the other hand, is what we use to describe the set of relationships which keep individuals connected to others. These can be in a hereditary form, such as tribes or clans, or can take the shape of organizations with voluntary memberships, such as civil society groups. It is the agreed space where people conduct cultural and economic affairs. This definition highlights the close association between the concepts of state and society: it is the state which seeks to satisfy the needs and wants of the people. The above decisions have led to numerous interpretations with regards to the definition of sovereignty, and its role in society.

There is now a growing awareness that such a role needs to be limited: the state cannot surpass certain boundaries, which are set at both the global and local levels. No matter how ruthless a state might appear, it simply cannot escape certain realities of the society in which it is. All of this having been said, it remains difficult to find a single measure to gauge the effectiveness of a state and its ability to manage societal relationships; this is because the very definition changes with the historical changes that modify a given culture. It is also the case that the frame of this state-society relationship is affected whenever the state grows into a society, and takes up more and more of the roles of a society, changes which soon evolve to become part of a new social contract.<sup>14</sup>

Another theme related to the question of these state-society relations is the connection which exists between a religion – as a defining factor of a person’s identity – and the state. The increasing reach of secularism and the defilement of previously sacred people and institutions are the triumph of reason and logic over emotional reactions, which include religious preconceptions. One general rule which emerges when examining all the varieties of societies in

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and professional syndicates, as well as political parties and political clubs, and other non-governmental organizations which are concerned with, for example, human rights. This study will not concern itself with these groups, however.

<sup>14</sup> Maliki, Mohammed, *Citizenship: Between the State and Society Democracy*, Edition 24, October, 2006, pp. 51-58



which these interactions operate is that there is a positive correlation between democracy and “separation of church and state”.<sup>15</sup>

## Exclusion and the State in Egypt

There are a number of different scholarly definitions for the concept of “exclusion”, but what they all have in common is a basic understanding that exclusion implies the disenfranchisement of a citizen – or a group of citizens – to the point where they no longer count as an integral element of country’s political, economic or social fabric. Exclusion is also made possible by discrepancies in access to power, both within and without the society: it shows the failure of certain societal networks to play a constructive role in mediating the relationship between people and the state. By allowing exclusion to grow in a given society, one is led to greater social inequality, and the society as a whole becomes isolated and is weakened<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of Egypt, there are many domestic and foreign factors which have deepened the exclusion of some citizens, and driven them out of the country’s economic and political systems. These domestic and foreign factors are expressed through numerous aspects when it comes to the Copts: there is the sectarian aspect, which covers Coptic-Muslim relations; the economic aspect, which, in Egypt, is a struggle between the many have-nots and the few who control all the wealth; there is further a political aspect, which might spill over into a struggle for power between the leadership of the Coptic minority and the rest of society; and finally, there is the social aspect, which foreign forces sometimes exploit as an excuse to intervene in Egypt’s internal affairs, in a situation which brings to mind the phrase “politicization of religion”.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there have been growing demands for Arab countries in general to democratize. These pressures have gone alongside growing internal demands from within the Arab countries themselves, and pressure from a newly emerging global civil society: there was a convergence between domestic Arab political pressure and demands from abroad demanding that Arab countries democratize.<sup>17</sup> Further to this, the effect of globalization has been to bring about a period of introspection.<sup>18</sup> This has all been a result of the state’s abrogation of any responsibilities it had towards social development or health or housing, in accordance with

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<sup>15</sup> Obeid, Hassan Ismail, *The Sociology of Religion: A Theoretical Introduction to Dialogue Middle Eastern Affairs*, Volume 35, 1994, pp. 9-18

and Jeff Hayes’, *Definition of religion in its relation to politics, Religion in the Third World*, Open University press, 1993, pp. 6-8

<sup>16</sup> A. E. Komter, “Reciprocity as a principle of exclusion :Gift giving in the Netherlands”, *Sociology*, vol. 30, p.299-316

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Haynes, *Religion, Globalization and Political Culture in the Third World*, (St. Martin Press, 1999), p.3

<sup>18</sup> Horsman, Mathew and Andrew, Marshal, *After the Nation- state*, Harper Collins, London, 1995, p. ix

the instructions of multilateral financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which have forced developing nations into a false sense of economic liberalism.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of globalization's having led to exclusion (of the Copts) is the way in which people around the world are now focused so heavily on wealth: this led not only to a growing divide in the wealth of different nations, but also to increasing gaps in wealth within individual countries, and within particular classes. Globalization has thus become the ideology of exclusion and ostracism, by its dismissal of the state's role in favor of increasingly smaller circles of influence. This, in turn, fed consciousness of and affinity for pre-state identities<sup>19</sup>, as well as, in the case of Egypt, religious-confessional identities.<sup>20</sup>

With an increase in the levels of poverty, this ideology of exclusion and ostracism has also bred resentment among the excluded, who are thus more likely to be involved in violent protests. The disenchanted excluded people formed the pool from which violent political factions recruited in many instances; with the state's role having been diminished, there was less chance of anybody challenging these factions. There have been many instances where such groups have taken to communal protests to express their displeasure, as groups, with government policies.<sup>21</sup> This disenfranchisement of a mass of people from the public space drove groups of youth into fanatical and extremist groups and fanned the flames of political discord. This in turn bred political repression, and increased tensions between the state and society.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, 1998 was a turning point the world over for situations in which religion and religious identities became a driving force for social movements. It was during the same year, that the United States passed legislation which mandated the American government to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities worldwide, at a time when a growing number of Third World countries were turning to greater repression to silence ethnic-based dissent. This dissent, in turn, was born of those countries' failure to produce appropriate levels of economic and human development. In this way, ethnic and religious minorities have become a focal point for globalizing forces, which otherwise only serve the interests of the powerful and the strong: they became pressure points which can be used against the governments of the countries in which they live.<sup>23</sup>

This is the setting in which "protection of religious liberties" became the guise which would allow Western countries to intervene in various countries.<sup>24</sup> Since Egypt is home to the largest Christian community in the Middle East, the United States was able to undertake a number of

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<sup>19</sup> Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Foreign Affairs, Volume 72, No.3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49

<sup>20</sup> Rudolph and Piscatori (editors) , *Transnational Religions and Fading States*, (Boulder and London, Westview Press, 1997, p. 14. The book gives examples of the rise of religion in Europe (Bosnia -Herzegovina) ,Russia (the Orthodox Church) and the USA (American Christian Fundamentalists)

<sup>21</sup> Al Hadeeni, Amani Masoud, *Politics and the Marginalized in Egypt*, Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies, (Arabic), Cairo, 1999, Introduction

<sup>22</sup> Yasin, Asayed, *The Society of the Third Millennium: Its Values, Internal Contradictions and Options for Change in Egypt in the Twenty-First Century: Hopes and Challenges*, (Arabic), Ahram Translation and Publishing Center, Cairo, 1996, p. 108

<sup>23</sup> Labib, Hani, *Citizenship and Globalization*, Ash Shrouq Printing Press, (Arabic), Cairo, 2004, p. 43

<sup>24</sup> Labib, Hani, *The Crisis of Religious Protection: The State and Religion in Egypt*, Ash Shrouq Printing Press, (Arabic), Cairo, 2000, p. 65

measures to interfere in that country, on the grounds of protecting religious minorities. The new-found American willingness to interfere became very clear, and it contained two key points:<sup>25</sup> the protection of Christians the world over from persecution, and the promotion of religious ideas which enflamed religious identity at the expense of national cohesion, thus giving any civil insurrection demanding civil rights a religious/confessional element.

Then came another crucial turning point. After the September 11 incident in 2001, the United States looked on the world's complex problems through the prism of constructive chaos.<sup>26</sup> It was then-President George W. Bush who said that "those who are not with us are against us", ringing in a new era in which culture would play a role in forming foreign policy. The fight against the spread of weapons of mass destruction, which would go hand-in-hand with the fight to spread freedom and individual liberties, particularly in Arab and Islamic countries, would form another, related plank in this overall new policy. It was easy enough for the US to make use of "Islamophobic" sentiments in its own country as a soft-power tool to win more concessions from Arab and Islamic countries.<sup>27</sup> Since that time, the world has witnessed the use of cultural-religious phrases instead of political ones to describe events in international relations, phrases such as "Crusade".<sup>28</sup> This new method made it easier to engender religious-based hatred, particularly between Christians and Muslims throughout the world, and that, in turn, had its impacts on Christian-Muslim coexistence in Egypt. Yet regional politics also played a role which cannot be overlooked.

The region as a whole has yet to be totally free of the vestiges of imperialism; it is also a region where, in the absence of any clear guidelines for the separation of religion and politics, there is a figurative and literal bolstering of sectarian violence. This broader regional atmosphere also serves to bring about sectarian tensions for the purpose of gaining political support;<sup>29</sup> it is an environment ripe for the application of double standards, which are then used to turn people away from their collective identity as citizens,<sup>30</sup> and turn them into purely sectarian individuals.<sup>31</sup>

Together with all of this came the economic disturbances as the Egyptian state began working, in the 1990s, to implement "structural adjustment" reforms. These were not to serve Egyptian interests but purely as a response to pressures from the IMF and the World Bank; they were

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<sup>25</sup> Shea, Nina, *In the Lion's Den*, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997, p. 17

<sup>26</sup> The US State Department works to spread chaos in Arab and Islamic countries in a bid to instill fanaticism and spread dissent against authoritarian regimes

<sup>27</sup> Bryan Turner, "Islam, Religious Revival and the Sovereign State", *Muslim World*, July 2007, Vol. 97, Issue 3

<sup>28</sup> Van Derzford, Everet, "Does Democracy Work for the Whole World? *Democracy*, No. 35, July 2009, p. 13

<sup>29</sup> Jad, Imad, The Regional Situation and its Impact on Sectarian Violence in Egypt, *Al Ghad*, (Arabic) No. 159, May, 2008, p. 23

<sup>30</sup> Ghalyun, Burhan, *The Political Foundations of the Arabs*, The Center for Arab Unity Studies, (Arabic), Beirut, 1994, p. 24

<sup>31</sup> Watfa, Ali Asaad, Problems of Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Arab Societies *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi [Arab Future]*, (Arabic), No 282, August, 2002, p. 212

undertaken on the grounds that such measures would produce greater confidence in the Egyptian economy, and would also bring about greater freedom of expression, and participation in the decision-making process. While these policies did have some partial benefits – such as growth as measured by various economic indicators – they also had a negative overall impact on long-term economic, social and political development. So while Gross Domestic Product has increased since structural adjustment came into play, there has also been an increase in real unemployment, particularly among the youth, not to mention a widening gap between rich and poor which resulted from a rapid increase in inflation, which made it difficult for large numbers of people to afford necessities and drove even those who were employed into poverty.<sup>32</sup> As excise duties went up, government expenditure on the public good went down, and the government also abandoned its commitments to improve rates of employment, a measure which disproportionately affected the poor, exacerbating even further the problems associated with poverty.<sup>33</sup>

Recent estimates have suggested that 14 million Egyptians live below the poverty line,<sup>34</sup> with 4 million of those not being able to afford to feed themselves.<sup>35</sup> Of course, these elements cannot be examined in isolation. When aspects related to social and political development were affected, these impacted on the ability of the country to experience true economic growth; issues such as administrative decay, religious extremism and political ossification are all inter-related, and what affects one will affect all of the others. On the societal level, there is a power imbalance which presents true socio-political development in Egypt.<sup>36</sup> The state authorities behaved as if they were the masters of society, without any regard for the fact that the state itself was merely an organ and extension of the society, from which it begs its legitimacy.<sup>37</sup> When we look at the relationship between state and society in Egypt, we find that the state itself is not yet fully formed; on the other hand, there is not enough of a democratic political culture within the society to allow for civic forces to become full, dynamic participants in the drafting of the social contract.<sup>38</sup> It can be said, in fact, that the Egyptian people are moving into an era characterized as a “pre-state period”.<sup>39</sup>

A number of societal forces went to work to try to entrench their own roles and protect their interests, especially as the state had abrogated many of its erstwhile responsibilities in the social and economic spheres, leaving gaps which civic institutions could fill. In addition to the

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<sup>32</sup> Ali Abdallah and Michael Brown, “The Economy”, in Lillian Craig (ed), *Egypt: Internal Challenges and Regional Stability*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 31-49

<sup>33</sup> Ilya Harik, *Economic Policy Reform In Egypt*, (Gainesville :Florida University Press, 1997), p. 39

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Human Development Report, 2007

<sup>35</sup> Map of Poverty in Egypt, *Al Ahrām Economic Magazine*, Electronic website:  
[www.ahram.org.eg/IK/ahram/2008/4/7/Inve2.HTM](http://www.ahram.org.eg/IK/ahram/2008/4/7/Inve2.HTM)

<sup>36</sup> Zahran, Farid, *New Social Movements*, Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies, (Arabic), 2007

<sup>37</sup> Said, Mohammed Al Sayed, “Constitutional Amendments: The General Spirit and Pattern of Governance” in *A Homeland Without Citizens*, Cairo Center for the Study of Human Rights, (Arabic), Cairo, 2007, p. 36

<sup>38</sup> Robert Springborg, “State- Society Relations in Egypt: The debate over owner-tenant relations”, *Middle East Journal*, Spring 1991, Vol. 45, Issue 2, p. 232

<sup>39</sup> Laila, Ali, *Citizenship in the National and Global Context*, *Democracy*, (Arabic), No. 32, January, 2009, pp. 37-47

traditional civic powers, policies of privatization gave birth to new economic classes which demanded political roles.<sup>40</sup> The state powers as a whole though went to work ensuring that they would maintain, in the midst of all of these changes, supreme authority over all happenings in the country, through political, security and legal means. There was a prevailing mood of tension in the authorities' relationship with opposition parties, trade unions and student movements, which were galvanized by social and political disenchantment and anger. Thus, as a result of the crumbling of state power, people retreated to forms of identity which were narrower than the nation-state notion of citizenship. Media campaigns blowing through the country like a gusting wind seemed to carry with them values which were diametrically opposed to those of the wider Egyptian community, making the situation for smaller groups seem particularly worrying, driving them further and further into their own niches and away from the broader society<sup>41</sup>, leading to pronounced feelings of alienation, isolation and frustration.<sup>42</sup> Santos described the situation as "Social Fascism", a state of affairs in which a regime governs through a disparity of power, which feeds a sense of disenfranchisement among individuals within a society.<sup>43</sup> Yet it should be noted that the previous Egyptian regime had a hybrid political system,<sup>44</sup> in the sense that the presence of institutions like a parliament, a presidency and a relatively free press gave at least the impression of democracy.<sup>45</sup> Digging deeper, though, one finds that the Parliament had no real role, either in public life or in terms of challenging the authority of the executive. The political parties also existed in a weak, fragile culture, while trade unions suffered from internal disarray, and the media was stuck in a non-transparent morass. To top it all off, the political elites were simply not concerned with the priorities of the masses, and a peaceful transition simply became impossible.<sup>46</sup>

The state monopolized the decision-making process, at both the policy and technical levels, leading to all-out confusion. Some policymakers would suggest and begin implementing nationwide mega-projects which they were not capable of handling, and some of these would be abandoned, leaving open to public debate and scrutiny plans which the government had previously carried out. In other instances, the state would involve the public in intricately technical discussions about subjects which they were not capable of grasping. The lack of a clear, critical approach to establishing exactly what the public good actually was led to heightened levels of public suspicion towards anything which the state authorities carried out. In this way, we can understand the lack of a democratic public culture as the political reality on the ground is

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<sup>40</sup> Egyptian Human Development Report for 2008, the Cairo office of the United Nations Development Program and the Planning Institute, (Arabic) Cairo, 2008, p. 25

<sup>41</sup> Ibrahim, Hassanain Tawfik, Globalization: Political Aspects and Repercussions, *Majallat 'Alam Alfikr, [Journal of the World of Thought]*, (Arabic), October-December 1999, p. 214

<sup>42</sup> Hamza, Barakat, Alienation, *The National Journal of Social Sciences*, National Center for the Social and Criminal Studies, (Arabic), Cairo, September-January, 1992, pp. 151-161

<sup>43</sup> Boaventura De Sousa Santos,(ed), *Voices of the World: Reinventing Social Emancipation*, Verso Books, 2002, p.456

<sup>44</sup> Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, no.2, April 2002, pp.28-37

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion", *Foreign Affairs*, March-April, 2006

<sup>46</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democracy challenges: the rise of semi- authoritarianism*, (Washington DC: Carnegie endowment for international peace, 2003), p.3

divorced from the idealized scenario presented in the texts.<sup>47</sup>

This sense of injustice and lack of equal opportunities fed feelings of discrimination along sectarian lines as well as others, such as gender, regional, agrarian or status. There was indeed a real set of forces which drove a wedge between Egyptian citizens and their government, with effects on social integration and participation.

## Factors Leading to the Rise of a Coptic Identity

In order to understand the “Coptic Question” we will need to adopt a historical perspective towards the political movements of all Egyptians, both Muslim and Coptic; anything else would give only a fragmented picture. We will deal with the Copts as forming a part of the overall social fabric of Egypt: if we are to understand Coptic non-participation in the political process, we will have to examine that non-participation in its proper context, as an overall Egyptian phenomenon. A second point which needs to be made is that Coptic Egyptians are first and foremost citizens of Egypt, and are not an independent group hermetically sealed off from the rest of Egyptian society. The Copts do not form a homogeneous grouping in terms of social status or political thinking. Some are peasant farmers, while others are tradesmen, professionals, businessmen or merchants: the only common threads among all of them are that they are all Egyptians, and all of them belong to the same religion. Yet the duality of these loyalties presents its own set of internal contradictions. So we will need to come to an understanding of what the “Coptic Identity” actually is, and try to figure out more about the nature of the relationship between Coptic Egyptians and the state. Discussions of religious identity, regardless of which religion is concerned, must include issues related to religious rituals and traditions and any other aspects of a way of life which mark them as group within the wider community.<sup>48</sup> It is threats to this shared way of life which pave the way for conflict between various groups.

To re-capitulate, we can see the following reasons for a conflict based around the Coptic identity:

- 1) Egypt provides a home and economic conditions, as well as a common language and history, for all its people. There is also a common mentality, which breeds an affinity with the tribe, the clan and, finally, the Egyptian state, among all Egyptian people. The

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Fox, “From Clientalism to Citizenship”, *World Politics*, Jan. 1994, Vol 46, Issue 2, p.151

<sup>48</sup> Sebastian Murken and Sussan Namini, “Choosing a Religion as an aspect of Religious Identity Formation in Modern Societies”, in Pye, Michael, Wasim, Alef Theria and Ma’sud Abdurrahman (Editors), *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice and Education*, Walter de Gruyter, 2006, pp289-30

plurality among the different groups of Egyptians present today began in 640 CE, when Amro Ben Al As came across Pope Benjamin, the 38<sup>th</sup> patriarch of the Coptic Church, who at the time represented one of the backbones of the newly conquered Egypt.<sup>49</sup> In order for such a pluralistic system to work, there would need to be a common understanding that exclusion of one group by any others was unacceptable: all persons, as both individuals or groups, would have to have the right to participate in the formation of the society, one which balanced the issues of respect for religious beliefs and the overall joint interest of all, provided, of course, that the common good did not lead to the subjugation of any one group.<sup>50</sup> We could also take it as a given that people will always seek to find ways of accentuating their own cultural identities which set them apart from other groupings. This type of differentiation will produce dynamic changes in response to changes in the social environment.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, excessive emphasis on these distinguishing characteristics of a minority will lead them to feel that they differ from any other groups in terms of values and the general principles to which they adhere.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, this distinctiveness becomes a justification for secession, and a tool for the creation of greater internal social dissent. This is especially true when social fault lines are due mainly to religious differences, and it becomes possible for a fully formed society to form completely within another; being so closely linked to the other group allows for a more pronounced feeling of separateness to take hold of any group looking for a separate identity.<sup>53</sup> With this attitude of Coptic self-identification firmly entrenched, ever-growing insularity is only bolstered, together with ideas of communal chauvinism, and is enflamed even further with ever-increasing levels of rhetoric and exclusivist political thinking. In Egypt, religious-social conflicts seem to show a strong connection to the political realm; it is as if one aspect of Egyptian life has to take over another.<sup>54</sup>

- 2) Egypt suffers, at both the state and societal levels, a sort of infrastructural fragility which leaves the country susceptible to fragmentation into discrete, and possibly conflicting,

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<sup>49</sup> Qallada, William Sulieman, op.cit, p. 29

<sup>50</sup> Ali Dessouki, Reflections on Community Relationship between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, paper submitted in conference on : “The Muslim -Christian Dialogue”, Lebanon, 1972

<sup>51</sup> Gordon Kaufman, “The Historicity of Religions and the Importance of Religious Dialogue”, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 4 ,1984, pp.5-15. See also: Philip Cole, *Philosophies of Exclusion*, Edinburgh University Press, p.109. “The right to culture entails the right to a public sphere in which individuals live a fulfilling national life”

<sup>52</sup> M. Sherif, *The Psychology of Social Norms*, (New York: Harper and Bros, 1936), p.3. See Also: Micheal Kenny, *Politics of Identity*, (Polity Press, 2004), p. 39. See Also: Butera, Fabrizio, *Coping with minority status: responses to exclusion and inclusion*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.306

<sup>53</sup> Holmberg, Eva Johanna, *Practices of inclusion and exclusion in pre modern culture*, (Turku: University of Turku, 2005), p. 13

<sup>54</sup> Abdullah, Ahmad, *Egyptian National Identity Egyptian Affairs*, *Ahhwal Masriyyah*, [Egyptian Conditions], (Arabic), Al Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies, Volume 1, 1998

statelets. This susceptibility on the economic, political and social levels impacts the deep roots of Egyptian society, and further exacerbates the retreat into religious-based identities.<sup>55</sup> Given the privileged place which theological thinking has in these new identities, and the lack of other modernistic ways for a more comprehensive identity to take shape, there is increased likelihood of intra-communal conflict.<sup>56</sup> Of course, the geography of Egypt doesn't help, as the country sits close to the conflicts in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan. In all of these places, religion has become a factor in conflict and thus extremist attitudes have come to command a premium in the region. Unlike in textbook cases, the region in which Egypt finds itself is one where religion plays a role detrimental to social cohesion, turning social unity into a matter of national security. The spiritual awakening so often referred to is often an excuse for the persecution of others. The frequent flare-ups in Muslim-Coptic relations raise a question: is this a conflict over religion only, or will it be a conflict which will grip every aspect of Egyptian national life in the coming years?<sup>57</sup>

- 3) The state's abrogation of its previous care-taking role has led to a reliance on the part of Coptic Egyptians on their Church, which has come to represent the public sphere and the focus of many activities of the Copts.<sup>58</sup> This has gone alongside an increased public interest on the part of Muslims in the goings-on inside Coptic churches, but this interest has been marked by series of slanderous, unhelpful rumors which circulate among Egyptian Muslims. Furthermore, a number of Coptic politicians have also been excluded from political life.<sup>59</sup> It seems that the Coptic Church and loyalty to it are eternal, but the matter which remains to be resolved is: does belonging to the Church preclude a sense of national citizenship?<sup>60</sup> Published scholarly work seems to echo the sentiments of Pope

<sup>55</sup> Al Manawi, Abdullatif, *The Copts: Church or Homeland?*, Atlas Printing Press and Media Production House, Cairo, 2005, p. 261; See Also: Floya Anthias "Belongings in a globalizing and unequal World", in Yuval-Davis et al., *The situated Politics of belonging*, Sage Publications, 2006, p. 21

<sup>56</sup> Abdulfattah, Nabil, op.cit., p. 76

<sup>57</sup> Abu Taleb, Hassan, *National Unity in Egypt: Is there a Crisis?* *Journal of Egyptian Comments*, (Arabic), Volume 25, January, 2005

<sup>58</sup> Educational activities such as Sunday schools for nursery, elementary, intermediate secondary and university levels, as well as programs for graduates and special supplementary lessons; there are also cultural activities and institutions such as a sound archive and a film library, as well as normal lending libraries, language courses and computer lessons, not to mention a puppet theatre. Add to this special group trips, financial and material support for the needy, and a rest home for the aged, as well as subsidized funerary services; add to this such services as clinics and other medical services, and special athletic events such as dedicated Coptic football tournaments. All of these the Coptic Church provides for either nominal fees or for free; Coptic churches are, of course, not alone in doing this, as many mosques do the same, but perhaps in a different way.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Purcell. "A Place for the Copts: Imagined Territory and Spatial Conflict In Egypt", *Ecumene*, 1998, No. 4, pp. 432-451

<sup>60</sup> Habib, Rafik, *The Copts of Egypt: Integration versus Isolation*, Ash Shrouq Press, Cairo, 2005, p. 13



Shenouda III in April 1980, when he said: “nobody can prevent the Church from carrying out its social duties, and if the state decides to do so, it will prove itself to be a totalitarian state.”<sup>61</sup> As soon as the Church took over some of the state’s natural roles, the Church hierarchy could rightly describe itself as being the spokesmen for the Copts of Egypt. The Church and its institutions have in fact become something of a citadel for Coptic Egyptians, providing them with educational services as well as pastoral care and economic assistance.<sup>62</sup> Combined with a widespread belief that the Coptic Church represents a body above and beyond the rule of law, this means that a typical Copt views the Church as far more than merely a spiritual custodian, but also as a cornerstone of the personal identity of the Coptic identity.<sup>63</sup>

- 4) The charismatic personality of Pope Shenouda III – who was a journalist and a military officer as well as a member of the Coptic Sunday School movement and an influential cleric before becoming patriarch – has played a role in reviving Coptic culture during what has come to be known as the “Coptic Renaissance”.<sup>64</sup> This has been marked by a renewed interest in Coptic history as it relates to such things as music and culture. The Church has also been able to provide educational scholarships for clergymen and provide them and their families with social welfare benefits and insurance.<sup>65</sup>
- 5) The internet has played an undeniable role in intensifying this feeling of separateness among Coptic Egyptians. Some have also used the World Wide Web to spread religious-based extremism, intra-communal violence and hatred. Some examples of this include “Copts Without Borders”, “An Eye on Egypt”, “The Free Space Blog” and “University Student Blog”. One blog, “Andreas and Mario”, focuses on the particular problems faced by Coptic children within broader Egyptian society. Many similar blogs use “Christianity is the Solution” on their masts.<sup>66</sup> Copts living outside of Egypt have played a high-profile role in all of this, with some using both Muslim and Coptic writers to make their points.<sup>67</sup> This online activity is not limited to blogs and sites, but also includes interactive communities on platforms such as Yahoo! Groups. On the other hand, there are other

<sup>61</sup> Dina Al-Khawaga, “The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community an active Role”, in Andera Pacini, *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East*, (Oxford, 1998), p.188

<sup>62</sup> See: Cohen, Abner, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, (Uni. Of California Press, 1969)

<sup>63</sup> Oudeh, Jihad, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Coptic Brotherhood*, *Al-Khamees [Thursday Magazine]*, (Arabic), 19 June 2008, p. 4

<sup>64</sup> Gamal Nkrumah, “Coptic Conundrum”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 15-21 November 2007. and S. Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.201-221

<sup>65</sup> Dina Al-Khawaga, “The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community an active Role”, in Andera Pacini, *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East*, (Oxford, 1998), pp.172-190. See also Sohirin Mohammad Solihin, *Copts and Muslims in Egypt: A study on Harmony and Hostility*

<sup>66</sup> “Coptic Blogs Horrify the Church”, *Al-Ahram Daily*, 22 February, 2008, p. 28

<sup>67</sup> Labib, Hani, “Map of Coptic Political and Social Trends”, (Arabic), September, 2006, unpublished

blogs, such as “A Coptic Muslim”, which seek to promote the idea of harmonious coexistence between Muslims and Copts in Egypt. The phenomenon of online activists has shed light on numerous issues, both large and small, affecting Coptic religious life. It has also worked to instill ideas of sectarianism which exist outside the realm of official institutions; it has transferred the isolation of a community from the physical into the virtual realm. There is now a cyberspace which has been brought face-to-face against ideas of tolerance and coexistence.<sup>68</sup> In terms of more traditional media, there are a number of satellite television stations, such as Aghapy and the more religious CTV, which cater to a Coptic audience, who seem to tune in despite the fact that they broadcast only religious shows. These shows seem to fill a gap in the availability of Christian religious teachings to a mass audience, something which Muslim audiences in Egypt may take for granted.

- 6) The influence of Copts living abroad who fabricate half-truths about the vagaries faced by Copts living in Egypt has now extended to many shores.<sup>69</sup> They are now becoming influential in the host countries of these communities, some of which wish to make use of the communal strife in Egypt, which is due to factors discussed above, for their own ends. One notices, for example, how the US ambassador in Cairo has had to make official enquiries about the status of Coptic youth in Egypt, only to be told by the Coptic patriarch that “the Coptic youth, just like their Muslim compatriots, are looking for change”.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, a report published by the UN’s International Labor Organization in 2008 paints a picture of religious discrimination in the Egyptian workforce.<sup>71</sup> The failure to provide a national-level response has deepened the sectarian divide.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hijazi, Islam, “Virtual Culture and Changes to the Public Political Realm: Facebook in Egypt as an Example”, *Issues*, (Arabic), The International Center for Future and Strategic Studies, May, 2009

<sup>69</sup> Al Jallad, Magdy, “Are you an Egyptian or a Copt?”, *Al Masry Al Yawm*, 10 June, 2008

<sup>70</sup> *At Tariq*, 2 May 2008, p. 7

<sup>71</sup> A report on the status of labor rights in Egypt, titled “Equality in the Work Force: Tackling the Challenges”. The report alleges that the Egyptian government adopts discriminatory practices against Coptic workers; according to the report, Copts in Egypt are deprived of equal opportunities, barred from promotion and do not have equal access to educational opportunities. The report also goes on to cite the very low number of Copts in what it describes as “sensitive” positions in the Parliament, or the Egyptian state and its military and security forces.

<sup>72</sup> The then-minister of labor retorted that: “Copts represent 25% of the membership of professional syndicates, and own more than 22% of the businesses established during the Liberalization Period, from 1974 to 1995. Figures in the Egyptian press indicate that Coptic Egyptians control 20% of all contracting firms, 50% of consultancy offices, 45% of [private] medical clinics, and make up 35% of the membership of the Egyptian-American Chamber of Commerce, and 60% of the Egyptian-French Chamber of Commerce. The Copts also comprise 20% of the educational establishment, and 20% of the investors in Sadat and 10 Ramadan Cities are Coptic Egyptians. According to the data, 15% of the employees of the Ministry of Finance are Coptic.”

## The Copts and the Church

The Coptic Church is the spiritual and religious expression of the Copts of Egypt, yet the Church plays an additional role, in politics, which is based on the idea that Christianity is an all-encompassing way of life with much to say about all issues; it is a vision which is wed to the view that Christianity provides answers to all questions. Pope Shenouda III is an advocate of this world-view. In this regard, one can point to repeated interventions into politics by the Coptic Church, in opposition to the stances of organizations of the Coptic laity. One such example is the backing by Pope Shenouda III of Hosni Mubarak's presidential campaign in 2005. There have been some changes to this position, of course: for example, Pope Shenouda refused to back the then-ruling party's candidate in the Shoubra District of Greater Cairo for the parliamentary elections of 2010, opting to throw his lot in with the Wafd Party's Rami Lakah, yet Church officials were quick to depict this as a personal opinion of the patriarch.<sup>73</sup>

This expansion of the Church's public role has, counter-intuitively, gone hand-in-hand with the exclusion of Coptic individuals from broader political life, with individual Coptic Egyptians turning to the Church instead of being a part of normal political culture. The Church has also made its influence felt in the social affairs of Coptic Egyptians, becoming their deputy before the state. One interesting situation in which these issues caused a conflict was when an administrative court in Cairo ruled that a Coptic Egyptian man had the right marry a second wife, over the head of protests by the Coptic clergy, a situation which led to an internal divide within not only lay Copts but also among clergymen.<sup>74</sup>

The Coptic Church has taken it upon itself to represent the Copts of Egypt, be they secular or religious, but it has done so through a series of agreements and understandings with the state authorities, which allowed for the Church to gain concessions from the state, and gave the state unqualified legitimacy from the Copts as a group, in complete contrast to principles of a civil state. The Church opts to build ties with the state apparatus for a variety of reasons: fear of loss of power, fear of loss of popularity among the flock, and fear that many might turn to the Church for answers to their problems, but that these answers might not be forthcoming. The Church, therefore, has had to find ways to distinguish itself from the state, and yet, at the same time, has been compelled to attach itself to the state in other ways. When the sermon is for a special occasion, there is an emphasis on the need to defend the state, while a different picture is painted when there is a need to emphasize a Coptic identity.

The Copts might not form a homogeneous political bloc, but they did unite around Coptic institutions and the Church after the rioting centered on the churches in Imbaba following the fall of the Mubarak regime. The state, meanwhile, resorted to unofficial means to try to bring about a peaceable resolution to the problem, in a bid to avoid making it an institutional conflict, and tried

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<sup>73</sup> *Al Yaum Al Sabi' [Seventh Day]*, Electronic Newspaper, 29 November, 2010

<sup>74</sup> Al Attar, Mahmoud, "The State Council and Christian Affairs", *Al Ahram Daily*, (Arabic), 13 June, 2010, p. 10

to arrange amicable settlements through meetings between Muslim and Coptic religious leaders. This growing proximity between Church and non-Church Copts is borne of their common vision of the threats which they face in the shape of Islamist factions, which are growing in strength while the state is ever-receding and fails to meet its security obligations. This will not, however, lead to a complete unity of action between the two Coptic flanks, as is evidence by the refusal of protesters reacting to the Imbaba incident to heed Pope Shenouda's May 15, 2011 statement calling on them to end their demonstration: "My children who are protesting today, this affair has surpassed the simple expression of opinion; your protest has been taken over by a group of people who have ulterior motives."

## Conclusions

This paper has attempted to illuminate the factors which have led to a heightened sense of Coptic separateness, emphasizing the ideas of the roll-back of the state under the previous regime. It is worth mentioning that the reduction of the state's role was not based on confessional affiliation, and was not targeted against the Copts per se. What this paper has sought to illustrate, however, is the multiplicity of factors related to state-society relations, both internal and external, which drove the Copts to adopt a more insular attitude within their country.

I can summarize my conclusions as follows:

- There is a clear affliction which affects the Egyptian body politic, particularly those parts of society which help build national unity. These problems need to be put in their proper perspective, however, and should be neither exaggerated, nor ignored, and not simplified. Chief among these problems which need to be addressed are the idea that Egyptian Copts represent a religious minority, first and foremost, and their increasing sense of embattlement. The primary responsibility of any state is, of course, the need to provide its citizens with safety and security and the ability to integrate within the broader society, in the service of national harmony. States which provide these things, and which allow their citizens the chance to achieve their potential and to feel free, will be rewarded by loyalty from their citizens.
- State and society are both necessary realities, the first as a framework and the second as a material, tangible presence. The state is an overall framework in which society exists; the first exists to bring about unity in the second, and the second protects pluralism in the first. The control of society by the state would put an end to freedom of speech and thought, while the surrender of the state to society would ruin its prestige and internal and external power.<sup>75</sup> This

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<sup>75</sup> Hanafi, Hassan, *Religion and Culture in the Arab Homeland*, Qiba Printing and Publishing, (Arabic), Cairo, 1998

relationship is very complex and convoluted, with intra-communal relations being even more complicated. At the time of writing, the state-society relationship in Egypt remains characteristically weak. It seems that the best description for this relationship in the Egyptian context is “Weak State-Weak Society.”<sup>76</sup> In this sense, we can distinguish between “strong” and “fierce” states, where the former works in harmony with the society which it rules while the second exercises its influence through naked power alone, and is born of a failure to peaceably control the society of the state.<sup>77</sup> In the case of Egypt, the description of “fierce state” is acceptable, and can be used to describe a situation in which the population remains apathetic to what the state wants, but the situation remains fluid and dynamic.<sup>78</sup>

- When religion becomes a determining factor in social issues, one can see a return to the forefront of communal identities, and one can notice the rise to prominence of various ethno-religious groups. This serves to lump together people who had previously been members of varying groups with varying socio-political aims and objectives. To these people, the world is divided anew between the faithful as opposed to non-believers, be they secular people or followers of other faiths. Religious extremism, and a superficial sense of religious piety, comes to be the dominant social forces. Of course, one obvious result of all this has been the victory of metaphysical, religious values over rationalism and free will; individuals willingly suspend their disbelief in favor of outmoded ideas.
- The Egyptian state does not have sole responsibility for the weakness of Egyptian society, but society itself, and the social relations within it, carry part of the blame. Against the background of a long-running familiarity with social exclusion among Egyptians, most groups within Egyptian society have a deep sense of anguish and insularity. This has driven many Egyptians into the arms of religion, as religion has ready-made answers to all of their questions, be they in relation to questions of worshipping and spirituality or daily life. This relationship can be viewed through its own isolation; Egyptians have shown an ability to form their own parallel societies, in which all have their own groups, which might stand in opposition to broader society. All of these facts are a reflection of deeper societal ills within Egypt; this type of relationship

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<sup>76</sup> Richards, A. “The political economy of Dilatory Reform: Egypt in the 1980s”, *World Development*, Vol. 19, no.12, 1991, pp. 1726-1727

<sup>77</sup> Ayubi, N., “Government and the state in Egypt today”, in Trip, C., and Owen R. (editors), *Egypt Under Mubarak*, (Routledge, 1989), p.18. “Street Politics is strong in one hand, but at the same time it is weak since it can be easily crushed”

<sup>78</sup> Ninette S. Fahmy, *The Politics of Egypt: State-Society Relationship*, (Routledge, Curzon, 2002), p.255

between social values and the composition of social sub-groups will have an impact on social stability and the concept of the social unit.<sup>79</sup>

- The nationalization of Egypt's Christian religious institutions has made the official Church and its organs hostages to the whims of the regime, as opposed to an independent civil society body which holds the state authorities accountable for their actions; as a result of all of this, even the lay elite will try to find ways to rise to power through the Church hierarchy, as the Church has a ready-made presence within the state<sup>80</sup>. This utilization of the Church for political ends – within the political, social and cultural realms, in a bid to gain legitimacy and build public support, as well as to provide a check against other political forces – left a number of self-contradictory gaps in political discourse, coming from both the government and the opposition. In contrast to this nationalized Coptic Church, there has been a Coptic opposition movement, which has been fed on physical attacks against the Copts and has used these to heighten the sense of isolation, in light of the abrogation by the state of its obligations to citizens. All of this has led to a loss of social capital and reputation for all actors on the Egyptian political scene.

- There is now a series of questions surrounding Church-state relations in Egypt and how they will develop in the near future. In the past, these relations were described as being founded on mutual understanding. What will become of these relations now, after the fall of the Mubarak regime? What shape will this relationship take, seeing as how many Copts viewed the former regime as having been their protector during a period which saw the rise of Islamic fundamentalism?

- This paper has set out a number of the factors which contributed to the rise of the Coptic identity, and raises a question: will the growth of Islamist groups, particularly radical Islamist groups, lead to a more coalesced identity? Or will it drive the Copts to try to integrate more fully in broader Egyptian society, as witnessed during the January 25 Revolution?<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ghalyun, Burhan, *Assassination of the Mind*, op.cit.

<sup>80</sup> Habib, Rafik, "The Secular-Religious State", *Al-Ushbu' [The Week]*, November 3, 2007, p.22

<sup>81</sup> The attempts to foment sectarian strife in the aftermath of January 25 are obvious. After the spirit of brotherhood that prevailed between Muslims who were praying in Tahrir Square and the Christians who protected them, the situation changed as revealed by successive events aiming at fomenting sectarian strife. As a result, Copts had to hold sit-ins in reaction to several events, as it happened after the Atfeeh event, the disappearance of Camilia Shehata and the Imbaba event. Among the factors contributing to fomenting sectarian strife were: the use of religion by some political groups after the revolution in order to achieve political gains, the general weakness of religious institutions, the absence of tolerance values and inadequate religious discourse.