Profile

Nubians reside in the Upper Nile region: though estimates vary, it is thought that there may be as many as 3 or 4 million Nubians in Egypt. When the Condominium Agreement of 1899 fixed the boundary between Egypt and Sudan, Lower Nubians found themselves under direct Egyptian rule and politically separated from their kin to the south. This arbitrary frontier divides the Nobiin-speaking group more or less equally between Egypt and Sudan. Close ties of culture, language and family continue to unite the people north and south of the border, and until the evacuation of 1964 that accompanied the building of the Aswan High Dam there was continual visiting back and forth between them. Egyptian Nubia is part of the Governorate of Aswan which also includes a populous area whose inhabitants are not Nubian. As a result, Nubians have found themselves a minority within their native province.

Historical context

Although Egypt remained the stronger power for most of its dynastic period, it did not destroy its southern neighbour, Nubia; nor did Nubia, in spite of its adoption of Egyptian gods and ideas of kingship, completely succumb to its neighbour's ways. The Nubian city of Meroë was sited on the banks of the Nile about 200 kilometres north of present-day Khartoum, growing rich from control of trade on the Nile until the fourth century CE. Its wealth gave rise to elite patronage of art works such as pottery and shield rings, worn on the forehead, a practice that Nubians continue today. The incorporation of Egypt into the Byzantine Empire brought Christianity to the Nile region. Coptic Christianity spread to Nubia, where a Christian kingdom existed from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries. At the end of this period Nubia adopted Islam, 700 years later than the north of Egypt, and many of its large churches were converted into mosques.

Rural Nubians have been neglected and exploited for much of the twentieth century. From about 1910 until their final destruction in the 1960s, the villages of Egyptian Nubia were populated chiefly by women, children and older people; most able-bodied men were forced to migrate to find work. For the sake of increased agricultural production downstream, their land has been destroyed by the...
building of successive dams at Aswan without any effort to obtain their consent. Over a period of
70 years about 60 per cent of Egyptian Nubia territory has been destroyed or rendered unfit for
habitation, and roughly half the surviving Nubian-speaking people have been obliged to find new
homes. Some attempt has been made to compensate Nubians for the loss of their farms and date
groves and create new livelihoods for them, but development south of Aswan has failed to keep
pace with the rest of the country. For thousands of years ‘Nubian’ and ‘slave’ were virtually
synonymous in the Egyptian mindset; although this prejudice has lessened in the modern era,
Nubians are still largely excluded from Egyptian national life. Nubians convened a ‘First Nubian
Congress’ in October 2002, and petitioned the government for greater compensation for their lost
land.

Current issues

Nubians remain bitter over the loss of land caused by the dam projects and have still not received
adequate compensation. While the dams were designed to serve Egypt’s development ambitions,
Nubians complain that the government continues to neglect their needs.

Since 2005 Nubians have become more active in advocating for change, and several Nubian
grassroots youth movements emerged in the wake of the 2008 bread crisis in Egypt. Political
activism, particularly among younger Nubians, then became more vocal and stronger with the
events of the 2011 uprising, around which greater mobilization took place.

In the months preceding the January 2014 referendum on a new Constitution, representatives of
the Nubian community were able to meet with members of the drafting committee to advocate for
various amendments to the text. The approved version was an improvement on the 2012
Constitution, passed under former President Mohamed Morsi and widely criticized by rights groups
for its lack of protections for many minorities. A significant development was that the ‘right to
return’ of Egyptian Nubians was recognized for the first time. Article 236 of the Constitution
stipulates that the state must make progress in granting Nubians the right to return to their lands
within ten years of the document’s ratification, in addition to developing Nubian land and
preserving Nubian culture. However, ten months later, President Sisi issued Decree 444, which
designated certain border areas as military zones that are not to be inhabited, a decision affecting
numerous Nubian villages.

Given that Nubians have struggled to attain greater social acceptance and political representation,
the parliamentary elections of October 2015 carried significance. Due to a reconfiguration of
decades-old electoral constituencies three months prior, New Nubia was assigned its own
parliamentary seat, which was won by Yassine Abdel Sabour, the first Nubian MP in Egypt’s new
parliament. While viewed as a positive step, many Nubians expressed scepticism as to whether the
most urgent issues facing the community would be addressed. The ‘right to return’ has remained
their cardinal demand, coupled with calls to combat unemployment, improve deteriorating services,
and revive aspects of Nubian culture including the language. Abdel Sabour stated he would push
for the implementation of Articles 47 and 50 of the 2014 Constitution, which affirm the state’s
commitment to preserve the cultural identities and heritage of different groups.
Frustration mounted in 2016 for Egypt’s Nubian community, culminating on 2 January 2017 with the first ever arrest of Nubian activists in direct relation to their struggle against the state. Six were charged with gathering illegally, protesting without a permit, and attacking security forces, after being detained by police on their way to protest a new presidential decree concerning land ownership. They sought to voice opposition to Presidential Decrees 355 and 498, issued in August and November 2016, which stipulate the confiscation of 1,100 acres of land and could yield a new wave of forced evictions of Nubians already forcibly uprooted from their historical homeland. A sit-in demonstration in late November succeeded in pressuring the government into negotiations, and Nubian activists and civil society organizations threatened to pursue international arbitration but suspended their campaign to allow the state to resolve the issue.

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