

Copts

Profile

Followers of the Egyptian Coptic Church live in such northern Sudanese towns as Al Obeid, Atbara, Dongola, Khartoum, Omdurman, Port Sudan and Wad Medani. Copt presence dates back over 1,300 years, although many are descended from more recent Egyptian immigrants. Because of the Copts' advanced education, their role in the life of the country has been more significant than their numbers suggest. Copts say they numbered 400,000–500,000 in the past, but through emigration and – sometimes forced – conversion to Islam, their ranks are now thinner.

Historical context

Copts began moving to Sudan in the sixth century CE to escape persecution in Egypt. Under Islamic rule which began in Egypt in the seventh century, they became subject to the code of dhimma, which offered them protection while according them second-class citizenship.

Initially this was an improvement over their vulnerable status under previous rulers, but, as the Islamization process became consolidated, strict regulations were imposed on the building of churches. Emigration from Egypt peaked in the early nineteenth century and the generally tolerant reception they received in Sudan was interrupted by a decade of persecution under Mahdist rule at the end that century.

Many were obliged to relinquish their faith and adopted Islam, intermarrying with other Sudanese. The Anglo-Egyptian invasion in 1898 allowed Copts greater religious and economic freedom and they extended their original roles as artisans and merchants into trading, banking, engineering, medicine and the civil service.

Proficiency in business and administration made them a privileged minority. The return of militant Islam in the mid-1960s and subsequent demands by radicals for an Islamic constitution prompted Copts to join in public opposition to religious rule.

General Nimeiry's introduction of Sharia law in 1983 began a new phase of oppressive treatment of Copts, among other non-Islamists. Copts felt sufficiently threatened to join the campaign against the new laws. These reduced Copts' status as court witnesses and abolished the legal sale of alcohol, which affected Copts as non-Muslim traders.

After the overthrow of Nimeiry, Coptic leaders encouraged support for a secular candidate in the 1986 elections. When the National Islamic Front seized power in 1989, discrimination returned in earnest. Hundreds of Copts, along with thousands of Muslims also suspected of disloyalty to the new regime, were dismissed from the civil service and judiciary.

As the civil war raged throughout the 1990s, Khartoum focused its religious fervour on the south. Although experiencing discrimination, the Copts and other long-established Christian groups in the

north had the fewest restrictions.

While many Christian organizations are reluctant to register with the government out of fear of interference, the Copts have chosen to register their church, which is exempt from property tax. Many Copts chafed at compulsory military service that sent them to the south to fight fellow Christians there.

Current issues

In 2005 Sudan's Government of National Unity (GNU) named a Coptic Orthodox priest to a government position, although the ruling Islamist party's continued dominance under the GNU provides ample reason to doubt its commitment to broader religious or ethnic representation.