

## Copts

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### Profile

Egyptian Copts are the biggest Christian community in the Arab world. Estimates of their numbers vary, but are around 4.7-7.1 million. They are proportionately most numerous in Upper Egypt. Most Copts are working class peasants and labourers, although there is a Coptic business upper class and a middle class of urban professionals and small landowners. Copts are present in most institutions of the state, and there are Coptic members of all registered political parties.

### Historical context

Copts believe themselves to be the descendants of Egypt's ancient Pharaonic people. They were first converted to Christianity with the arrival of St Mark in Egypt in 62 CE. Egypt became part of the Byzantine Empire in 395 CE, and the Egyptian Church was separated from the Christian community in 451. The Muslims arrived in 641 CE, but did not constitute a majority until about three centuries later, mostly due to the conversion of the Egyptian populace. From the ninth century onwards the Copts were persecuted by their Muslim rulers, in turn Arab, Circassian and Ottoman. Churches were destroyed, books burnt and elders imprisoned. By the time the British had taken Egypt in 1882, Copts had been reduced to one-tenth of the population, mainly as a result of centuries of conversion to Islam.

Arab Muslims governed Christians and Jews by the rules of the Islamic sharia. By Islamic law, as dhimmi people, they had to wear different colours and clothes from Muslims, could not build new places of worship or repair old ones without permission, or construct them in such a way as to overshadow those of Muslims. They were subject to a heavy poll tax. With the Arabization of governmental positions, Coptic clerks sought to study Arabic and teach it to their children, given the tradition of inheriting jobs. There was a gradual change to the use of Arabic, with the Coptic language being abandoned except as a liturgical language, and many Copts converted to Islam.

### Ottoman and Colonial era

In the mid-nineteenth century, Mohammed Ali Pasha, Viceroy of Egypt under the Ottomans, who became hereditary ruler of Egypt in 1841 after a political settlement with the sultan, reconstructed the administration, modernizing industry and creating a modern education system. Copts were employed in financial and accounting positions and were appointed rulers in a number of local governates.

They had rights of land ownership, and a large financial and commercial bourgeoisie developed. A lay council, the Majlis al-Milli was created in 1874 to represent the Coptic community. Religious freedom and equality in employment were guaranteed. The peak of Coptic integration was in the liberal period from the 1919 'revolution' to 1952.

Christians united with Muslims in their fight for independence against the British colonialists. There were two Coptic prime ministers during this period and widespread political participation as MPs and in the media. The British tried to separate Copts and Muslims, attempting to isolate Copts from the nationalist movement by inciting sectarian strife. Copts opposed British intervention in the Egyptian constitution and did not call for rights for religious minorities in the 1923 constitution.

The revolution in 1952 brought in nationalization and agricultural reform. Middle and lower class Copts benefited, as did their Muslim counterparts. However, the Coptic elite lost 75 per cent of their property through nationalization; hitherto they had controlled a major share of transportation, industry, banking and agricultural land. Nasser also issued two decrees which had implications for Copts: one enforcing religion as a basic subject in the curricula rather than complementary to it, and a second in which Al Azhar University was confined to Muslim students.

Copts sided with Arabs in the conflict with Israel in the 1940s, but when Arabs demonstrated violently against Jewish settlement in Palestine, Copts were often victims of political abuse and physical assault. The dissolution of political parties with significant Coptic membership, such as the Wafd Party, the seizure of Coptic endowments in 1957 and the limitation of landholding to 200 acres, created an atmosphere of tension and led to increased emigration of Copts.

### **Sadat era**

At the onset of the Sadat era in 1971 the dissolution of economic centralization benefited upper class Copts. However, as social frustrations mounted in the 1970s with the rise of Islamic radical movements, strikes and protests, Sadat initially flirted with the Islamists, politicizing religion and using Muslims as new allies in confrontation with the left. Old scapegoats were sought out. In 1972 Coptic churches, houses and shops were burnt. Islamic groups became increasingly organized and violent, until the government began to confront the militants, arresting thousands.

Copts demanded the cancelling of discriminatory laws and protested the use of sharia as the basic source of legislation. Numerous confrontations took place in 1978 and 1979 between Muslims and Copts in Upper Egypt. In 1980 Sadat tried to implicate Pope Shenouda III in a plan to undermine state security; the Pope was stripped of authority and exiled to a desert monastery; 125 Coptic clergy and lay activists were arrested, Coptic associations were banned and all Coptic publishing concerns were closed down. The Pope was kept under house arrest for four years until his re-appointment in 1985.

Sadat's assassination in 1981 left behind a divided nation. As economic recession deepened, violence against Copts again erupted in the second half of the 1980s, continuing sporadically up to the present. Other Coptic concerns include restrictions on the building and repair of churches - which limit their freedom of worship and often cause sectarian confrontation - and the educational curriculum, which distinguishes between Copts and Muslims and ignores Coptic culture in general. Furthermore, some elements of the mass media have been accused of frequently promoting hatred and division. In addition, Egyptian military and police colleges restrict Christian admission, and there is a reluctance to admit Copts to some faculties and universities.

### **Current issues**

Like other moderates in the country, many Copts long considered that the solution to grievances lay in social and economic reform, and in the consolidation of a democracy based on pluralism and equality between all segments of society. Many stressed the importance of civil society and its institution in combating injustice and curtailing prejudice, hatred and extremism.

Copts continue to face state discrimination in such areas as university admissions, public spending, military promotions, and required authorisations for the building or repair of churches. Up until 2005, presidential approval was required for repairing churches. Although now the decision rests with the regional authorities, in practise many Copts still complain of obstruction and difficulties. Religious conversion to Christianity remains a difficult issue. Although there is no problem converting from Christianity to Islam, under some interpretations of Islam, conversion the other way is a crime punishable by death. Those who do convert often prefer to do so in private, because of fear of harassment from the authorities and Islamist organisations. Islamist attacks on Copts have also led them to fear Egypt's largest opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood. There are sporadic attacks on Christians - notably, in 2006 in Alexandria, when one Christian was knifed to death, and others were injured outside an assault on Copt churches. Further attacks were reported close to Alexandria in 2007, with attacks on Coptic churches and the properties of Copts.

In May 2008, four Copts were shot dead at a jewellery shop in Cairo, although nothing was stolen. In southern Egypt that same month, Copts and Muslims clashed over a church's claim to farmland. One Muslim was killed in the ensuing violence, whilst three Copts were injured and three Coptic monks briefly taken hostage. Coptic diaspora organizations organized demonstrations in Europe and the United States in June 2008, accusing the Mubarak government of ignoring the violence. Some Copts expressed alarm at the prospect of rising sectarian tension.