



MEI MEDIA WATCH

(A Survey of Editorials)

No. 17

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Alexandria Church Attack

[Note: Shortly after the mid-night mass marking the New year a powerful bomb exploded near a church in alexandria in which at least 21 chrisitan workshippers wre killed and another 79 injured. Editorial commentaries from the international and Middle Eastern media are reproduced here.
Editor, MEI]

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arab news.com
The Middle East's Leading English Language Daily

Jeddah, Editorial, 1 January 2011, Saturday

1. New Year tragedy

It is essential that Egypt maintains its characteristic tolerance and moderation.

New Year has begun tragically and dangerously in Egypt with the killing of 21 people in a church in Alexandria with 79 injured in a terrorist attack.

The early theory espoused that Al-Qaida was responsible for the attack cannot be ruled out. Al-Qaeda in Iraq has been conducting a deadly campaign against Christians following the reported conversion to Islam by two Egyptian Christian women. The group says the women are being held against their will by the Coptic Church.

But at this time there is no firm evidence of an Al-Qaeda fingerprint. Meddling from abroad cannot be denied but does not address the issue in its fullest. The case is closed but not resolved, leaving everyone dissatisfied with the outcome.

No one can deny home-grown Muslim-Christian tension in Egypt: The seven Christians who were killed in a drive-by shooting on a church in 2009; the death of a Christian last November (2010) when hundreds of Christians rioted in Cairo after police suddenly stopped the construction of a church; and when a man with a knife stabbed worshippers in 2006, leading to days of clashes between Copts and Muslims — all point to the fact that sectarian violence is not new in Egypt and is arising with greater frequency. The country's characteristic tolerance and moderation has been starting to be replaced by an environment of sectarian exclusion and tension, undermining its tradition of religious coexistence.

The root cause: A tendency, across Egypt's sectarian divide, to place religious affiliation above the bonds of citizenry. It is through this narrow perspective that some people regard others, whether Muslims or Christians, in an exclusivist manner. It is through this flawed viewpoint that some people seek to live in a place of religious "purity." It is this quest for religious purity, which started in the 1970s, that is scuttling the boat. Under such circumstances, sectarian violence finds justification and religious hatred finds a cause. And this tendency for exclusion and the quest for religious purity are no longer confined to certain sectors of Egypt's Muslims. Even the Copts are now catching on.

Just as seriously, some sections of society have begun to accept only those versions that concord with their own views without even thinking that there may be another side to the story. Each side constructs its own theories of injustice. The normal objectivity and enlightened views of the parties concerned has turned into a one-sided attempt to lay the blame completely on the other.

To eliminate the root cause of the resentment, Egyptians should adopt a national spirit, with national identity taking precedence over narrower sectarian divisions. This is the only means to develop a modern nation state that respects citizens, upholds the values of tolerance and respects pluralism, whether religious, cultural, or political.

Christians, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population of 84 million people, are, first and foremost, citizens and members of the Egyptian community and are not seen as a separate group or closed entity. As such, despite the Alex attack and those before it, Egypt continues to maintain a relatively cohesive national fabric. But simply depending upon a strong history of national unity is not enough. Egypt cannot afford to remain passive about sectarian tension; it cannot afford to alienate and exclude people on the basis of their religious affiliation. To break the cycle, it needs to revive its tradition of enlightened civil and religious rights.

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article227953.ece>

gulfnews.com

Dubai, Editorial, 2 January 2011, Sunday

2. Egypt attack aims to foment sectarian strife

Authorities must act to bring the perpetrators of the crime to justice.

The joy of ushering in the New Year (2011) was shattered for worshippers at a Coptic church in the Egyptian city of Alexandria when a powerful bomb exploded in the first half hour of 2011. At least 21 were slaughtered and scores injured in the heinous attack outside the Saints Church in the Mediterranean port city, which bore all the hallmarks of an Al Qaida terror operation.

The fact that this bombing comes amidst rising tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt is further cause for concern.

An attack such as this against innocent worshippers needs to be condemned in the strongest words. The attempt is clearly to aggravate religious tensions and spark sectarian hatred, thereby disturbing the peace.

However, any analysis of the attack and its repercussions must be tempered by the realisation that an act of terror is just that — an act of terror, which has nothing to do with any religion or creed. It is important to remember that this is a criminal act carried out by those who have no respect for the sanctity of human life and try to cloak their evil designs in the garb of some imagined "cause".

The extremists of Al Qaida have in the recent past issued threats against Egypt's Coptic community for allegedly forcibly holding two Egyptian Christian women who reportedly converted to Islam.

The fact remains that Christians and Muslims have coexisted in that ancient land for centuries, and no sinister plot by extremists to target religious minorities in the region will succeed in the long run. Religious leaders should come out strongly against the kind of ideology that promotes this type of carnage and the government must do all in its power to bring those responsible to justice.

Source:

<http://gulfnews.com/opinions/editorials/egypt-attack-aims-to-foment-sectarian-strife-1.739320>

TheNational

Abu Dhabi, Editorial, 2 January 2011, Sunday

3. Provocation is the real danger in Egypt attack

Restraint seems almost too much to ask. The bomb blast that left 21 dead as churchgoers filed out of midnight mass in Alexandria yesterday (1 January) was an attack on the fabric - some would say the very survival - of the Coptic community in Egypt.

The outrage that Christians expressed is perhaps understandable, if regrettable. But of course, by clashing with police and even attacking a nearby mosque, the victims were turned into the dupes of their attackers.

Al Qaeda is suspected in the attack, although there is still some uncertainty. Whatever terrorist group murdered innocent civilians at their place of worship, their aim was clear: to provoke further strife. Alone, these groups are too weak to threaten civil society.

Countries across the Middle East including the UAE immediately condemned the attack. Although a suicide or car bombing is relatively rare in Egypt, and a tragic blight on the great city of Alexandria, there is a familiar pattern in the region. Throughout last year (2010), there has been an alarming trend of attacks on Christians and other sectarian minorities in Iraq and elsewhere.

It is a real threat to cosmopolitan Middle Eastern societies that have stood for centuries. What is worse, these atrocities often masquerade as acts of faith and falsely lay claim to the mantle of Islam. What the faithful on each side must know is that both Islam and Christianity are religions of peace. Murderous attacks on civilians are as anathema to one faith as to the other.

"This terrorist act has shaken the conscience of the nation," said President Hosni Mubarak. "All Egypt was targeted and terrorism does not distinguish between Copt and Muslim." Brave words and true, but Mr Mubarak must do more than give fine speeches. Discrimination against Christians has long been prevalent in political institutions and public life.

Egypt's Christians and Muslims have far more in common than differences - including widespread poverty, illiteracy and lack of education. Facing these underlying problems together will be the greatest assurance of security.

So in the face of atrocity, the victims must be asked for restraint. And they can only be asked to do so if all of Egypt, indeed all of the Middle East, supports their calls for justice.

Al Qaeda and other extremist groups continue to seize upon sectarian differences to justify their crimes. If we allow them to do so, we are indeed all the victims.

Source: <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/editorial/provocation-is-the-real-danger-in-egypt-attack>



Editorial, 2 January 2011, Sunday

4. The plight of the Copts

Even among the persecuted Copts, national pride, it appears, can be dearer than life itself.

The plight of Egypt's ancient Coptic community seems to be going from bad to worse. On Saturday (1 January), just after midnight, as worshipers emerged from a New Year's mass at Alexandria's Saints Church, a powerful explosion, probably from a suicide bomber, killed at least 21 and wounded around 100.

President Hosni Mubarak, who denounced the attack, said it was the work of a foreign terrorist group. However, Copts, who took to the streets and rioted to protest the attack, claimed Muslim Egyptians were behind the explosion. Preliminary investigations found that the explosives for the bomb, which had been filled with nails and ball bearings, had been made locally.

At least two instances of blatant incitement preceded the attack, not including the foreboding precedent from a year ago in which eight Copts were gunned down by Islamists as they left Church following Christmas mass.

Last month (December 2010), a threat appeared on the website of an al-Qaida-affiliated terrorist group called the Islamic State of Iraq, which claimed responsibility for an attack on a Syrian Catholic church in October (2010) that killed about 60 people. The group vowed to attack a Coptic church for holding two Coptic women who had allegedly converted to Islam.

In September (2010), meanwhile, Al-Jazeera TV broadcast a two-hour program called Without Limits that accused the Coptic Church of hiding Israeli weapons and ammunition in monasteries and churches, purportedly in preparation for a war "against the Muslims" that would lead to the creation of an autonomous Coptic state.

The only evidence mustered to support these claims was an incident in mid-August (2010), in which the son of a priest in Port Said was falsely accused of smuggling weapons from Israel. The contraband turned out to be Chinese-made fireworks. Nevertheless, the man is being held by Egypt's immensely powerful State Security.

Much has changed since Egypt's 1919 revolution – when a green banner was waved bearing a crescent and cross, symbolizing those both Muslim and Christian communities led the nationalist movement against British occupation. In recent decades, Egypt's secular ruling elite has acquiesced to or even encouraged an Islamization process that appeases the increasingly religious masses.

By orchestrating this Islamization process, the Mubarak regime neutralizes criticism from Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic extremists calling for further concessions to Islamic dictates. As a result, the old secular nationalism of the Wafd party or Nasserism, that blurred sectarian differences, is gradually being replaced by a decidedly Islamic-based nationalism, which has made life tough for the Copts.

In state schools, textbooks represent Egypt as an exclusively Muslim state and include anti-Christian texts. In the summer of 2008, the Egyptian doctors' syndicate, which, like other professional organizations, has increasingly been taken over by Muslim Brotherhood activists, banned all organ transplants between Muslims and Copts on the grounds that "society would not tolerate organ donations across religious boundaries."

In the recent parliamentary elections, Copts, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 80 million populace, were almost completely marginalized, along with the Muslim Brotherhood and Wafd parties.

Just days before the elections, clashes broke out between riot police and the Coptic community in Cairo, after the government halted construction of a staircase for a Coptic church. The riots ended with two Copts dead, dozens injured and 156 arrested, with most facing charges that carry possible maximum life sentences.

The Copts' future is growing increasingly uncertain.

Rumours of widespread vote-rigging in the elections led the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wafd parties to pull out before the second round of voting. This has resulted in a severe blow to the regime's legitimacy and it might complicate the ailing Mubarak's transfer of leadership to his son Gamal.

But it is not clear whether this will benefit the Copts.

Indeed, it may be that the regime will resort to further discriminatory measures against them to appease Islamists and deflect criticism.

There is relatively little that the West can do to help.

A Copt was widely lauded recently in the Egyptian press for vowing that he would rather die at the hands of his Muslim brethren than accept American protection.

Even among the persecuted Copts, national pride, it appears, can be dearer than life itself.

Source: <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/Article.aspx?id=201938>

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Beirut, Editorial, 3 January 2011, Monday

5. Fight the roots of extremism

For all the adjectives which could be deployed to describe the killing of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on New Year's Eve (2011), one is above all not appropriate: unforeseeable.

As heinous and hideous a crime as it was, the bombing outside of a Midnight Mass in Alexandria, for anyone taking at least a passing notice in 2010 attacks on Middle East Christians, should not have come as a total surprise.

Drive-by shootings, violent and deadly protests and the halting of church construction have all been endured by Egypt's Christians in the past year. That is to say nothing of Iraqi Christians, 53 of who were blown up in a Baghdad church two months ago (October 2010).

But these incidents are not (as some will likely claim) the opening shots in a war of religions. They are base atrocities born out of poor societies seemingly incapable of protecting their citizens of all creeds from the rot of extremism.

In Egypt, as in Iraq, a risible economic situation sees millions – from both religions – subsist below the poverty line. Extremism mostly takes root in societies with a large percentage of unemployed, poor, uneducated and sedentary individuals and groups. They are fertile breeding pools for those who choose violence to express dissatisfaction with life in the name of religious duty.

Attacks, when they do occur, are greeted with the cliché of condemnation coming from across the world. Politicians, clergymen, royalty, activists all rush to voice their two cents of disapproval yet, unsurprisingly, people keep dying. Obviously, condemnations are useless and serve as no deterrent to the continuation of killings and mayhem. Words will not suffice, especially not after each attack has already been carried out.

It is a problem only solvable by addressing the roots, not the results; the roots being economic and social inequality compounded by poor security, education and literacy levels.

Blaming outside forces, as Egypt's president has chosen to, is wrong even if it is correct; if Egypt and Iraq were coherent and harmonious societies, they would not produce individuals who offer the ideological and logistic support which facilitates such crimes, even if perpetrated by foreign hands.

Little good too will come from calls for unity in the face of terrorism, unless the contributing factors for terrorism are addressed by governments in the Middle East.

If this cannot be achieved, the fall in this part of the world will not only be that of its Christians. The whole region will suffer, cast as a place devoid of ethics, civil rights or self-respect. Currently – and regrettably – this is far from unforeseeable.

Source:

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=123150#axzz1ATQ9NYLp



Dubai, Editorial, 3 January 2011, Monday

6. Egypt's hour of trial

Cairo's brush with terror is quite disturbing. The suspected suicide attack on a church on New Year's Eve (2011), which killed at least 22 people, is a serious moment of realisation for the country. The very fact that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has suspected a foreign hand behind it goes on to establish the nervousness that has crept in the corridors of power.

But more unfortunate than the incident are the clashes that were reported between two major communities of the area, hinting at the evolving sense of unrest in a heterogeneous society. Egypt that has been relatively free from such upheavals, irrespective of the fact that it is home to an assertive political opposition, should take a holistic look at the situation and move rapidly to nip the evil in the bud.

The most promising aspect, however, is the fact that both the government and the Islamist opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, are on the same page. Apart from condemning the incident, they have restrained from finger pointing at each other. This commonality of interest for the sake of national integration can go a long way in deterring Al Qaeda or Israeli manoeuvring in Egypt. This episode of chaos and unrest ahead of forthcoming presidential elections would have come as a test case for the security apparatus, and there shouldn't be any misgivings on that count. Egypt for long has been in the eye of storm, and unscrupulous elements might have found the New Year (2011) celebrations as an opportunity to strike, and that too by targeting the minority Christian community. What are required at the moment are serious introspection and a determination to get going.

Egypt, which sits at the crossroads of geopolitics and economics, has an important role to play in the region. Its support for the Palestinian cause and influence in the West and Israel makes it a driving force for peace and reconciliation in one of the most volatile zones of the world. This strength of Cairo is what makes terrorist outfits go jittery and opt for derailing Egypt's initiative in regional and world affairs. Though nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack, it would be wise for the authorities to broaden their scope of investigations and include home-grown as well as foreign miscreant organisations in the culpable net. It is incumbent upon the government and the political opposition to share their notes for consolidating security parameters, and evolve a new relationship of trust and confidentiality. There is an opportunity in disaster for Egypt.

Source:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/editorial/2011/January/editorial_January5.xml§ion=editorial&col=

The Boston Globe

Editorial, 4 January 2011, Tuesday

7. Failing to quell sectarian rifts

There was a pretext for the horrific suicide bombing of a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, Egypt, that killed 21 people and injured close to 100 emerging from a New Year's Mass on Dec. 31 (2010). The Saints Church was on a list of churches an Al Qaeda offshoot had targeted for attack on the grounds that Coptic officials were allegedly confining two women who had converted to Islam.

This was untrue, and even if true would not have been an excuse for trying to incite a religious war. Nonetheless, Egypt's civil authorities could have deprived their Islamist foes of this rationale for violence if they had responded to the plight of the two women with more respect for their human rights and more awareness of the country's sectarian tensions.

In the two separate cases, the women said they fled their homes to escape abusive husbands who were Coptic priests. Each was located by police after just a few days. But instead of offering the women protection, the Egyptian police handed them back to church authorities. One is reportedly living now in a desert monastery, the other with nuns in a Coptic Church residence in Cairo. Both have said they never converted to Islam.

Because the Coptic Church forbids divorce, Egyptian authorities owed it to the two women to give them a choice about how and where they wanted to live. At the same time, the Egyptian government should have been aware that returning them to the Coptic Church would incite the enemies of Christianity.

The responsibility for the bombing belongs to the terrorists — presumably Islamic extremists — who wilfully distorted the truth to promote the cause of Al Qaeda. Still, the Egyptian government should have honoured the women's desire for freedom. That would have been the most effective

way to avoid the lethal rumours of a conversion to Islam and a forced re-conversion to Christianity.

Source:

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2011/01/04/failing_to_g_uell_sectarian_rifts/

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR

Massachusetts, 4 January 2011, Tuesday

8. Coptic Church bombing in Egypt: Mubarak must prosecute

Strong condemnation of the deadly New Year's (2011) bombing at a Christian church in Egypt has come from where it counts most: religious and political leaders of this predominantly Muslim country.

Minority Christians -- called Copts -- rightly complain that no one goes to jail for religious attacks on them. Egypt and other countries must reverse this practice of impunity for perpetrators.

Extreme Islamists -- possibly linked to Al Qaeda -- are likely behind the attack that killed 21. So it's encouraging that in Cairo, the grand sheikh of Islam's pre-eminent theological institute has denounced the bombing as a "heinous crime." Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak got on national television and promised to bring the perpetrators to justice.

But will he? The Egyptian government prefers to handle sporadic violence against the country's Christian minority -- called Copts -- through a "reconciliation" process between perpetrators and victims.

Reconciliation has some value, but no one does time for the crimes against Egypt's Copts, such as murder or destruction of property. In its 2010 annual report, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom rightly condemns such impunity:

"The absence of accountability breeds lawlessness, which encourages individuals to attack, and even kill, others who dissent from or fail to embrace their own religious views, including members of minority religious communities."

With no firm pushback from the state, religiously motivated attacks on Copts are on the rise in Egypt. Some describe the violence of recent years more like a purge.

Indeed, Christians and other religious minorities -- as well as nonconforming Muslims -- are under increasing attack in the Middle East and North Africa, regions which a 2009 Pew study found to have the most government restrictions on religious practice anywhere in the world.

In Iraq, where Christian and other religious minority populations have dwindled under threats and hardship, the unsteady government lacks the capacity to ensure proper security. In Iran, the

government itself is the persecutor. In a country such as Pakistan, anti-blasphemy laws feed religious intolerance – to the point of the Jan.4 (2011) assassination of the governor of Punjab Province, reportedly because he spoke out against blasphemy laws.

In recent years, political and religious leaders from the West and Muslim worlds have come together to further religious tolerance. That effort is important because what leaders say influences the cultural atmosphere. Their rhetoric can, for instance, bring public pressure to bear against a threatened Quran-burning (as in the United States last year [2010]).

But what leaders do is just as important, which is why it's imperative that Mr. Mubarak follow through on his promise to "track down" and "capture" the perpetrators.

As the US religious freedom commission points out, impunity "often leads to endless cycles of sectarian violence." The world is seeing that now, not just in Egypt but in countries such as Nigeria and Sudan. Holding religious attackers to account can help break that cycle.

Source:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2011/0104/Coptic-church-bombing-in-Egypt-Mubarak-must-prosecute>

The Jakarta Post

Editorial, 4 January 2011, Tuesday

9. Warning from Alexandria

Unless world leaders soon take quick and firm pre-emptive measures, the bomb blast outside a church in Egypt on New Year's Day may indicate what is in store for 2011: A world slowly heading towards war between religions not unlike the medieval Crusades.

The timing and the target of the bomb attacks, which killed 21 people in Alexandria on Saturday (1 January), suggest that the perpetrators intended nothing less than to provoke a religious war. Pope Benedict was not far off in calling the attack a "vile gesture".

But, the world should not play into the hands of these terrorists. There should be greater condemnation of the attack from world leaders, particularly those from the Muslim world including Indonesia, besides sending their condolences to the victims and their relatives. Leaders of all the major religions, including Islam, must be at the forefront in condemning the attacks and sending a clear message that killing innocent people is not part of any religion that truly loves peace.

What is at stake is global peace. Although the Egyptian authorities have yet to find the perpetrators of the New Year's Day bombing, it is clear this is part of an ongoing global campaign to terrorize Christians living in predominantly Muslim societies. We have seen similar attacks against Christians in recent weeks in Nigeria and Iraq.

These attacks in turn have served to fuel rising Islam phobia in the West. The stage is now quietly and slowly being prepared, perhaps not even to the knowledge of both sides, for a renewal of the war between Islam and Christianity. Unless the world acts in unison to prevent this from becoming a reality, we are literally heading towards a clash of civilizations, not just in terms of Samuel Huntington's ideological warfare, but an actual physical and bloody war pitting followers of the two major religions against each other.

The Indonesian government should take a cue from Alexandria that its indifference to rising religious intolerance will only encourage further persecution of religious minorities. Persecutors always start small, for example with vandalism and intimidation, but, as the example of Egypt shows, these acts can lead to deadly and devastating attacks in no time.

This gloomy prediction may seem far-fetched only if the government acts early and firmly to pre-empt it. Sadly, we have seen little pre-emptive action so far, in spite of the many warnings about the rise of religious intolerance in the country.

Source:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/01/04/editorial-warning-alexandria.html>



Toronto, Editorial, 4 January 2011, Tuesday

10. Carnage in Egypt: Christians under siege

They died as they filed out of Mass in a season of peace. The New Year's (2011) suicide blast that killed 21 Coptic Christians and injured 100 left Saints Church in Alexandria spattered with blood. It was a brutal reminder that vulnerable Christians are under siege in parts of the Muslim world, targeted by Al Qaeda and other extremist groups.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was quick to decry the attack, saying it has "shaken the conscience of the nation." More importantly one of Egypt's chief clerics, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar University, repudiated it as "a cowardly, criminal act perpetrated by enemies of the nation and the (Muslim) community." He called for "unity between the cross and the crescent."

Comforting as those words were meant to be, many of Egypt's Copts doubt their sincerity. They feel abandoned by their leaders. Last year (2010) on Coptic Christmas, Christians were murdered in a drive-by shooting. Rights groups cite many similar horrors.

Now, veteran Egyptian journalist Hani Shukrallah cautions that even "supposedly moderate Muslims" are embracing anti-Christian attitudes. Others also complain that "political Islam" infects the schools and society. Left unchallenged, this could tear Egypt apart.

In Iraq, meanwhile, Christians marked a sombre Christmas at Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad, where an Al Qaeda attack recently killed 68. In Nigeria, Islamists struck two churches, killing six, while Christmas bombings claimed 32. And in the Philippines, Al Qaeda-linked extremists bombed a chapel at Christmas.

In this post 9/11 world, it is not easy to thwart terror attacks, whatever the motive. But Muslim leaders such as Mubarak must make a more visible, more proactive effort to protect the vulnerable, if they hope to avert social anarchy. And respected clerics should echo al-Tayeb and resolutely challenge those who invoke Islam to fan hatred and murder.

Source: <http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/article/915330--carnage-in-egypt-christians-under-siege>

THE AUSTRALIAN 
THE HEART OF THE NATION

Sydney, Editorial, 5 January 2011, Wednesday

11. Defending all religious rights

Egypt's Christians need protection from sectarian attacks.

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak blames foreigners for the bombing of a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria which killed 21 worshippers and wounded 100, and there is every reason to believe the attackers were at least inspired by al-Qaida. But that is only part of the story. The root cause of the deepening sectarian crisis in the Arab world's most populous nation lies in the failure of Mr Mubarak's long-serving government (in power since 1981) to protect the Coptic minority.

Instead, by appeasing Muslim militancy, he has made Christians more vulnerable to attack.

Copts make up 10 per cent of Egypt's 80 million people and have been a vital element in society since the 1919 revolution, when a green banner bearing both an Islamic crescent and a Christian cross symbolised the unity of the two groups. However, the Copts now complain of discrimination at every level. An unsympathetic bureaucracy requires high-level approval for the smallest of alterations to existing churches, as well as for new places of worship. Copts are denied jobs and education opportunities. Marriage between Coptic men and Muslim women has been banned. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights organisation reports that 52 anti-Christian incidents between 2008 and 2010 have gone unpunished. The issue of religious conversions is also highly charged. In Iraq, al-Qaida calls for attacks on Christians to avenge the alleged kidnapping and detention by Egypt's Copts of two women who are claimed to have converted to Islam. In this environment Muslim extremists taking their cue from al-Qaida, whose deputy leader is the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been acting largely with impunity. They see the Copts as easy targets, forsaken by a government which is buttressing its political base by appeasing the militants it once campaigned to crush.

Mr Mubarak is a tough former air force commander who has shown himself to be uncompromising in dealing with terrorist groups and speaks of cutting off the hand of terrorism. He should spare nothing to do so. The Copts need protection against extremism and an end to discrimination. Otherwise a sectarian conflagration in Egypt is inevitable. Coptic Pope Shenouda III has made an appeal for help. Mr Mubarak should heed it.

Source:

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/defending-all-religious-rights/story-e6frg71x-1225981969200>



Beirut, Editorial, 6 January 2011, Thursday

12. A wake-up call for Christian leaders

In the wake of deadly attacks in Egypt and Iraq, Christian leaders have been sounding the warning bell, quite loudly, about threats to the community in the Middle East. The most vociferous rhetoric has come from Lebanon's Christian community, which stands out in one important aspect from its neighbours. In Lebanon, Christians have enjoyed more political freedom than their counterparts in the region, but have made poor use of it, mired in their destructive factionalism.

Prior to Independence, Lebanese Christians were divided over whether they wanted the continuation of a French mandate, or an end to colonialism. After Independence, the divisions continued; the civil strife of 1958 might have erupted due to Cold War tensions, but it was also centred on a struggle between President Camille Chamoun and Army Commander Fouad Chehab.

A few decades later, the Civil War began with Bashir Gemayel liquidating rival Christians of the National Liberal Party. The war's latter years saw bloody conflicts between another general, Michel Aoun, and the Lebanese Forces under Samir Geagea. This conflict alone killed thousands of Christians.

And all along, Christian politicians in Lebanon – where the calls for protection are loudest – have played the double game of seeking the backing of foreign parties, while demanding to be treated as upstanding, patriotic citizens.

Whether overtly or covertly, such politicians have declared over the decades that they enjoy the protection of Paris, Washington, or the Vatican, while rival Christian leaders have rarely promoted the interests of either their community or their country. If such behaviour continues, warnings about the threats to Christians will be superfluous – the community is on track to lose any influence it has traditionally enjoyed.

Lebanon's Christians should remember that calls for unity and protection cannot be issued simply because a crisis or catastrophe has taken place. The so-called disaster of Christian emigration is a few centuries, not a few decades old.

Christians must take up their full responsibilities and rights as citizen to avoid being portrayed as a minority that is perpetually on the verge of selling its property and leaving for good. The responsibility falls on politicians who are short-sighted and focused on immediate political gain, as well as members of the clergy, who haven't done enough to ensure a stable and durable presence for their community.

The bombings in Iraq and Egypt are a warning for Lebanon's Christians and more importantly, their leaders: put aside greed, narrow-mindedness and racism, and work on ensuring that members of the community become fully-fledged citizens who require no special protection inside the country, or assistance from abroad.

Source:

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=123330#axzz1ATQ9NYLp

Al-Ahram

Cairo, Editorial, 6-12 January 2011

13. Alexandria's test

Great countries often suffer grave tribulations. They also face difficult choices -- both negative and positive. Egypt is at a crossroads once again. The question of national unity is of paramount importance. Coptic Christians and Muslims are in the struggle for national survival together. We are one nation, one people. We are all betting on Egypt's true mettle.

The time is ripe for searching the country's true soul. The impassioned flames of sectarian strife must be put out. Confessional conflict can only ruin the country's economic prospects. Egypt has been through many upheavals and in recent years the gulf between Muslims and Christians seems to have widened considerably. However, the real test is to stem the tide of zealotry.

The Coptic file, hitherto shelved, must be opened at some point in the near future. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend that the Copts have no problems. We must wake up to the challenge facing the nation.

Let us desist from dithering. The time for examining the concept of national unity in depth is nigh. Egypt cannot be the leading Arab country without demonstrating to the entire world the full spectrum of its democracy. Enhancing the democratic process entails incorporating Coptic interests. Copts are an integral part of the Egyptian nation.

Egypt is fast changing and it is our task to steer the change in the right direction. The dual religious composition has long been part and parcel of the Egyptian national identity. It is in this context that Egypt is trying hard to contain sectarian strife.

We must not forget the gallant efforts made by our security forces to capture those responsible for the terrorist attack on the Two Saints Church in Alexandria. Terrorist cells are busy at work trying to sow the seeds of confessional conflict.

The most important task at hand is healing the nation. The wounds are deep and some Copts feel terribly resentful and indignant. Muslims, therefore, being in the majority must demonstrate magnanimity for the sake of national unity.

If there was anything positive at all concerning what happened it is that it reminded Egyptians that they cannot live in two separate worlds -- one Muslim and the other Coptic.

The sympathy marches of the Muslims hand in hand with their Christian compatriots revive a sense of belonging and reflect the real spirit of this ancient country. Such a gesture reinforces a sense of belonging to one homeland that has witnessed wars galore and revolutions where Muslims and Christians stood shoulder to shoulder, side by side, fighting the common enemy -- foreign invasion, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease and, above all, prejudice.

Source: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1030/ed.htm>



Editorial, 8 January 2011, Saturday

14. Egypt's show of tolerance

The Coptic Christian Christmas passed peacefully in Egypt on Thursday night (6 January) and Friday (7 January), thanks in part to the efforts of the country's moderate Muslims. Thousands turned out to help protect churches following the horrific New Year's Day (2011) suicide bombing at a Mass in Alexandria that killed at least 23 people. Prominent Muslims, including President Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal, attended Christmas Eve services; the country's most senior Muslim leader, Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, has led the way in condemning the attack and calling for tolerance.

These praiseworthy actions, however, do not change two underlying realities: Religious discrimination and violence have been steadily growing in Egypt, and Mr. Mubarak's autocratic regime has worsened the situation through its heavy-handed repression and failure to prosecute those who persecute Christians.

The broader problem is well summarized in the latest report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal government agency that keeps Egypt on its watch list. "Serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against

members of religious minorities, as well as disfavoured Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt," it said in May (2010). "Over the past year, there was an upsurge in violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians. The government has not taken sufficient steps to halt the repression of and discrimination against Christian and other religious believers or, in many cases, punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom." A major case in point is a drive-by shooting after a Mass last Christmas Eve in the southern city of Nag Hammadi, for which no one has been tried.

Mr. Mubarak appeared on national television after the Alexandria attack and claimed that "foreign hands" were responsible for the bombing. The state-run press rushed to point a finger at al-Qaeda. But authorities have so far produced no evidence to back that claim; on the contrary, the deputy interior minister said that the attack was carried out with "locally made explosives," and the prosecutor general conceded Thursday (6 January) that investigators had yet to identify a suspect.

Meanwhile, the regime is busy doing the one thing it is good at: brutalizing opposition activists who had nothing to do with the attack. On Monday (3 January) there were demonstrations in Cairo's Shubra neighbourhood to protest the treatment of Copts that were joined by liberal Muslims who belong to non-violent dissident movements. According to Egyptian human rights groups, security forces separated Copts from Muslims and then went after the Muslim activists, eight of whom were arrested. They were subsequently beaten in a police station and charged with numerous crimes; a hasty trial has been scheduled for next week. On Wednesday (5 January), a fundamentalist preacher was allegedly tortured to death in Alexandria after being arrested by security forces investigating the bombing, according to reports Friday (7 January) by two Egyptian Web sites.

This kind of repression has intensified in the past several years of Mr. Mubarak's 29-year rule, which is one reason that sectarian tensions in Egypt are growing worse rather than better. A show of tolerance on Christmas won't change that record; only genuine political reform will make Egypt a safer place for religious minorities.

Source:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/07/AR2011010705579.html>

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