

COMMENTARY

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Implications of the Death of Pope Shenouda

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The death of Pope Shenouda could not have come at a worse time for Egypt's Coptic Christians. For more than forty years, the Pope served as an important liaison between the regime and his Coptic constituents, maintaining a balance and some semblance of harmony, for the most part, in a volatile socio-political environment lying beneath the surface. The smallest triggers could ignite religious tensions, which sometimes had political underpinnings. We saw this with the attacks on and murders of Copts at the Alexandria church on New Year's Day 2011. This was followed by the vicious October 2011 attack on Copts in Cairo, during protests, where according to BBC News "they were attacked by thugs before the security forces fired on them and drove military vehicles into the crowds..." Protesters blamed the interim military government (SCAF), alleging that it tried to stoke religious violence.

Timing is particularly bad because after Egypt's revolution last year, the post-Mubarak parliament consists mostly of a variety of Islamists. While most Islamist political parties have expressed moderation in their platforms, the Salafist Nour Party continues to manifest hard-line views and policies, even towards Pope Shenouda's death. During a minute of silence in the Egyptian parliament in honour of the Pope, some Salafists belonging to the Nour Party left the session, and some refused to stand, contending, "A minute of silence to mourn someone is not at all mentioned in Islam," reports *al Masry al Youm*. A Nour Party spokesperson later clarified that this was not specifically a reaction to Pope Shenouda, but it is a religious policy that applies "to anyone, whether Muslim or Christian."

The call to stand in silence came from the People's Assembly Speaker Saad al-Katatny, who belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. This illustrates the diversity of

views within the Islamist political spectrum, as well as recognition by the Brotherhood of the significant Coptic constituency.

Egypt is in transition, and the 10 percent Coptic population, out of 85 million, is rightly anxious about the future. With the 2011 revolution and subsequent strong political victories by Islamists in parliament, nearly 100,000 Copts have reportedly fled Egypt out of fear of the Islamist political empowerment. For more than forty years, Pope Shenouda had maintained a delicate balance between politics and religion, especially regarding the Coptic community. Now, whoever replaces him, will have a much more challenging road ahead, because the political outlook harbours tremendous uncertainties. The presidential elections slated for May this year might clear the path for transition from the interim military government (SCAF) to a civilian rule, but politics in Egypt will remain highly complex for several years to come. The political constituents of the country are numerous, with diverse ideological platforms, and with the military being a major and most important stakeholder in the country's future politics. With external relations added into the mix, like Egyptian-US and Egyptian-Israeli relations, the political theatre becomes even more complex.

In such a political atmosphere imbued with confusion, uncertainties and anxiety with individuals and parties manoeuvring for their advantages, there are many moving parts. The new Pope will have to enter this political space with so many uncertainties. He will have to possess more nuanced political shrewdness.

Pope Shenouda learned a hard lesson under the late President Anwar Sadat, when the latter exiled him to a monastery in the western desert. Since then, his relationship with Hosni Mubarak was far more agreeable. However, Pope Shenouda was not a 'Teflon Pope.' He was criticized for appearing too supportive of the Mubarak regime. Consider these acts of unwavering support for the regime, as *Al Akhbar* reports:

Shenouda, for his part, was willing to punish Father Philopater Jamil in 2005 when he suspended him for two years after the priest joined the Ghad Party contesting the stranglehold Mubarak's party, the NDP, had on Egyptian political life.

The late Pope went so far as to praise Gamal Hosni Mubarak in early 2010 as a "suitable man to be president of the republic" at the time when Mubarak the father was grooming his son to inherit the presidency.

Shenouda pressed on with his unwavering support for Mubarak when he stood against Coptic demonstrations in protest of the massacre of the Two Saints Church toward the end of 2010.

This was the protest that witnessed, perhaps for the first time, a clear condemnation of the regime itself and not of hard-line Islamists.

Prior to the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution last year, the church reached the pinnacle of its service to the regime, when it tried through its pastors and priests to deter Copts from participating in the scheduled demonstrations at the time, as the young activist in the Revolutionary Socialists Peter Safwat claims.

Safwat says that the church stayed on the same loyalist path in dealing with the events following the revolution.

According to him, “the church refused to allow Coptic demonstrators (members of the Maspero Youth Union) protesting [against] the Imbaba church incident from entering the cathedral,” under the pretext that “protesting is not part of our values and the solution to our problems is fasting and praying.”

Upon the first anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, Pope Shenouda issued a statement to discourage Copts from participating in demonstrations commemorating Mubarak’s downfall on 11 February, claiming, “disobedience has nothing to do with religion.” Of course, one only needs to study Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. to learn the innate relationship between religion and civil disobedience for the sake of social justice.

The new Pope will have to be more mindful of the will of the masses, rather than appeasing the post-revolution government. The people made indescribable sacrifices to bring democracy to Egypt, and continue the hard struggle to dislodge SCAF from power. It is in the interests of the people, including the Coptic community, to uphold the democratic ideals, rather than allow themselves to be wholly co-opted by future regimes at the expense of their freedoms and rights. That would be repeating history. The Egyptian people want to progress, not regress. And the same is true for the Copts.

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