

Navigating Historical Minority Dilemmas Today: Presenting Violence against Copts to an International Audience after 2011

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Abstract

In the case of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christians, the application of the minority label, especially by outside actors, is viewed as undermining. Labelling Copts a minority is not only resisted as running counter to Coptic discourses of identity but also by Egyptians in general as a threat to national unity (*al-wahda al-wataniya*). At the same time Christians are often targets for violence and suffer from weak representation in the political system. How to manage Coptic inclusion in conceptions of Egyptian national identity while securing Christians and Christian spaces is a dilemma that has evolved but persisted. Indeed, in the aftermath of Egypt's January 25th uprising there has been an increase in violent attacks on Copts. As a result of the uptick of violence stemming from the rise of IS, Coptic church leaders in the diaspora have begun to tap into a broader discourse of genocide against Middle Eastern Christians. This has enabled them to bypass the dilemma over minority language while at the same time providing a framework with which to discuss and raise awareness of the violence against Copts in Egypt to an international audience.

Keywords: Coptic Christians, Egypt, minority politics, national belonging, genocide

Introduction

This article discusses the way in which the term minority has been perceived and developed within a specific national and historical context affects the way a particular community engages with the dilemma of claiming inclusion in the nation while raising awareness

of discrimination and attacks on their community. While the term minority is ubiquitous in western media, policy and academic speech, this belies the controversial nature of its application and debates over its meaning. In the case of Egypt's Coptic Christians, the application of the minority label, especially by outside actors, is often perceived as interference and as undermining the national status of the Copts, as well as undermining Egyptian sovereignty. Therefore, labelling Copts a minority is not only resisted as running counter to Coptic discourses of identity but also by Egyptians in general, as a threat to Egyptian conceptions of national unity and nationhood.

Attacks on Copts have increased since the start of the Arab uprisings and this has necessarily provoked a response from the Coptic leadership, which is largely found among the top layer of the Coptic Orthodox Church leadership, centered around the Patriarch, Tawadros II. In the immediate aftermath of Egypt's uprising, this church leadership was challenged by Copts who sought a voice outside of the institution of the church. Therefore, the leadership has had to balance its commitment to the public discourse of national unity while at the same time acknowledging the frustrations and fears among the Christians of Egypt concerning the insecurity they face in daily life. The leadership has also had to take the substantial Coptic diaspora into account and offer mechanisms through which anger and fears about attacks on Copts can be expressed without undermining the stance of the Coptic leadership vis-à-vis the Egyptian state. This is necessary in order to remain in overall control of the portrayal of Copts both in Egypt and globally, especially in light of the ongoing developments in communications technology and social media.

This article contends that one way in which the Coptic community has sought to solve the dilemma of how to express anger about lack of security for Copts in Egypt while remaining loyal to the entrenched national unity framework is to continue to avoid speech that minoritizes Copts. At the same time, Coptic leadership has had to react to the frustrations brought to the surface in recent years at the lack of security for Copts in Egypt. I suggest that to do this the Coptic church leadership in the diaspora has increased their engagement with the regional and international conversation about a genocide targeting Middle Eastern Christian in general, as well as other religious groups, such as Yazidis. This has given space to raise awareness about the challenges faced by Copts without compromising the entrenched public discourse of

national unity that particularly objects to the labelling of Copts as a minority by foreign actors.

Copts and the Modern History of the Minority Label in Egypt

For some communities, the minority rights framework is an opportunity to achieve enhanced rights and protection and they actively seek this status (Berbrier 2004). For others, the implications of the minority label include ‘difference’ or ‘otherness’, which enhance perceptions of being apart from the nation and can reinforce barriers between communities and challenge national unity. This calls into question the usefulness of the minority label and also requires consideration of the impact of a term that has entered into common usage and modern political consciousness. At least this suggests that the term requires closer investigation in its every day and academic usage. It also requires an unpacking of the historical trajectory of the concept of minority within the specific context of Egypt in order to understand the implications of the term for the Coptic community and why it forms a barrier that still shapes the way Copts represent themselves, their identity and status, and the challenges they have faced since 2011.

While Egyptian Christians acknowledge that numerically they are a religious minority, they prefer not to be described as a national minority (Tadros 2013). This stance was reaffirmed neatly by Pope Tawadros in 2013 when he stated: ‘Yes, we are a minority in the numerical sense, but we are not a minority when it comes to value, history, interaction, and love for our nation.’¹ This distinction demonstrates that the term minority is not simply a numerical categorisation but is also one that has social and political effects (Smith 1987). In this case study, it also sits in tension with the community’s self-identification as indigenous by undermining its understanding of what it means to be a citizen. Therefore, to consider ‘minority’ to be a self-evident category is to obscure the relations of power that it establishes in many instances. Internationally, this is also a challenge because of a tendency to see non-Muslims as beleaguered minorities and even an anomaly in an assumed

1 Weber, K. (February 13 2013) Egypt’s Coptic Leader: ‘Christians Are Not a Minority in Terms of Value to the Nation’, The Christian Post, Online <http://www.christianpost.com/news/egypts-coptic-leader-christians-are-not-a-minority-in-terms-of-value-to-the-nation-89697/> accessed 21 April 2017.

homogenous 'Muslim World'. In this mindset, communities such as Copts are usually invisible, except when they are portrayed as victims. In addition, the role of European powers in setting up regimes such as the capitulations during the Ottoman era and some of the policies employed during the colonial period, have left a legacy of distrust of external actors regarding their intentions vis-à-vis national minorities.

This clearly applies in the Coptic case. The Copts fear that foreign intervention on their behalf undermines their status within the nation, and this includes the activism of diaspora Copts. Indigeneity is central to Coptic identity and advocacy for Coptic rights in the diaspora is seen as denying this. The term Copt is derived from Aigyptos, the ancient Greek name for Egypt, and originally meant simply Egyptian. With the Arab conquest and the subsequent, gradual process of the Islamisation and Arabization of Egypt since the seventh century, the term Copt came to refer only to those Egyptians who remained within the Christian faith. For Copts then, Coptic identity consists of both religious and national elements that are largely intertwined and root their church and Egypt within one another. Former Coptic pope Shenouda III was often heard to repeat the famous slogan: "Egypt is not a nation that we live in but a nation that lives within us." The rootedness of Copts in Egypt is integral to their denominational identity and to the church's understanding of its primacy as the largest Christian community. The authenticity of the church is predicated on its identity as *the* Egyptian national church. Christians make up approximately 5-10 per cent of the population and are not ethnically or linguistically distinguishable from Muslim Egyptians. While Christians are a minority vis-à-vis Muslims, the Coptic orthodox are the majority among Christians, at around 90% and they are the most visible and dominant representative of Christianity in the nation. Indeed, the Coptic orthodox are the largest Christian community in the Middle East, so this dynamic also affects the sense of Copts as spokesmen for Christians in the both the nation and the Middle Eastern region. Since the emergence of the modern nation in Egypt, Copts have sought to have sought a national voice and status, not as an othered minority but as a foundational element of the Egyptian nation.

Christians in Egypt publicly raised grievances about inequalities concerning their status in the nation at the Coptic congress held in 1911 in Assiut. This was followed by a congress held by Muslims that sought to reject Coptic demands, leading to a vigorous debate in the national

press. Yet the force of the Egyptian independence movement against the British and development of ideas of Egyptian nationalism involving unity between Christians and Muslims as a fundamental element meant that since the time of the 1919 revolution, ‘cross and crescent’ imagery became an integral part of the imagination of Egyptian national unity and independence. Consequently, Copts and Muslims rejected the application of the minority label to Copts in the emerging independent nation, along with any special protections in the constitution or parliamentary laws (Mahmood 2016).

1919 is still pivotal in popular imagination about relations between Muslims and Christians in the national space today (Ibrahim 2010: 60; Iskander 2012b). Unity and tolerance, as well as the rejection of the language of minority and majority, are therefore not only part of Coptic identity discourses but of Egyptian expressions of national identity found among both Christians and Muslims. Yet, many of the grievances raised in 1911 remain and over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century Copts found themselves increasingly marginalised from political life. Without calling on the minority label as a mechanism for protection or representation, Copts were neither fully included nor fully protected and increasingly relied on the Coptic church to represent them in political matters. This has left them vulnerable to the violence that successive governments have failed to address and treated as a mere security issue without addressing the social and political aspects behind this situation.

This situation has become entrenched because the Church leadership is bound by a fear of marginalisation within the framework of the Egyptian nation that leads to a public discourse that emphasises national unity and seeks to diffuse tensions between Muslims and Christians, even at the cost of failing to address the roots of discrimination. This has been illustrated by the dependence on the use of reconciliation councils to address disputes between Muslims and Christians rather than use the court system, often resulting in a failure to accord justice or compensation to Coptic victims. In exchange, the Church leadership acts as a national institution that cooperates with the state in a kind of pact between the Pope and the President. This has given public visibility to the church leadership and a channel for the expression of Coptic interests. However, under this framework Copts experience at least as much co-optation as cooperation and thereby remain trapped within

a relationship of unnamable minoritisation and therefore untreatable discrimination.

Coptic Activism and Insecurity after 2011

The Arab Spring moment was embraced by many individual Copts as an opportunity to redress some of the marginalisation processes that were entrenched as a result of this status quo. There was also a sense that Copts should have agency as Egyptian citizens and no longer be treated as a homogenous Coptic political bloc with the pope as their only voice. This was in line with the national mood, as demonstrated by the growth of protest movements such as *Kifaya* (enough) and April 6th in the 2000s. The Coptic Church, being an organ of the state, initially advised Copts against joining the protests but large numbers still took part and national unity slogans and banners were part of the imagery of Egypt's uprising. Recalling the 1919 revolution and the cross and crescent imagery was central to assertions of Egyptian national identity among protesters. Young Christians in particular did try to use the gaps that the uprising had apparently opened up in order to bring their grievances into the open rather than revert to the mechanism provided by the church to put forward their grievances. They campaigned for considering discrimination against Copts and other issues affecting them as national issues to be addressed in the public sphere, rather than within the church space (Doss 2014).

However, these efforts were dismissed in the Egyptian media as 'factional concerns' (Matalib Fi'owiya) that came second to securing Egyptian interests; Coptic interests were thereby minoritised *vis-à-vis* national interests and portrayed as a distraction from the 'real' issues facing the nation despite the insistence on the national unity discourses and symbolism that are still so entrenched in Egyptian nationalism since 1919 (Monier 2012). This echoes the congresses of 1911; the Christian one known as the Coptic congress and the Muslim one as the Egyptian congress. The unspoken implication of this exclusionary discourse (Riggins 1997) is that the Christian concerns were Coptic and the Muslim response represents the Egyptian stance, thereby othering the Copts. In the atmosphere of threat and vulnerability that proceeded from the 2011 uprising, Egypt saw a spate of arson attacks on churches in the months following the uprising (Tadros 2013). This increase in violence against Copts was seen as going unpunished by the government and even being perpetrated by the state during the

Maspero Massacre on October 9, 2011, when army soldiers killed over 20 Coptic protesters. Yet the church leadership held firm to its support of the army-led transitional government, indicating that it was unable or unwilling to risk any disruption to the church-state relationship, bounded by the national unity discourse. Demonstrations held days later also saw protesters chant national unity slogans in response to the Maspero massacre, illustrating the way that this discourse acts as a refuge and defense in times of violence against Christians, rather than becoming a target for criticism.²

This indicates that despite (or because of) the events of 2011 Copts continue to hold to their historic stance that the protection of Copts is to be found in their loyalty to the Egyptian nation and Egyptian citizenship (cf. Labib 2004) and not in outside interference or special protection as a differentiated minority even in times of violent attacks on the community. The brief experience of Muslim Brotherhood rule during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi from 2012-2013 has reinforced the argument that security for Copts and continued existence in the homeland of Egypt is only guaranteed by a cooperative relationship with the government via the Church leadership in promoting the idea of a civil state as opposed to a religious state that would see the encroachment of political Islam that would force Christians out of Egypt. Consequently, after a period of instability and uncertainty about the shape of the relationship between church and state and between individual Copts and their government after 2011, the ouster of Morsi and institution of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as president seem to have sealed the return to the church-state pact (Guirguis 2016: 96).

This support did not protect them from a backlash when Copts were targeted for this support, with around 80 churches and Coptic properties being attacked and often set on fire immediately after the ouster. In fact, this actually played into the resurrection of the ‘cooperation for security’ arrangement between church and state because the attacks were likely carried out by Brotherhood supporters. Under the al-Sisi government, the Muslim Brotherhood represented the main enemy of the Egyptian nation and Egypt’s 25 January uprising. The attacks on

2 YouTube User Al Masry al Youm, Maseerat al “wahda al wataniya” tantalaq min al Azhar lil Kat’idra’iya” [National Unity March starts from al Azhar and Heads to the Cathedral] uploaded October 14 2011, online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzVw5vMrcek>, Accessed May 9 2018.

Copts supported the discourse that placed responsibility for trying to break up the unity of Egypt at the door of the Muslim Brotherhood. The cooperation between church and state then reinforced the traditional national unity attitude and provided the government with further justification for the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. It also limits the political freedom of Coptic individuals as they continue to be treated as single political bloc.

As a result, Copts act like a political minority in a kind of millet system, in which political representation is via religious leaders and not via direct representation. Thus while Copts refuse to accept formal protection as a minority, they in fact act like an unofficial minority without the formal guarantees of minority protection or recognition, such as through a parliamentary quota that would guarantee a degree of political representation for Copts as an alternative to the Church-state pact. As in 1922/3, the idea of a quota for Copts as debated post 2011, is seen as undermining national unity but designating Copts as a minority in need of special protections to ensure inclusion. While ideally special measures would not be needed to ensure representation, it remains a reality that there are challenges left unresolved by the aversion to introducing any speech or mechanism that implies Copts are a minority.

The Emergence of IS and Forming a Transnational Narrative of Violence Against Copts

Although the 2011 uprising by and large failed to alter the situation for Copts in Egypt, it has forced some small changes in the dynamics of the community, especially vis-à-vis the way the Coptic leadership shapes the portrayal of events in international circles. Added to this insecurity within Egypt though was the emergence of Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. This has had the effect of increasing the transnational element of the security threat to Christians in Egypt. Not only is the threat from terrorism stemming from inside Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood but also international terrorism is reaching in from outside Egypt's borders. In fact, 21 Copts were killed in 2015 in Libya by IS affiliates and in 2017 IS issued a warning that Copts would from then on be a major target (Tadros 2017). A series of attacks on Copts by IS affiliates in North Sinai even led to the internal displacement of a number of Christian families (Ibrahim 2018).

This changing dynamic has led to a new development in the way violence against Copts is portrayed. How to portray attacks on Copts has been a sensitive issue as a result of the minority dilemma described above. It has been particularly sensitive in international circles with Copts in the diaspora who employ minority rights language to call for pressure on the Egyptian government portrayed by Egyptian media in general and also the Coptic leadership, as traitors to Egypt and as seeking to undermine Egyptian sovereignty. This is part of the legacy of the historically embedded sense that foreign actors exploit calls for minority protection to undermine Egyptian sovereignty and national unity (Iskander 2012b). However, IS's rise to global prominence in 2014 has provided a new context. That is the adoption of the genocide discourse that has also been employed by Christians and other communities such as the Ezidis (Yezidis) in Iraq and who have suffered extreme violence and displacement as a result of the actions of IS (Monier 2017).

The actors involved in raising international awareness of the persecution of Copts have also changed with church leaders in the diaspora becoming increasingly visible in global media rather than the Coptic civil society activists that had in previous decades sought to campaign for minority protection. Figures like Bishop Angaelos, the Coptic Bishop of London, have been heavily involved with the campaign for the US congress to describe IS's actions as a genocide against Middle Eastern Christians and Ezidis. He has spoken on the BBC's Hardtalk programme about genocide against Christians in the Middle East and the persecution of Copts, as well as the need for the global community to act.³ Similarly, Bishop Suriel, Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Melbourne, has been increasingly vocal in Australian media and social media (Saad and Westbrook 2017) in publicising attacks on Copts and calling for global awareness about the genocide of Middle Eastern Christians.⁴

While such figures might occasionally use the term minority in their speech or writings, this is not usually to call for protection as minorities

3 Bishop Angaelos on BBC Hardtalk, 24 April 2017, Accessed 26 February 2018, Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0509gzz> ; Interview with General Bishop Angaelos, BBC Hardtalk, 20 August 2014, Accessed 26 February 2018, Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3csw9hh>

4 See for example, The Horrific Genocide of Christians in the Middle East, *AINA*, August 2 2014, Accessed 26 February online: <http://www.aina.org/news/20140801201647.htm>

but for protection of citizens that are being targeted for their religious affiliation. Their speech also places this call in terms of building a culture of citizenship and justice for all. In his testimony at a congressional hearing on 'Human Rights Abuses in Egypt' in Washington in December 2013 Bishop Angaelos said:

“Since the uprising, and due to a decrease in law and order resulting from the turbulent period under the rule of Mr Mohammed Morsi, there have been increasing challenges facing Christian and minority groups in Egypt. Having said that, and in looking to the future, we continue to support the current process of rebuilding Egypt with a new constitution and ethos, and support the whole community as it calls for change.”⁵

This extract from his testimony still shows a reluctance to use the term minority for Copts by referring to “Christians *and* minority groups” separately. There is also an evident commitment to address the problem of violent persecution within the national framework and as part of addressing the social and political challenges facing the Egyptian nation as a whole, so it is not a call for improving the rights of certain groups but of improving the situation for all Egyptians. This testimony was given in 2013 when the main concern in Egypt was the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporting the presidency of al-Sisi.

Moving into 2014, this speech evolves again to place more emphasis on the genocide aspect as it is from August 2014 onwards that IS really comes into play and the world begins to see the cruelty of their actions in Syria and Iraq. The focus is not on Copts but there is a concern to highlight the violence against Christians, Ezidis and other groups in Iraq, Syria *and* Egypt. In doing so, the attacks on Copts become a global issue beyond borders and not a localized Coptic or Egyptian problem but one that is the responsibility of the international community. It is not a problem of a national minority, but a global problem of citizens targeted by extremists who seek to divide the peoples of the region and are therefore enemies of national unity and regional stability. In this

5 Grace Bishop Angaelos testified at Hearing, *Coptic Orthodox Church Centre UK*, Accessed 27 February 2018, Online: <http://www.copticcentre.com/grace-bishop-angaelos-testified-at-a-congressional-hearing/>

framework the issue at stake is not one of minority protection from discrimination within national borders, but an ethical one that supports victims of a transnational terrorist phenomenon. This gives a partial answer to the dilemma of how to highlight the problems faced by Copts in Egypt to an international audience without abandoning the Coptic stance on the national minority label. In this way, while history and national politics have bound Egyptians within a national unity discourse that denies the applicability of minority rights to Copts or to an indigenous issue of sectarianism, Copts have sought agency within global debates on the violence against Christians, including Copts, in the Middle East. In this way they have increased their visibility without compromising their stance within Egypt.

In the case of Copts, the deeply embedded rejection of the label appears to demonstrate that the community seeks to remain in control of its own categorisation and to claim agency in the definition of its relationship vis-à-vis national identity and belonging (cf. Iskander 2012a). However, I would suggest that the entrenched and hegemonic national unity discourse that is rooted in the social and political developments that took place in Egypt during the early part of the twentieth century, also acts as a boundary beyond which Copts, and Egyptians in general, cannot step. Consequently, alternative discourses that allow the flexibility to raise awareness of the challenges faced by Coptic community without contradicting the hegemonic of national unity discourse by, for example, utilizing minority terminology, needed to be found to enable the Coptic and Egyptian leaderships to manage the circumstances thrown up by the Arab Spring.

Conclusion: transcending the national minority dilemma in Egypt

This article has revealed that Christians in Egypt have been involved in a process of negotiating their status and belonging since the emergence of the modern independent Egyptian nation. This process is far more complex than a simple minority-majority binary based on religious affiliation. In fact, Copts, and Egyptians in general, prefer not to use minority-majority language for historical and political reasons that have governed the way the understanding of the term minority has evolved and been applied since the early twentieth century and into the present day. This has affected the way Copts respond to and portray violent

attacks on their community as they negotiate constructions of identity that are at once both religious and national. As a result, how to respond to the label of minority that is frequently applied in international media and political speech has been a particular dilemma for the leaders of the Coptic community.

Copts are not without any agency and seek to influence the way they are portrayed both in Egypt and internationally. The most recent phase in this continual process of negotiating the status of Copts in the nation is the post-2011 period during which there were social and political ruptures leading to instability in forms of political action and social relations. In response to this, and particularly to the uptick in violence against Christians in the Middle East with the emergence of IS, Coptic leaders in the diaspora have constructed new spaces in which they can normalise their visibility and raise awareness of the struggle with sectarian violence without having to employ calls for the protection of minority rights for Copts. This has come in the form of taking an active part in the global discussion of genocide against Christians (and other groups) in the Middle East.

While tapping into a globally recognised and emotive genocide discourse they continue to hold to their historic stance that the protection of Copts is to be found in their Egyptian citizenship, not in outside interference. Copts are not bypassing the nation in doing this but are actually seeking to reinforce national unity narratives and calls to strengthen the culture of national citizenship. It also avoids the marginalising accusations of factional interests that raising issues of Coptic rights directly at national level has previously provoked. This has enabled them to partially bypass the dilemma over minority language while at the same time providing a framework within which to discuss and raise awareness of the violence against Copts in Egypt to an international audience.

While it appears that Copts, in adopting and adapting to this format for discussing the violence against Christians in Egypt, are asserting agency over their representation, they are also constrained by the rejection of the minority label. The historical narratives that problematise any mechanisms that could guarantee representation and inclusion specifically for Copts because of the negative association with creating Copts as a permanent minority community, for example a parliamentary quota, form a barrier to achieving representation of Coptic concerns except via the Church leadership. This has not prevented Coptic interests from being seen at the national level as other to Egyptian interests.

Additionally, authority is centralised in the religious leadership which eventually undermines a secular conception of citizenship or political representation and in effect maintains the religious aspect of the boundary between citizens because representation is based on religious affiliation. Although the church leadership in the diaspora has been engaging with international audiences using new language of genocide against Christians in general, the situation within Egypt is more guarded and the speech is less innovative. Within Egypt there is heavier reliance on the traditional national unity speech that dominates any issues that touch on Muslim-Christian relations and maintains the status quo; a system of unmentionable majority/minority relations that enable the entrenched inequalities to persist. Even in the diaspora the innovations adopted in the portrayal of Coptic concerns and attacks on Christians to international audiences remain restricted by the limitations that require the avoidance of speech that could suggest that Copts are a minority who require any special guarantees to ensure their representation and security within the Egyptian nation.

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