

## **A New Vision of the Copts of Egypt: State Policy and Inner Difficulties (1948–1957): In Light of US State Department Documents**

**Noha Osman Azmy\* and Louay Mahmoud Saied\*\***

### **Introduction**

The term Copt originally came from the Greek word *Aiguptos* meaning “Egyptian.” It became synonymous in Egypt with native Christians since the Arab conquest.<sup>1</sup> The Copts are the largest Christian community in the Middle East, geographically concentrated mainly in Egypt, where they constitute some 10–16% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Although most of the writers used to refer to the Copts in Egypt as minority, the Copts themselves used to deny that.<sup>3</sup>

The first half of the 20th century can be arguably considered the turning point in the Copt’s modern history. The year 1911 witnessed the first Copts’ claim of discrimination and the 1923 constitution was the first official step, according to some Copts, against their sense of belonging to Egypt by declaring Islam as State religion. There is a prevalent narrative of entrenched and pervasive discrimination against Egypt’s Coptic community in that period. It behooves us then to look closely at this dominant narrative to determine its legitimacy.

1952–1957 was a tumultuous period in Egypt. The country witnessed the collapse of its monarchy and the rise of a revolutionary republic. Although there had been Coptic claims of discrimination before the 1952 Revolution, the Free Officers’ relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, their little Coptic knowledge and the absence of any Coptic figure in the junta increased their fear towards the new regime.

The Arab-Israeli War in 1948 and the Tripartite Aggression in 1956 were events that deeply affected the Copts’ feeling of insecurity in Egypt. The Copts were under strained relations with the Muslim Brotherhood because of their violent actions after 1948 war, and had to approve their loyalty to their homeland Egypt after the Suez Crisis. Between both wars, they suffered from the inner conflict between the reformers and the conservatives and the state policy that encouraged some Copts to convert to Islam.

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\* Associate Professor, Tourism Guidance Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Sadat City University.

\*\* Associate Professor, Tourism Guidance Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Sadat City University; Director of the Coptic Studies Center, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt.

1 E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt: Spatial and Social Change*, (Durham: Center of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986), 14.

2 David Zeidan, “The Copts-Equal, Protected or Persecuted?: The Impact of Islamization on Muslim-Christian Relations in Modern Egypt,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 10, No 1, (1999), 53.

3 A minority may be defined as “group of people who were in some way different from and dominated by the people around them. This group might be differentiated by religion, physical features, language, customs, and heritage, shared experience and nationality or by a combination of these.” E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt: Spatial and Social Change*, 11, Lise Paulsen Galal, “Coptic Christians Practices: Formation of Sameness and Difference,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, No1, (2012), 47–48.

Previous historians have approached the topic of the Coptic community in Egypt in this period from a number of perspectives. Vivian Ibrahim claimed that the authoritarian policy of President Gamal Abdel Nasser was behind the Coptic inner difficulties and reason for their sufferings.<sup>4</sup>

Edward Wakin's work "*A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*" is remarkable narrative of the Egyptian Coptic community. He focused on the Copts' relation with the state arguing that all was because of the state policy; and the Copts did not best use the Suez Crisis to bargaining for their deprived rights. He mentioned that from President Gamal Abdel Nasser's attitude to the Copts, in all occasions, anyone could realize that the Copts were not among Nasser's close interest. Nasser did not hate the Church but he considered it as an Egyptian or national Church.<sup>5</sup>

A number of Egyptian and primarily Coptic historians have questioned the reasons behind inner difficulties during this period. Samira Bahr and Hany Labib<sup>6</sup> believed that the corruption inside the Church and the weak role of the Patriarch were the reasons of the Copts' crisis during this period. While others believed that two main reasons determined the relations between the Copts and the state and might be the root reason for the sectarian sedition: First, the measures that the Egyptian President Nasser took to resist the Muslim Brotherhood's influence like making the religion an obligatory course in all educational school levels and open al-Azhar university for the Muslims students to study all the science branches and not the religious sciences only as before; second, the nationalization and land reform.<sup>7</sup> While others saw that the authoritarian nature of the Nasser's regime weakened the role of lay Copts in political participation, thus strengthening the role of the Coptic Pope in political matters.<sup>8</sup>

While all these studies are useful in one sense or another, the topic of the arguable relation between the Copts and the State and its influence on the inner difficulties deserve a comprehensive holistic study, which takes into consideration the full context of the local and global situation. While it is common to study bits and pieces of Egyptian social life as it concerns its minority populations it is less common, to find a historian who analyzes claims of discrimination to reach the truth concerning the Egyptian policy in this critical period of Egypt's history.

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4 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernization and Identity*, (London, Tauris Academic Studies, 2011).

5 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, (Nebraska, NE.: iUniverse, Inc., 2000).

6 Samira Bahr, *al-Aqbat fi al-Hayat al-Siyasiyah al-Misriyah (the Copts in the Egyptian Political Life)*, (Cairo: Anglo, 1979), Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr (the Crisis of the Religious Protectorate: the Religion and the State in Egypt)*, (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2000).

7 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtiyah wa Ta'rikh-ha al-Mu'asir (the Nationalism of the Coptic Church and its Contemporary History)*, (Cairo: Harmony, 2002), 147.

8 Ami Ayalon, "Egypt's Coptic Pandora's Box," In *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, edited by G. Ben-Dor & O. Bengio (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 53.

This study will argue that prior to 1952 there were some Coptic claims of discrimination and conflict inside the Coptic community; and some prominent Coptic members contacted the US Embassy in Cairo to ask for their interference. After 1952, the Free Officers' relation with the Muslim Brotherhood increased the Copts' fear towards the new regime and was the reason for establishing their violent societies. The documents proved that one of the Coptic officials claimed that Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Government and army had used the campaign against corruption as a weapon against Copts in the Government service. The State relation with the Church was reshaped after the inner conflict of 1954 and kidnapping of Patriarch Yussab II. The Tripartite Aggression of 1956 was the good chance for the Copts to prove their loyalty to their homeland to Egypt. But their claims of discrimination in 1957 were not new in compare with prior to the 1952 Revolution; the only difference was that they were sure that Abdel Nasser's policy was not interested in their benefits.

It is clear that these Coptic claims of discrimination were built around the belief that Egyptian Copts were being persecuted by the government ignoring the facts concerning the inner conflict inside the Church. The continuing declassification of US State Department documents has been of importance for the study of many subjects related to the State policy and Coptic community; here an attempt is made to reconsider the state policy towards the Copts in light of this material. The US Departments of State records indicated that the Egyptian Coptic community faced violent action before the 1952 Revolution, but the United States did not have a plan to intervene in the Egyptian inner affairs during that time. And the kidnapping of Anba Yussab II was not only because of the financial corruption of his servant Malak, but also because of an abnormal relation with him that was refused by the Coptic Nation.

The US State Department documents will be the primary source material for this study. The United States was the power that the Copts were keen to contact and to ask for support as a superpower in the Middle East prior to 1952 Revolution. During the period of the research, it was keen to have close eye on the Egypt's policy towards the minorities; and to investigate whether their inner conflict and claims of discriminations were because of Nasser's regime or not. The American reports focused on the Coptic fear of the Islamic current that was clearly shown in the 1956 constitution and the abolition of *shari'ah* courts. The Copts' fear of the Islamic thought based regime continued during the period of 1952–1957, till Nasser managed to have strong ties with Patriarch Kyrillos VI.

According to Islam, the Jews and Christians were acknowledged as *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book) and if they chose to retain their faith but recognize the rule of the Islamic empire, they became known as *dhimmi* (covenanted people). They were given freedom of worship and accorded protection by Muslim rulers in return for paying a *jizyah* (tribute).<sup>9</sup>

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9 Fiona McCallum, "Religious Institutions and Authoritarian state: Church-State Relations in the Middle East," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No 1, (2012), 115.

Since the time of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (1805–1849), while the Jews’ population was about 7,000; most of them lived in one quarter in Cairo, 1,200 of them were Karaites and the rest were Rabbinites, the Copts were about 150,000 distributed into many quarters through the whole country and had about 130 churches and monasteries.<sup>10</sup> The Church as a religious institution was the field of the Copts’ activities and the center of their knowledge and awareness. During the time of ‘Abbas Pasha, who ruled Egypt in 1849, he wanted to exile all the Copts from the Egyptian lands to Sudan. That opinion was totally rejected by al-Azhar Imam, Sheikh al-Baquri, wondering what the Christian brothers did to exile them. The first turning point in the Copts’ modern history was under Sa‘id Pasha’s rule. In 1854, he relinquished the last point of persecution to the Copts by removing the *jizyah* and allowed them to be recruited in the Egyptian army. The year 1866 was the launch of the parliamentary life in Egypt by establishing *al-Shura* (consultative) Council by Khedive Ismail. According to that new pretended democratic life, all Egyptians, regardless of their religion, had the right to enjoy their political rights; that made all the Egyptians had the same view to the political cause and to the world.<sup>11</sup>

When Khedive Tawfiq tried, under the British occupation, to stop working with the constitution, the first political party was established under the title of National Party. Article five of its chapter, that was written by Muhammad ‘Abduh,<sup>12</sup> ensured that it was political not religious party, it gathered characters of different sects, some were Copts and others were Jews, because it did not look to their religion but its main interest was the political cause.<sup>13</sup>

### The Social and Economic Status of the Copts

The first arguable census for the number of the Copts was during the French Expedition to Egypt in 1789. The French scholars mentioned that the Egyptian population was 2.5 million, 17% of them were Copts.<sup>14</sup> Then their number increased through the years:<sup>15</sup>

| The year | The Copts | The number of the Egyptians | Source |
|----------|-----------|-----------------------------|--------|
| 1879     | 331,235   | 10,016,917                  | Census |
| 1907     | 661,692   | 11,185,478                  | Census |
| 1917     | 1,025,852 | 12,717,861                  | Census |
| 1927     | 1,181,910 | 14,177,864                  | Census |
| 1937     | 1,303,910 | 15,910,694                  | Census |
| 1947     | 1,501,635 | 18,966,763                  | Census |
| 1960     | 1,905,382 | 25,984,101                  | Census |

10 Clot Bey, *Lamhah ‘Ammah ila Misr (General Look to Egypt)*, trans. Muhammad Mas‘ud, Part 2, (Cairo: Dar al-Mawqif al-‘Arabi, 2001), 253–254.

11 Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr*, 36.

12 Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–11 July 1905) was an Egyptian Islamic jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, regarded as one of the key founding figures of Islamic Modernism, sometimes. Malcolm H. Kerr, “‘Abduh Muhammad,” in Dale H. Hoiberg, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I: A-ak Bayes (15th ed.). (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2010), 20–21.

13 Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr*, 37.

14 Farag Tawfiq Zakhur, *Qissat al-Aqbat (the Story of the Copts)*, (Tripoli: Gross Press, 1993), 16.

15 Derek Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945–1990*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 164.

Two important factors affected the rise of the Coptic populations in Egypt: first, the British occupation that announced the protection of the minorities; second, after the 1922 Declaration that considered the minorities, including the Copts, an important condition for Egypt's independence.

The 1927 and 1937 censuses were considered among the most accurate for the Christians. They were trying to avoid military service, so they were not keen to register their children. The tax officer registers were the most accurate source about the Christian numbers as they dominated the tax collection since the Arab conquest. An independent estimates occurred in 1927 mentioned that there had been 912,000 Coptic Orthodox Christians; and if the foreign Christians would be taken into account the number would be almost 1.2 million.<sup>16</sup>

Concerning the Coptic geographical distribution in Egypt, over 60% of the Copts prefer to live in Upper Egypt, particularly in Asyut and Minya. About 25% of Egyptian Copts lived in Cairo and 6% in Alexandria. The rest were distributed in the Delta, the Suez Canal and desert provinces.<sup>17</sup>

In the villages, the Copts used to be peasants. In the towns, the Copts were employed in the departments that related to record-keeping, accountancy and translations. The highest number of the Copts used to be found in the Ministries of: Public Works, Finance and Postal and Telegraphic Services.<sup>18</sup> The Copts constituted 45% of the Egyptian civil service and 98% of the tax collectors. On the civil posts level, in the first half of the 20th century the Copts dominated the posts of teachers, professors, doctors, chemists, bankers, merchants, industrial managers, and all posts that the Muslims were prohibited to be like rubbish collectors.<sup>19</sup>

Although the Copts denied the minority idea, but their fear of persecution still existed towards the educational system in Egypt. In 1933, all primary school teachers were Muslims; the Copts felt that their children were under the influence of Muslim teachers. The conversion of some 600 Copts to Islam was considered by the Copts as a direct impact of the incorrect educational policy of the government.<sup>20</sup>

In response to ignoring their demands of teaching Christianity in elementary schools, the Coptic community encouraged the Coptic associations to construct schools for their children. In 1934, the Coptic associations held a conference to discuss the issue and to enter the course of the history of the Church and the Coptic language among the curricula of the associations' schools. It was recommended to encourage the Coptic journalism and called for Christianity

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16 E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt*, 28–29.

17 J. D. Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (1982), 159.

18 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernization and Identity*, 76.

19 E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt*, 88.

20 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 79–80.

course in compulsory schools for Coptic students. By the end of the same year, when the number of the compulsory schools reached 3,000, the Holy Synod issued a statement mentioning its participation in the compulsory education and establishing schools for the Coptic students. It asked the Ministry of Education to use the graduates of the ecclesiastical Schools to teach the Christianity course in the schools and the government to help the Copts on constructing their schools.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Copts' First Persecution Feeling**

It seemed that the education was not the only persecution that the Copts suffered from. The political position of the Coptic community was deteriorating. Since mid of the 20th century the administrative independence of the community and the traditional monopolies they had enjoyed under Ottoman rule had been slowly dismantled. By 1907, a number of incidents had increased anti-British sentiments, encouraged the growing nationalist movement. However, the nationalist press campaign continued and in November 1910, the pro-British Coptic Prime Minister, Butrus Ghali, was assassinated by a Muslim pharmacist, Ibrahim Wardani, who was quickly hailed as a hero by the nationalists.

The first split in the Coptic community occurred after that incident. Shortly after Ghali's murder, a number of prominent Copts organized a Coptic Congress in the Upper Egyptian town Asyut, in order to publically announce a list of complaints. Two months later a group of prominent Muslims organized what they called an 'Egyptian Congress' in Heliopolis to reject Coptic claims of discrimination and to reaffirm their conclusion that the proper religion of the Egyptian nation was Islam as the religion of the majority. The Coptic and Egyptian congresses marked an important turning point in the Egyptian state. For most historians, 1911 was the first time the Coptic community appeared on the Egyptian political scene as a cohesive and politicized 'minority.'<sup>22</sup>

The legal and constitutional position of the Copts in modern Egyptian society was defined in a wide debate on the representation of minorities, which was held following the Declaration of 28 February 1922. According to that Declaration, Egypt was to be independent with four provisos, the most notable of which was the protection of minorities. Tewfik Doss, a Copt, explained that he thought that minorities should have the right of representation. Politically he underlined the importance of removing any pretext for foreign intervention under the guise of protecting minorities.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Tariq al-Bishri, *al-Muslimun wa al-Aqbat fi Itar al-Jama'ah al-Wataniyah (Muslims and Copts in the Framework of the National Community)* (Cairo: General Egyptian Organization for Books, 1981), 321–322.

22 B. L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics 1918–1952*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1986), 14.

23 Samy Fawzy, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Egypt", *Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, Vol. 17:1, (2000), 35.

Coptic opposition to the reserved points was vehement. The Copts insisted that they were not a minority and that any division made between Copts and Muslims was artificial. They feared that this reservation would destroy the national unity and serve as a ready excuse for British interference in Egyptian affairs. In one important meeting in St. Peter's Church in Cairo in May 1922, leading Coptic and Muslim Wafdists attacked all the reserved points and demanded the return of their exiled leaders. The Egyptian calls for unity resisted the British claims of protecting the minority. Later, Allenby, the British Proconsul to Egypt, showed that this reserved point of 1922 Declaration was not in Britain's interest and had to be dropped to avoid Copts-Muslim unity against the British.<sup>24</sup>

Fear again found its way to the Copts after the 1923 constitution, when its article mentioned that the "Islam is the religion of the state."<sup>25</sup> Although the Wafd successive governments tried to stress on the national unity between the Copts and the Muslims, the British occupation and its pro-governments tried to use this Copts-Muslims disputes to widen the disunity and weaken the Wafd Party through spreading the Coptic fear of discrimination, the religious disputes and bias the majority on account of the minority in election, promotions and high posts.

During the last years of King Farouk's reign (1936–1952), the bitter complaints of the Copts were published in the Coptic newspaper *Misr*. In the Coptic magazine *al-Manarah*, in 1951, it was issued that this nation consisted of two sections, the Muslims and the Copts. The bitter smile could be seen on the faces of three millions Copts while they were remembering the happy years when Wafd Party used to join Coptic persons as members, representatives and leaders of the nation, then it prayed for the late leader Sa'ad Zaghlul. On February 19, 1951, *al-Manarah* magazine compared between the Copts and the Jews who were exiled from Egypt, asking about the Copts who were discriminated and chased by their natives, which safe road to follow, and which desert to protect them.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Copts and Muslim Brotherhood Violence**

The absence of Wafd Party and the weak influence of the British pushed some Copts to contact the emerging and promising new powers i.e. the United States. In October 1951, an important conversation happened between Mr. Farag Goubran and Mr. Ortiz in the US Embassy in Cairo. While lunching with Mr. Goubran, who was a point IV governmental trainee and who was also an author and contributor to *Akhbar al-Yaum*, one of Egypt's leading newspapers, he said that he wished to discuss most confidentially a matter of grave importance with the United States. Mr. Ortiz told Goubran that perhaps he should discuss

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24 B. L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics 1918–1952*, 72–73.

25 Samira Bahr, *al-Aqbat fi al-Hayat al-Siyasiyah al-Misriyah*, 146.

26 *al-Manarah*, 29 February, 1951.

this matter officially at the State Department. However, his official position as well as other consideration, he said, made this unwise.

Goubran felt obligated to draw the attention of the US State Department to the serious developing situation of the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt, of which he was a member. He said that there were two million Copts in Egypt who were becoming increasingly alarmed by the growing instance of discrimination against them by the Muslim majority. The Muslim Brotherhood, he said, was primarily the cause for these serious manifestations of religious enmity. He said that it was particularly regrettable that the execution of many of the social reforms by the Egyptian Government was being used by the Muslim fanatics as a weapon against the Christian minority.

The Coptic Christians, Goubran said, could only look towards the United States to protect them in the event this religious discrimination became more serious. Ortiz told Goubran that he was very sorry to hear that situation in Egypt, and that he could offer him no hope concerning intervention of the United States in such a situation. Speaking only personally, he told him that there were ways by which a minority could protect itself in the event of serious persecutions and that this would be chiefly through the international organizations which were able to deal with such problems.<sup>27</sup>

Goubran closed the subject by saying that he hoped that the Americans could look into this situation and that should remember that they could always count on the Coptic Minority as the US' firm friends in Egypt.<sup>28</sup> The United States realized that supporting the minority or using the religious discrimination was not the right approach to intervene in Egypt's internal affairs during that time. Opposing the main opponent of the British and the supporter of the Free Officers, meant the Muslim Brotherhood, would be against the US' goal to replace Britain in Egypt and to get rid of the old Egyptian regime.

The Muslim Brotherhood's main thoughts were established upon the idea of eliminating foreign and corrupted figures to return to the ideals of the early Islamic society. Struggling against the nonbelievers and their opponents under the title of jihad was the reason of the Coptic fear of this organization. They were founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, who acted as Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and the most talented preacher of the Islamic currents during the 20th century.<sup>29</sup>

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27 The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation, Discrimination against Coptic Christian Minority in Egypt, Between Mr. Farag Goubran and NE Mr. Ortiz, Secret*, October 2, 1951, From American Legation, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1-2.

28 The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation, Discrimination against Coptic Christian Minority in Egypt*, 2.

29 The aims of the Society were clearly stated by al-Banna to his followers: "You are not a benevolent society, nor a political party, nor a local organization having limited purposes. Rather, you are a new soul in the heart of the nation to give it life by means of the Quran... When asked what it is you propagate, reply that it is Islam, the message of Muhammad, the religion that contains within it a government... If you are told that you are politician, answers that Islam admits no such distinction. Islam was seen by the Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood had a deep influence among the lower and middle Egyptian classes. Hundreds of thousands of the activists were members in the Muslim Brotherhood society. This influence and the large members' number were especially evident in the countless demonstrations, marches, and protests the Brotherhood staged between 1945 and 1948, the strong period of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>30</sup>

The escalated incidents after the abrogation of the Anglo-Egyptian 1936 treaty, in October 1951, carried unsafe feeling for the Copts. The Muslim Brothers were allowed by the Wafd government to have arms, to fight with the leftist groups and the students against the British forces in the Suez Canal.<sup>31</sup>

The deep rooted belief of the Muslim Brotherhood made them suspicious about any different sect. their violence was not only against the British in Suez Canal but also against the foreigners and the Jews even in Cairo. The Muslim Brotherhood suspicious of the Copts to act as spies for the British directed their violence against them too.<sup>32</sup>

In January 1952, riots and burning a church were the remarkable things in the Copts-Muslims relations in Suez. Under the murdering of five Copts, protests and petitions in a number of newspapers were published to represent the Copts' objections at the events.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Copts and the 1952 Revolution**

The 1952 Revolution marked the end of the royal regime in Egypt and beginning of the republican one. Although the new regime put new principles to ensure social integration between the different classes and sections through: the Copts' participation in Egypt's liberty, ensuring the Church's role in the national cause against the Israeli aggression, and equality between all Egyptians regardless of their religious sect,<sup>34</sup> the Copts' worry was kept hidden in their hearts.

Being of lower middle class of the Egyptian society that was influenced by Islam, and not including a Coptic member were reasons for the Copts to have a negative image about the military junta that came to power in 1952.<sup>35</sup> Some members of the junta had strong ties with Muslim Brotherhood, like Kamal al-Din Hussein, who would later on be the Minister of Education.<sup>36</sup>

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as a total system, complete in itself and the final arbiter of life in all its aspects". Derek Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945–1990*, 22.

30 Selma Botman, "The Liberal Age," in M. W. Daly (ed.), *Cambridge History of Egypt*, Part II, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301.

31 Derek Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945–1990*, 23–24.

32 Hugh Goddard, "Challenges and Developments: Christian-Muslim Relations in the Middle East," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, (2003), 24–25.

33 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 155.

34 Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr*, 20.

35 D. Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," 164.

36 S. S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, (New York: Oxford University Press,

The Head of the new regime, Muhammad Naguib, was keen to calm the Copts' worry as main part in Egypt's society. In a speech given at the Coptic Youth Society in Alexandria in September 1952, Naguib announced that the post-revolutionary Egypt would depend on the unity between Copts and Muslims. He invited the reformist Coptic organizations to encourage modernization and cleanse of the old administrative apparatus. Many of the Coptic benevolent societies increasingly operated as pressure groups to address the shortcomings of the Patriarchy.

Naguib accepted an invitation of Qommu Sergius to attend a patriotic ceremony at his church in Qulqali in September 1952. Sergius was able to establish close links with the RCC (Revolutionary Command Council) due to his nationalist history in 1919. In the presence of General Naguib, Sergius stated that the new Revolutionary Command required purification everywhere,<sup>37</sup> which was an indicator of the Copts' acceptance to the demanded reforms.

It was clear from the beginning that Gamal Abdel Nasser was not just a member of the junta, but he was the real leader and the coming head of the country. One of the Catholic missionary talked about Nasser's origin and his relation with the Copts "Beni Murr, the village where Nasser was born in, was about two miles to North-East of Asyut in Upper Egypt. One third of this village population was Copts. The big landlords were also Copts. The Christianity in this village was not attractive to anyone because the ecclesiastical men were weak and not active, keen to collect money rather than keep on their prayers."<sup>38</sup> The Copts believed that Nasser did not meet through his life some Copts with strong characters that could effect on him. And all who wrote about Nasser did not mention any distinguishable book about Christianity that Nasser read. Nasser and Muslim Brotherhood's relations prior to the Revolution exaggerated the Coptic fear. The Copts' experience with the Muslim Brotherhood's discrimination was still in their minds and hearts. The Muslim Brotherhood was among the main supporters to the Free Officers in their Coup against the royal regime in Egypt; that was might be the reason when the political parties were dissolved in 1953, their society had not been touched; and they had the same number of representatives as the Copts had in the committee in charge of the draft constitution.

It was claimed that one of the Free Officers mentioned in a television interview that the RCC members worried about the Copts reaction to the Revolution rather than the King Farouk's abdication. The Officers thought that their relation with Muslim Brotherhood might push the Copts to ask for foreign protectorate, particularly Britain that already still had some military bases in Suez Canal.<sup>39</sup>

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2003), 170.

37 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 160.

38 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 47.

39 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtayah wa Ta'rikh-ha al-Mu'asir*, 12-13.

From their side, the Muslim Brotherhood did not try to stop this Coptic worry, on contrary their violence resumed just few weeks after the Revolution. According to an American report, certain anti-Christian manifestations had occurred during the November 1952 and given rise to some disquietude on the part of the Copts in Egypt. At the beginning of December 1952, a Coptic church was burned at "Tema," a village in Upper Egypt, by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, according to information, which the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo had obtained. A second incident occurred a day or two later at the university in Cairo when, in a meeting students, one young man shouted, "The Quran must be our constitution," two Coptic boys shouted in turn "the Crescent and the Cross." They were immediately beaten up by the others. The next day General Muhammad Naguib, the Head of the Free Officers, called at the houses of the two boys and presented each of them a copy of the Bible.<sup>40</sup>

The connections between the Copts and the US Embassy were also on the formal level. According to American documents, a Coptic government official informed an officer of the US Embassy that young hooligans in the provinces had joined the Muslim Brotherhood in large numbers, and that it was this group which was responsible for burning of the church and also for threats, he said, which have been against wealthy Copts in Upper Egypt. As a result of these events and in response to rumors to which the Copts gave rise during those days, an authorized official source had issued a statement which denied any communal dissention had taken place and said that any attack on a religious establishment would be considered equivalent to high treason. The government official told also the Embassy officer that members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Government and army had used the campaign against corruption as a weapon against Copts in the Government service. He said that many Copts in the service with good regards, including himself, had been called before anti-corruption committees and some had already lost their jobs.<sup>41</sup>

The American report mentioned that it seemed evident that some influence of the extremist elements of the Muslim Brotherhood was being felt from time under the new regime, in spite of the well-known opposition of General Naguib and most of the High Committee to any manifestation of religious fanaticism.

Declaration of an authorized official source, translated from French in *Le Progrès égyptien*, December 8, 1952.

"We can affirm in the name of the Government and of its President and of the responsible authorities, that any movement having the aim of provoking communal dissensions will be suppressed with greatest energy and severity. In fact, to provoke communal dissensions represents not only a menace to law and order, but it also

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40 The US Department of State, *Recent anti-Christian Manifestation, December 11, 1952*, From American Legation, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950-1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

41 The US Department of State, *Recent anti-Christian Manifestation, December 11, 1952*, 1.

represented a crime of which the nation suffers the consequences, through a rupture of its unity. Other rumors indicate that churches have been burned in certain towns. We can affirm that this has not taken place and cannot take place, and that it was an attempt, only an attempt, to attack a place of religion, a church or mosque, will be punished as a high treason. The sentence will be carried out on the actual place of the attempt. Other criminals have said that the re-organization of the Ministers was made on a religious basis, affecting a great number of Copts. This is disproved by the facts themselves which prove that the most complete equality, without any religious discrimination, is maintained in this sphere.

The duty of every Egyptian is to combat these rumors with energy and without weakness and to inform the responsible authorities about anyone who tries to provoke dissensions among the children of the Fatherland. We proclaim that the Government and at its head, Muhammad Naguib, the Ministers, and all responsible authorities, state that the strength of Egypt lies in the Union of its diverse elements and in their commons will, religion if for God and the Fatherland is for every citizen. There is no difference between a Muslim, Christian, or an Israeli. Each one of them is responsible for his beliefs God alone, and all are responsible before the law for their actions.”<sup>42</sup>

The American Ambassador, Jefferson Caffery, commented that the declaration mentioned above with its strong threat of punishment to extremists, seemed to make clear the determination of the government to prevent any recurrence of this sort. Soon, the Coptic worry from Muslim Brotherhood was eliminated because Nasserist ideology was more secular than being Islamic. For reasons unconnected with Coptic anxieties, Nasser vigorously suppressed their biggest bugbear, the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954 after their attempt to murder Nasser in Alexandria. Although this step meant the end of the violent actions against the Copts, their worry moved to another direction. The Copts were suspicious about the new regime dominant role towards them.

### **The Copts and Agriculture Reform**

By the end of the ninetieth century, Copts enjoyed a strong economic base; they held some 25% of Egypt's total wealth and constituted some 45% of its public service employee. However, after the 1952 Revolution, they considered the land reform and the nationalization as serious steps to threat this base and negatively affected their rich families.<sup>43</sup>

The land reform law of September 1952 prohibited land owners to possess more than

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42 The US Department of State, *Recent anti-Christian Manifestation, December 11, 1952*, 2–3.

43 David Zeidan, “The Copts - Equal, Protected or Persecuted?,” 57. Prior to the 1952 Revolution, less than 6% of Egypt's population owned more than 65% of the land in Egypt, and less than 0.5% of Egyptians owned more than one-third of all fertile land. M. Laanatza et al., *Egypt under Pressure* (Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1986), 49–50, 60–61.

200 feddans of land. All land bought by the government would be sold to peasants though no person could obtain more than five feddans from the government. Peasants who bought land would pay the government the cost of the land and a 15% surcharge over a period of thirty years.<sup>44</sup>

Land Reform broke the power of the upper bourgeoisie among whom was a large number of Coptic families like Doss, Indrawes, Wissa, Khaiatt, 'Atiya Shenuda...etc. Combined with the disbanding of the Wafd and the decline in Coptic participation in the government and public services, this resulted in an erosion of the political and economic role played by the Copts in Egypt.<sup>45</sup>

Some Copts believed that although land reform did not hurt the Copts much as some of them continued to enjoy owning big mansions and their private cars, but the Muslims were the only who benefited from this new reform. Few numbers of the Copts were selected to take their shares from the Coptic landlord's properties, while most of the land reform employees were Muslims. The law of the endowment dissolution of September 1952 did not affect the Church's endowments but later on in 1957, a new law was issued to submit all Muslim and Christian endowments to the governmental administration. But soon under the Coptic complaints, these were excluded Coptic endowments from the law with the limit of 200 feddans for each church and monastery.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Coptic Inner Difficulties**

Struggling over the waqfs, or the endowments, the unreasonable way of dealing with the Church sources and the deteriorated status of the poor Copts were the key of the inner difficulties of the next two years after the Revolution in the Coptic community.

The Ministry of Interior issued on July 25 and 26, 1954, communiqués regarding the kidnapping of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch by members of the outlawed "Coptic Nation Association." It stated that: "At midnight, July 25, a group of Christians assembled at St. Marc Church and some of them forced their way into the Patriarchal Palace where Anba Yussab II, the Pope and Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox lives. They coerced him into signing documents relinquishing his post and then forcibly invoked him under the threat of arms into a taxi outside the palace. Police enquiries revealed the name of the taxi-driver and the place to which his Beatitude was taken, namely St. George Monastery in Old Cairo. The criminals had threatened the taxi driver with death if he did not comply with their orders. They had also assaulted the policemen guarding the church area, wounded them, deprived them of their arms by force and detained them inside the church until the morning."<sup>47</sup>

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44 'Asem al-Disuky, *Major Landowners in Egypt: 1914-1952* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2007), 76.

45 David Zeidan, "The Copts - Equal, Protected or Persecuted?," 57.

46 Tariq al-Bishri, *al-Muslimun wa al-Aqbat fi Itar al-Jama'ah al-Wataniyah*, 544.

47 The US Department of State, *Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, July 27, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Signed by Jefferson Caffery, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950-1954, Internal

The background to the events described the dissension and intrigue within the Coptic Orthodox community. The dispute between the Patriarch and the members of this community apparently largely revolved around the activities of the Malak Girgis, a black skinned native of Girga, who was the body servant of Anba Yussab II and who, through his influence over the Patriarch, was alleged to have interfered effectively in community and Church affairs on frequent occasions. Matters reached such a stage that the *Majlis al-Milli* (Community Council), secured the issuance of an order by Lt. Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser restricting Malak to residence in Girga. The Patriarch subsequently obtained an audience with Abdel Nasser and, in tears, begged the release of his servant who, he said, was the only one who knew how to assure his comfort in his age. Nasser, determined to wash his hands of the matter, ordered Malak's release. With Malak's return trouble started again.<sup>48</sup>

The threat was directed against Yussab's handling of the question of waqfs, along with the actions of his personal servant Malak Girgis who, was accused of simony. Malak, who was originally a peasant, and whose own personal salary did not exceed LE 10 a month had, by 1952, amassed six properties and was running a saloon car; Malak was said to preside over the choice of Bishops, the promotion of priests and the distribution of all properties. Indeed, Qommus Luqa, whilst Wakil of the Church, personally witnessed attempts to sell ecclesiastical positions, including priesthoods and Deaconries. Similar rumors had also spread concerning payments and bribery for the promotion of high ecclesiastical offices, including Bishoprics.

Qommus Sergius, in General Naguib's presence, declared that fifteen days were given to the Patriarch to start administrative reforms otherwise Sergius would lead a march on the Patriarchate. With Naguib's support, Sergius was able to remove the corrupt Patriarchal servant, who was replaced by his brother. *Misr* newspaper considered that as part of the *Harakat al-Tathir* initiated by the Revolution<sup>49</sup>; Naguib and the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) required a purification of all institutional and religious structures. *Misr* reported in August 1952 that *al-Tathir* had finally, thanks to Naguib and the Revolution, begun within the Church.

Soon, the momentum of cleansing within Church structures spread in a number of non-Coptic newspapers and magazines. Indeed, five Copts who were accused of corruption, having worked in close association with Malak, were also subjected to the purge. 'Abduh, the head Deacon, 'Adli, the Pope's chauffeur, Ayyub, the porter, Qommus Girgis, overseer of the Red Mountain Monastery, and Qommus Mikhail, the overseer of Ayra Monastery were all removed from their positions.

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Affairs, Reel 29, 1-2.

48 The US Department of State, *Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, 2.

49 The concept of *Harakat al-Tathir*, (a purification or cleansing movement), increasingly found resonance and was repeatedly used by the press in the days following the 1952 Revolution.

Whilst the process of *al-Tathir* in the Church excited many voices who had been opposed to the servant Malak and his tyranny, there were also casualties. It was reported that Sergius' continuous attempts to raise publicity and highlight his own agenda had become detrimental and embarrassing to the Church. Similarly, the *Majlis al-Milli*, and in particular Ibrahim al-Minyawi, who had a personal rivalry with Qommu Sergius, supported his dismissal. Similarly, the RCC which was planning to use Qommu Sergius's nationalist credentials to achieve their own agenda of national unity and institution purification earlier remained silent.<sup>50</sup>

About the Coptic Nation, it was a group of young men of the Orthodox Community banded together to form a sort of Coptic organization called the Coptic Nation Association. That group reportedly issued pamphlets attacking the Patriarch and accusing him of having abnormal relations with the servant. The American documents were the only source that clearly referred to abnormal relation with Malak.

During the forties of the 20th century, in general, the Coptic political movements took two forms: the Coptic Democratic Party was formed. Its policy was against Wafd Party and loyal to the Palace. And after 1952 Revolution, it was called "the Coptic Democratic Party or *Hizb al- Dimoqrati al-Qibti*, HDQ".<sup>51</sup>

Prior to the 1952 Revolution, Egypt witnessed number of active Coptic organizations that their concerns were like those of the HDQ, calling for political, religious and social reforms within Coptic society.<sup>52</sup>

In November 1951, a group of Copts decided to take over the waqfs by the *Majlis al-Milli*. They aimed to avoid the reason of struggle between the Church and the *Majlis al-Milli* to free them to pursue the political and concerns of the Coptic community in Egyptian politics. But the Patriarchal servant Malak's instructions prevented them to hold their planned youth conference.

After the 1952 Revolution, The most notable example of Coptic youth movement was *Jama'at al-Ummah al-Qibtiyah* (JUQ, The Coptic Nation Society), that was established by the young lawyer Ibrahim Fahmi Hilal. The head office of the society was in Cairo, and its members were about 92,000. The JUQ was closely associated with the HDQ, and participated in a number of joint activities. The society had its own flag and uniform, encouraged its members to learn the Coptic language, and demanded a radio station for the Copts.<sup>53</sup>

A number of Egyptian historians have questioned the reasons behind the emergence of *Jama'at al-Ummah al-Qibtiyah*. Samira Bahr argued that the society emerged as a religious

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50 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 160–161.

51 Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr*, 109.

52 D. Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," 160–163.

53 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 160–161.

movement to confront to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>54</sup> Edward Wakin urged that this association had the same enthusiasm of the Muslim Brotherhood but not the same power. It aimed to revive the Coptic language and struggle to restore the political power and youth to Coptic Nation. He ensured that it had a fanatic program that included using power.<sup>55</sup>

Hany Labib also talked in his work about the tools and symbols of this organization that looked like that of the Muslim Brotherhood. He mentioned that it was registered as religious society not working with politics; and its members had their own uniform that they used to wear during their exercises and *Ankh* sign (life sign in Hieroglyphic) that looked like the cross on their chest.<sup>56</sup> The Monk Qummos Antonious al-Antony argued that this association was formed for social and religious purposes only to serve the Church and not to work in politics. It worked to revive the Coptic Nationalism against the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Propaganda. But some of its members were impetuous that was the reason for its dissolve. And Patriarch Yussab himself once showed his respect to this organization; and all the Coptic people had great hope on it.<sup>57</sup>

The opinions that urged the religious influence on this organization to stand against the Muslim Brotherhood's violence seemed to be correct. Like *al-Wasayah al-'Ashr* (The Ten Commandments) of the Muslim Brotherhood, in late 1953, the JUQ issued a ten-point manifesto, that urged for the attachment to the Holy Bible, and attention by Coptic youth to spiritual and moral issues. Also, the statements of one of the prominent members of the Coptic community to the US Embassy would confirm this claim.

Dr. Aziz S. 'Atiya, a retired professor and the prominent member of the Egyptian Coptic community, gave the reporting officers of the US Embassy in Cairo the following additional details concerning the kidnapping of the Coptic Patriarch: The "Coptic Nation Association" whose members carried out the kidnapping was formed by a group of young Coptic patriots for the protection of Coptic interests, by force if necessary, and particularly in answer to anti-Coptic activities on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood. As professor 'Atiya put it, they were "more or less the Coptic equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>58</sup>

Vivian Ibrahim took into account the role of other religious youth associations, including *Shabab Muhammad* (Muhammad's Youth), who undoubtedly also had an effect on the JUQ. For example, numerous calls were made in the period immediately before the Revolution to create a counter society to *Shabab Muhammad*, and name it the Coptic Youth Society. She

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54 Samira Bahr, *al-Aqbat fi al-Hayat al-Siyasiyah al-Misriyah*, 156–157.

55 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 71.

56 Hany Labib, *Azmat al-Himayah al-Diniyah: al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi Misr*, 109.

57 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtiyah wa Ta'rikh-ha al-Mu'asir*, 12–13.

58 The US Department of State, *Development in Case of Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, August 2, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Signed by Jefferson Caffery, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

also took into account the influence of Pharaonic nationalism as the main symbolic logo for the JUQ was the 'Key of the Nile' or Pharaonic *Ankh* cross, which, whilst an expression of Egypt's Pharaonic identity, also had Coptic connotations. She also argued that JUQ also displayed features of a paramilitary organization, echoing the activities of *Misr al-Fatat* which later became the Socialist party and the Wafd's *Fariq al-Shabab*. This included the establishment of a boy-scout group, with a special uniform to be worn on presentation occasions. Hilal himself also acknowledged the influence of *Misr al-Fatat* in a letter published in 1953.<sup>59</sup>

As a way to negotiate the Copts' status in the post-revolutionary period, Ibrahim Hilal sent an open letter to the committee in charge of drafting the new constitution. Hilal argued that the 1923 constitution had been the roots of sectarian hate; he explained that Islam became the embodiment of the Egyptian state, and, consequently, the Copts 'were persecuted and discriminated'. The Egyptian identity was the main concern of Hilal in the 1923 constitution and the new draft. He asked for the political share of the Copts.<sup>60</sup>

In the early hours of July 26, 1954, eighty-seven JUQ members led by Hilal attacked the Orthodox Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo aiming to kidnap the Patriarch. The timing of the event was crucial; it marked the two-year anniversary of the abdication of King Farouk and the rise of the RCC. Before the sunrise, they informed the doorkeeper, Dawoud, that Bishop Yuhanna of Giza had been ragged in a train accident, and that they had to speak to the Patriarch. Once they entered, the only two soldiers presented were attacked and their weapons removed; and two elderly Ethiopian servants in the Bishops' quarters were tied up. The abductors' demands were the unconditional abdication of Patriarchate and his exile to the St. George Monastery in Old Cairo, Hilal also demanded a union between the Holy Synod and the *Majlis al-Milli* under a new reorganization of Coptic Church structures, and new elections were also to be held for all Coptic institutions including the papacy based on universal franchise.<sup>61</sup>

Yussab was driven to the St. George Monastery in Old Cairo, where one of the youths informed Deaconess Mary that the Pope had arrived and was waiting outside in a taxi. Highlighting the ad-hoc nature of the whole scenario, it took over an hour for the Deaconess to allow Yussab into the monastery fearing that he was in fact an impostor. Meanwhile, the remaining JUQ members, under siege from the Egyptian security forces at the Patriarchate, demanded that the Holy Synod call an immediate session and decide on the abdication of Yussab.

By dawn on July 26 most of the churches in Cairo and Alexandria, as well as the principle governorates and press agencies, had received a declaration signed by the JUQ

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59 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 167.

60 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 167.

61 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 72.

announcing the pope's abdication and condemning the corruption that was rampant in the Church under his rule. *Al-Gumhuria* of July 27, 1954 quoted a responsible judicial source as saying that all persons accused in connection with the detention of the Patriarch would be committed for a trial before the Supreme Military Court. The Patriarch had not bodily suffered any harm. The inquiry continued under the supervision of the Public prosecutor General.<sup>62</sup>

Investigations revealed that the young men concerned belonged to the Coptic Nation Association which had been dissolved by the judicial order and who had taken refuge inside the Patriarchate, they numbered thirty six. It was decided to delegate Mr. Gindi Abdel Malak, Minister of Supply, who persuaded the young men to open the gate, otherwise it would force open by the police. At long last they heeded the Minister's advice and opened the gate at 5 p.m. these men had all been arrested and the state security prosecution had opened an inquiry. The Patriarch has returned to his residence.<sup>63</sup>

### **Who was Patriarch Yussab II**

Archbishop Yussab was born in 1881. He studied theology in Greece, and became the chief of Jerusalem Monastery from 1914 to 1919. In 1942, Pope Yu'annis XIX (1928–1942) died, leaving the See of St. Mark vacant. Yu'annis had been closely associated with corruption in the Church, limited reform and prolonged disputes with the *Majlis al-Milli*. King Fu'ad (1917–1936) was said to have interfered in the appointment of Yu'annis, as Article 142 of the Egyptian constitution of 1930 gave the King the right to appoint religious leaders. Elections for the new Patriarch were scheduled for early February and nominations were put forward for four Bishops and two monks; the winning candidate would gain over 50% of all votes cast, or a new contest would be scheduled to be held between the two highest candidates.<sup>64</sup>

In the second place was Bishop Yussab of Girga with 736 votes. Yussab called for religious and administrative reform which would enable the Church to return to spiritual duties through new ecclesiastical structures.

Yussab gained substantial support from educated religious figures like prominent Coptic lawyer, Saba' Habashi (1897–1995) the doctor Naguib Mahfouz (1882–1972) and the lecturer Sami Gabra (1893–1979) and had close personal working relations with the Anglican Church and were less concerned with the question of the administration of waqfs. In spite of all of the propaganda, on February 4, 1944, Bishop Makarius of Asyut won the election for the Coptic Patriarchy with 1,221 votes.<sup>65</sup>

After the death of Makarius, Yussab was elected Coptic Patriarch on May 10, 1946,

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62 The US Department of State, *Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, July 27, 1954, 2.

63 The US Department of State, *Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, July 27, 1954, 2.

64 Sami Abu al-Nour, *Dawr al-Qasr fi al-Hayat al-Siyasiyah fi Misr 1937–1952* (the Palace Role in the Political Life in Egypt 1937–1952), (Cairo: Madbuli, 1988), 267–268.

65 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 136–138.

after receiving 1,101 votes. The royal decree was issued on May 14, 1946, as required by the Egyptian constitution; sanctioning his appointment was signed by King Farouk. He was known as Patriarch Yussab II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Five Eastern Cities. His predecessor of the same name was the 52nd successor of St. Mark and was Patriarch from 831 to 844.<sup>66</sup>

The US Embassy thought that the selection of Anba Yussab was wise. Coptic officials stated that he was calm, courageous, and above all quietly tactful, as he tried to prove a pleasant contrast to the late Patriarch, Anba Makarius, a nervous and somewhat timid leader who was constantly at loggerheads with his community. Best of all, Anba Yussab was said to be on excellent terms with the Palace, with high government officials, and with Muslims in general, among whom he had many good friends. In fact, Sheikh Hasan al-Banna, head of the Muslim Brotherhood, sent him a friendly letter of congratulations on his election stated that the Muslims of Egypt “harbor the kindest feeling towards their Coptic Brothers.”<sup>67</sup>

Commenting on the kidnapping, Professor ‘Atiya told the officials of the US Embassy that the kidnapping was poorly planned and executed but he felt that the Patriarch should take the lead in seeking to obtain the release of those involved. In fact, he spent an hour trying to convince the Patriarch to go to the Prime Minister in person and ask for their release. He based his argument on religious grounds, saying that this was the Christian thing to do since while they were a force evil they could be converted into a force for good. The Patriarch was favorably influenced at first but finally decided not to make the request. The professor described his attitude as “willing to forgive them in heaven but not on earth.”<sup>68</sup>

Professor ‘Atiya described the Patriarch as weak, incompetent and unpopular. He said he ought to abdicate. He remarked that one evil influence at least was removed when the Patriarch dismissed his body servant, Malak, on July 31. However, he said that there remains a civil advisor who was an equally and influence. According to Professor ‘Atiya one reason why the Coptic Church was in such a state of decline was because the last three Patriarchs including the Yussab were selected from among the Archbishops, who were also monks instead of the board group of all monks in accordance with traditional practice.<sup>69</sup> On contrary to what the Coptic officials used to say, there was a connection between them and the Americans after the Revolution, not only to discuss the results of the kidnapping on the Coptic community, but also to express their fear of the new government’s interference in the internal Coptic affairs.

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66 The US Department of State, *Election of the Coptic Patriarch, May 15, 1946*, From the American Legation, Cairo, Egypt, Signed by S. Pinkney Tuck, Central Files, Box 3950, Egypt 1945–1949, Internal Affairs, Reel 8, 1.

67 The US Department of State, *Election of the Coptic Patriarch*, 2.

68 The US Department of State, *Development in Case of Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, August 2, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Signed by Jefferson Caffery, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

69 The US Department of State, *Development in Case of Kidnapping of Coptic Patriarch*, 1.

On the evening of September 13, 1954, three official delegates of the Coptic Orthodox Church to the Evanston Ecumenical Conference were entertained at a dinner at Dr. Wendell Cleland's home in Washington D. C. Dr. Aziz 'Atiya was a recognized Egyptian Scholar in the field of medieval history and a leading Coptic layman. Saliba Surial was a monk and Makari al-Suriani was a priest. The members of the delegation were therefore probably selected in order to represent three important elements in the Coptic life. Their qualifications also included a good command of English and a relatively progressive attitude in ecclesiastical affairs. The delegation program included two days (September 13 and 14) in Washington. They had attended a tea at the Egyptian Embassy and visited the Washington Mosque on September 13. The following day they were scheduled to visit the office of the Near East at 11 am and also they hoped to tour the library of the Congress before that appointment.<sup>70</sup>

Makari al-Suriani: he was a teacher of theology at the Coptic Theological college located on the grounds of the Butrussia Church in Cairo. He was in his middle thirties, spoke English well, and seemed to outrank his monastic colleague. He lived at the Dier al-Surian Monastery in the Wadi al-Natrun just west of the Nile Delta between Alexandria and Cairo. He said that communications between Cairo and the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun were good. Mail was brought by the Cairo-Alexandria bus to the rest house at the half way point on the desert road and a jeep conveyed it to addresses in the Wadi. He himself commuted conveniently to Cairo several times a week by jeep and bus. He said that a Coptic selected a monastery of his own choice, advised by friends but the choice once made was permanent.

He spoke with repugnance of the recent incident in which the 73 years old Coptic Patriarch Anba Youssab II was kidnapped and forced to sign an act of abdication by an activist organization of young Copts. The perpetrators, he said, were all members of the Coptic Nation Association. They timed their assault to coincide with the anniversary of the 1952 military coup against Farouk, specifically in early morning of July 26, the day on which Farouk had signed his abdication. However, Makari said the Coptic community and hierarchy did not sympathize with these young men and disagreed with their approach. The Coptic Nation members were too close an imitation for the Muslim Brotherhood. Makari cited one example namely their use of the slogan "the Bible is our constitution" just as the Muslim Brotherhood about "the Koran is our constitution." These young men believed in violence as the way to counter the threat of the Muslim pressure, whereas the Copts were too weak and should not even attempt to use force in self-defense since God was the Copts' only real protection. He ensured that it was contrary to the Coptic religion to organize such a group.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation with Coptic Orthodox Church Delegation to Washington DC*, September, 1954, From Near East South Asia and Africa Mr. A. E. Beach to Near East Mr. Parker Hart, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950-1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 2.

<sup>71</sup> The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation with Coptic Orthodox Church Delegation to Washington DC*, 2.

He said that the Coptic delegation to the Evanston conference was the first instance in which the Coptic Church had been represented at an inter-combinational conference outside Egypt. When asked if this stemmed from a Church decision or from government encouragement of a new atmosphere in Egypt since the Revolution of 1952 he answered that the Coptic Church was making a basic change of policy. For the past hundred years had avoided contact with Protestant churches because they resented Protestant missionary activity in Egypt and seemed it only an attempt to win followers away from the Coptic community. They felt more confident and also were convinced that they had to let the world outside Egypt know about the Coptic Church.

He was interested in the fact that *al-Ahram* newspaper had carried an article about the Copts at the Evanston conference (containing chiefly the delegation's testimony to the completeness of religious freedom in Egypt) and had seen the article at the Washington mosque. However, the mosque did not have the contemporary issues of *al-Gumhuria*. And Makari was even more curious to know what that paper would say.<sup>72</sup>

Dr. Aziz 'Atiya, unlike Saliba and Makari, showed an ambivalent attitude toward the Coptic Patriarch. While he described the methods of those who had abducted him, he thought the Patriarch was outmoded in his ideas that the Coptic community needed more progressive leadership. When speaking of the Patriarch as a leader of the Coptic Church vis-à-vis the other churches, however, his support of the Patriarch increased. It was clear to Mr. A.E. Clyde Dunn, from the US Department of Near East, that 'Atiya was a strong Coptic nationalist. He spoke, too, about the desirability of Coptic missionary activity in the southern Sudan if the European missionaries departed, but intimated that since the Coptic Church was a poor one it should welcome financial support from the outside.

He stated that he had retired from teaching and expected to head up a Coptic reassert institute. In connection with this, he mentioned that he had a large and valuable collection of Greek, Coptic and Arabic papyri and some Arabic paper manuscripts of the Ummayed Period. He thought the collection should find a resting place somewhere other than in Egypt, and gave the impression that he would like to sell it.

Supplementary to the remarks of Makari, 'Atiya said that factor which had moved the Coptic Church to Participate in the Evanston congress was increasing Catholic proselytizing pressure on the Orthodox Copts. He said that the danger from the Protestant missionary activity, on the other hand, was much less than it used to be. 'Atiya seemed worried by the implications of Abdel Nasser's Islamic unity campaign, feeling that it would adversely affect the Copts. He said also that Coptic elements were endeavoring to exert to eliminate from the new Egyptian constitution the declaration that Islam was the religion of the state.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation with Coptic Orthodox Church Delegation to Washington DC*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> The US Department of State, *Memorandum of Conversation with Coptic Orthodox Church Delegation*

On Saturday, September 25, 1954, at the session of the Consistory, the Bishops made a suggestion calling on his Beatitude the Patriarch to introduce certain reforms concerning the Church which still in need for comprehensive reforms. His Beatitude rejected the demands of the members of the Consistory and, as a result, the majority of the members withdraw from the meeting. Following this withdrawal, the session became illegal because it lacked the necessary quorum. After their withdrawal the Bishops held another meeting and adopted the decisions they took.

Afterwards Mr. Gindi Abdel Malak, the Minister of Supply, met with his Beatitude the Patriarch and the Bishops and discussed with both the decisions taken, and promised to study these decisions further. Next morning, his Beatitude the Patriarch issued an order appointing Anba Lucas, the Bishop of Manfalut, as his aid. The Bishops met again and issued the following statement: “we publish this statement in order to clarify the situation before public opinion. When our colleagues the Bishops who did not attend the last meeting of the Consistory heard of our decision, they supported us in our attitude and affixed their signatures on the demands which have made. We demanded among other things the appointment of three Bishops to supervise the affairs of the Patriarchate. But his Beatitude the Patriarch had rejected these demands and issued without our knowledge an order appointing one of the Bishops as his assistant. The statement goes on to say the demands of the Bishops included a pardon for the young man who are accused of kidnapping his Beatitude, setting up a committee to run the affairs of the Patriarchate and the reorganization of the income from the Church’s waqfs. The statement ends by saying that the Consistory is determined to see that these demands are realized.”<sup>74</sup>

On October 1, 1954, an Arabic press published an interview with Gindi Abdel Malak, Minister of Supply, who was also the member of the Ministerial committee for the study of the Coptic legislation. He said “it is a fact that the communal affairs Orthodox Copts all for urgent reform.”<sup>75</sup> “As regards the internal situation in the Patriarchate, differences have developed between the community, the Bishops and the Patriarch. When I considered this case, I deemed it appropriate that there must be a special committee beside the Patriarch to study all matters referred to the Patriarch attention. I have already recommended to the Patriarch that the proposed committee might take the form of a conclave of Bishops’ and include a number of important figures of the community. The Patriarch promised to consider the proposal which, I believe, will ensure better cooperation in the best interest of the

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to Washington DC, September, 1954, From Near East South Asia and Africa Mr. A. E. Beach to Near East Mr. Parker Hart, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 2.

74 The US Department of State, *The Statement of the Bishops of the Consistory*, October 2, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

75 The US Department of State, *Moves to Reform Administration of Coptic Orthodox Church*, October 2, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Signed by Jefferson Caffery, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

whole community. Continuing, Mr. Malak said he would call prominent Copts to an early meeting with the Bishops to consult on these matters. He further revealed having talked to the Patriarch in connection with purging the Patriarchate from undesirable elements, and expressed the hope that his petition in this respect would be granted.”<sup>76</sup>

The Minister said that he felt that both the community and the Bishops wished the youths accused in the Patriarch’s abduction incident, to be pardoned. The Patriarch, he said, has expressed his willingness to forgive them, and has already granted a petition submitted to him on their behalf by Mr. Boulos Ayyad, their solicitor. Referring to the present deplorable condition of the Coptic community, Mr. Malik said upon complaints being received of this situation, the Council of Ministers decided to form a special Ministerial committee to consider it, which met for the first time on September 21. He concluded that “I would sincerely hope that reform legislations will soon be concluded for submission to the cabinet.”<sup>77</sup>

On October 2, the press published four decisions were taken by the Bishop of the Consistory and a statement issued by the Bishops. The decisions were given as follows in the press:<sup>78</sup>

- a) That the Patriarch be asked to withdraw the case now pending before the Supreme Military court and to pardon all accused on his abduction, in writing.
  - b) That the Patriarch’s suite and his valet, Malak Girgis, should be dismissed from having impaired the dignity of the Church.
  - c) That a three-member body of Bishops should be set up to assist the Patriarch in managing the Church’s affairs.
  - d) That these resolutions be communicated to the Patriarch and the competent authorities.
- The press added that these decisions followed the Bishops’ withdrawal from the Consistory meeting at which the Patriarch refused the demand for the Church reforms that they had made.

Regarding the first decision of the Bishops, it would be noted that the Patriarch was called upon to make a request to the Egyptian authorities, in writing, to drop the case against his kidnappers and pardoning them. On September 11, on the occasion of the Coptic New Year the Patriarch had made such a declaration addressed to the Orthodox Coptic Community. Regarding the second decision, the Department’s attention was invited to the penultimate paragraph of the dispatch under reference. Third decision showed that Bishops intend to try and keep Church’s matters in their own hands since there was no mention of prominent

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76 The US Department of State, *The Statement of Gindi Abdel Malak*, October 2, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

77 The US Department of State, *The Statement of Gindi Abdel Malak*, 1.

78 The US Department of State, *Moves to Reform Administration of Coptic Orthodox Church*, 1.

members of the community having a part in the management of the Church affairs.<sup>79</sup>

In response to the demands for reform on the part of the Coptic Orthodox Bishops of the Consistory, the press quoted the Patriarch as declaring “No Power in the world can oblige me to form committee to help me carry out my task.”<sup>80</sup> The Patriarch was also reported to have declared that a Consistory could not meet or take decision except under his chairmanship and that thirds of the membership must also be presented. He concluded by appealing to the Bishops and the members of the committee to forget their differences and unite around him.

The Secretary General of the Consistory had called a meeting of the members of the Consistory for this morning, had sent a letter to the Patriarch inviting him to attend and indicated that the Bishop of Beni Suef would chair the meeting if the Patriarch did not appear.<sup>81</sup> With the exception of one Bishop who was ill, all responded and a meeting of the Consistory was convened on October 5.

Following the meeting, the Bishops presented several resolutions to Zakaria Muhi al-Din, the Minister of Interior. The Government apparently had already made arrangements to have Gindi Abdel Malak, Coptic Cabinet Minister, worked out a settlement; therefore, Muhi al-Din forestalled any possible action on the part of the Bishops by telling them that the time was not opportune for the publications of resolutions antagonistic to the Patriarch and by advising them to the patient.

On the afternoon of the same day, Abdel Malak met with ten prominent Coptic laymen to discuss the problem. Upon emerging from a four hour meeting Abdel Malak stated that a settlement based on reform necessary in order to preserve the dignity of the Coptic community and that he would urge the government to promulgate legislation already prepared for this purpose. Abdel Malak also announced that a committee consisting of four of the leading Copts who participated in that meeting had been appointed to study further Coptic reform. On the same afternoon this committee met first with the Patriarch and then with the Bishops in order to present its views on a possible solution to the dispute.<sup>82</sup>

On October 7, it was announced that the committee had been successful in bringing about an agreement among the higher Coptic clergy. According to the press, the settlement was based principally on the concession made by the Patriarch. He agreed to dispense with certain members of his entourage, to pardon the twenty-nine men accused of kidnapping him and to appoint three Bishops to assist him in performing his duties. The Bishops thereupon

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79 The US Department of State, *Moves to Reform Administration of Coptic Orthodox Church*, 1–2.

80 The US Department of State, *Coptic Patriarch Rejects Bishops' Demands for Reform: Bishop Plan to Go ahead Anyway*, October 4, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

81 The US Department of State, *Coptic Patriarch Rejects Bishops' Demands for Reform*, 1.

82 The US Department of State, *Coptic Dispute Settled*, October 8, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950–1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1.

called on the Patriarch to reaffirm their loyalty to him, and on October 8, they returned to their Bishoprics.

The *Majlis al-Milli* refused any Holy Synod meetings without chairmanship of the Patriarch. This attitude supported the Patriarch to depend on article 2 and 7 of the Holy Synod laws that confirmed the chairmanship for the Patriarch and its resolutions by his approval. But another explanation was declared in the Synod that led finally to the dismissal of the Patriarch; it was mentioned that the legitimate chair should be the oldest Bishop according to the history of Patriarchate law.<sup>83</sup>

The settlement reached on October 7 appeared to have opened the way for curbing the authority of the Patriarch. The US Embassy thought that if the four men committee established under Government auspices to study Coptic reform remains active, additional changes might be forthcoming. As long as the basic differences between the high clergy and the members of the community existed, however, it was doubtful that the ground continually being lost by the Orthodox Coptic Church to other Christian Churches would ever be regained.<sup>84</sup>

This was not the first occasion in which there had been disagreement between the Patriarch and members of the Coptic community. Difficulties previously arose in March 1950 when the Patriarch attempted to arbitrarily influence the elections for membership in *Majlis al-Milli*. Although a solution was worked out in 1950, just as it has been in the present dispute, cleavage between the higher clergy and the members of the Orthodox community, which was the principal problem of the Copts. The difficulty stemmed from the fact that Bishops and the Patriarch could be selected only from among Coptic monks. More often than not the monks were half educated and very narrow in their views. Because of their life of speculation they had little understanding of the problems of the modern Coptic layman and were ill-fitted to offer him guidance. Although the Bishops sided with the dissatisfied laymen in this dispute, this was only a tactical move made to improve their position with respect to that of the Patriarch. When considered from the overall point of view, the Bishops were not a force favoring reform.

The breach within the Coptic community had resulted in a steady increase in the number of adherents to Catholicism among the Copts. In addition, 80,000 Copts were members of the United Presbyterian Church. Generally, it was among the more educated urban Copts that individuals who had broken the Orthodox Coptic Church were found.

Finally, the *Majlis al-Milli* approved the Holy Synod resolution of the Patriarch dismissal. On September 21, 1955, Gindi Abdel Malak, the Minister of Supply announced

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83 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 73.

84 The US Department of State, *Coptic Dispute Settled*, October 8, 1954, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3951, Egypt 1950-1954, Internal Affairs, Reel 29, 1-2.

that under the Coptic community and Church leaders' demand, the Patriarch was dismissed; and the three-member body of Bishops committee that was formed to run the Church affairs till the Patriarch's death were determined as follows: 1. Bishop of Dairut, 2. Bishop of Asyut, 3. Bishop of Menoufiya.<sup>85</sup> The committee members were selected by 18 members of the *Majlis al-Milli* and 12 Bishops. One week later Yussab was moved to Dier al-Maharraq in Upper Egypt where he lived till his death.<sup>86</sup>

The nature of the Church-State relation changed under Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency. The authoritarian nature of the Nasser regime weakened the role of lay Copts in political participation, thus strengthening the role of the Coptic Pope in political matters.<sup>87</sup> This suited the Church hierarchy which institutionally preferred to maintain the Ottoman millet system where a single person, in this case the Pope Kyrillos VI, represented an entire community before Ottoman officials.<sup>88</sup>

### **The Abolition of *Shar'iah* Courts**

According to the holy Bible, marriage was a divine sacrament between man and woman, a union ordained and originally performed by God. Given the holy nature of this union, its dissolution was only proper on grounds of sexual infidelity.<sup>89</sup>

Until 1955, non-Muslim communities in Egypt enjoyed judicial and legislative autonomy in the field of family law. They had their own personal status regulations, most of them drafted by their respective Community Councils (*Majlis al-Milli*), the councils were called "*mahakim milliyya*."<sup>90</sup>

In 1955, Egypt passed Family Status Law 462, applicable to all Egyptians. According to the new law the *Majlis al-Milli* courts law would be eliminated and replaced by unified system courts based upon *shar'iah* law for Muslims and corresponding religious laws for

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85 The Egyptian National Archive, *Non-Muslim Guilds, Modifying the Laws and Charters of the Orthodox Community*, collection number 9-1-5/76 G2, Folder 2846, Archival Code 50851-0081.

86 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 75.

87 Ami Ayalon, "Egypt's Coptic Pandora's Box," in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, 53.

Martiz Tados, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, (2009), 270.

88 Paul Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 10, (1999), 219.

89 *Math*. 19:5–6.

90 In practice, fourteen religious groups had been considered by the Egyptian state as having an organized community judicial body prior to December 31, 1955, and enjoyed legislative autonomy. They could be divided into three sects (*millah*) composed of one or more denominations (*ta'ifah*): the Orthodox sect included four denominations (Coptic, Greek, Armenian, and Syrian); the Catholic sect included seven denominations (Coptic, Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean, and Latin); and the Protestant sect was considered as united and was governed by a single law. As for Jews, two denominations were recognized: Karaites and Rabbanites. Nathalie Bernard-Maugiron, "Divorce and Remarriage of Orthodox Copts in Egypt: the 2008 State Council Ruling and the Amendment of the 1938 Personal Status Regulations," *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 18 (2011), 358.

Egypt's many non-Muslim communities. The law eliminated one of the *Majlis*'s sources of power.

Under the new law, the authority of the Coptic waqfs were removed from the *Majlis al-Milli* and assigned to the Coptic Orthodox Church's waqfs organization, whose members were to be chosen by the Pope, thereby depriving the Communal Council of its financial control.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the restrictions were laid to limit the property ownership by the churches and monasteries to 200 feddans.<sup>92</sup>

The Coptic Orthodox Church, however, objected the new law, which, in its view, violated fundamental principles of the Church. This collection, indeed, allowed divorce on several reasons: for adultery of either husband or wife; abandonment of the Christian faith by either spouse; uninterrupted absence of either spouse for five years without any sign of life; a sentence of hard-labor or imprisonment for at least seven years of either spouse; insanity or incurable disease for more than three years of either spouse, or impotence of the husband for at least three years; a threat on the life of one spouse by the other; misconduct of either spouse; mistreatment or severe breach of marital duties of one spouse toward the other resulting in incompatibility between them and ending in separation for more than three years; and if one spouse entered the Church by taking robes.<sup>93</sup>

On December 6, 1955, the Orthodox Church announced its mourning status by: not to ring the Church bells, not to hold any ceremonies, boycotting all the formal ceremonies and social occasions that the Church used to attend, fasting till the sunset, not holding any memorial prayers in fourth, fifth and sixth of January 1956, closing all the churches' gates in the Christmas eve, and closing the Patriarchate's gate and all the reception halls in the Christmas eve and not to exchange the greetings. The Church threatened every Bishop to devote himself to a monastery for praying, if the regime did not stop attacking one of the sacred secrets of the Church meant marriage roles and all personal status regulations were kept in the hands of the Church priests.

The Christmas ceremony was simultaneous to the Yugoslavian President Tito's visit to Egypt. Ahmed Husni, the Egyptian Minister of Justice held a meeting with three Bishops presenting the Coptic Church and some prominent Coptic laymen representing the Coptic community. Husni convinced them to attend the ceremony in the Church in the Christmas Eve promising to study the Coptic demands, especially by preventing the divorce through converting to Islam. In response to the meeting, the Coptic committee announced that there was no need for boycotting the Christmas ceremonies. While some Copts including their newspapers saw that incident showed Nasser's care to the Copts, the others considered it great

91 S. S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*, 103.

92 Tariq al-Bishri, *al-Muslimun wa al-Aqbat fi Itar al-Jama'ah al-Wataniyah*, 457.

93 Nathalie Bernard-Maugiron, "Divorce and Remarriage of Orthodox Copts in Egypt," 360–362.

treason by some Bishops who cared about their income from the marriage and divorce cases rather than their theology.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Copts after the Tripartite Aggression**

On October 29, Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. French and British forces began an invasion on November 5, with an initial airborne attack to remove Egyptian air power. Despite fierce resistance by the Egyptians, Port Said and Port Fuad soon fell. The attack followed the President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision of July 26, 1956, to nationalize the Suez Canal, after the withdrawal of an offer by Britain and the United States to fund the building of the Aswan Dam.

After the aggression, the question of the loyalty of the Jews and Copts to Egypt started to rise up. Soon after the Nationalization of the Suez Canal, on October 2, a Coptic Society Conference was held in the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate where Coptic leaders and prominent Islamic characters attended. The Head of the *Majlis al-Milli*, Iskander Demian, asked the United Nations Security Council to listen to the Egyptian point of view concerning their unity which was against the European rumors of minority discrimination. Among the five resolutions of this conference was that "this conference is representing all the Egyptian Copts who are supporting President Gamal Abdel Nasser's policy to defend Egypt and its rights against any aggression. The conference is quite sure that the Security Council will approve, for the world peace sake, the nationalization of the Suez Canal."<sup>95</sup>

Early in December 1956, the Egyptian government began to promote an impression of Muslim-Christian solidarity when Anwar al-Sadat, Secretary General of the Islamic congress, attended as President Nasser's representative a special service held by the Acting Coptic Patriarch at the Coptic Cathedral in memory of the "martyrs of Port Said." The service was also attended by the Assistant Secretary of the Liberation Rally, Ibrahim al-Tahawi. Speeches were made on the occasion by Sadat and the acting Patriarch. The former praised the martyrs who had purged the fatherland from the enemies of the Islam and Christianity. The acting Patriarch spoke of the unity of the Muslims and Copts in the face of foreign aggression against Egypt.<sup>96</sup>

On December 10, the Rector of al-Azhar and a number of the '*ulama*' called at the Coptic Patriarchate where expressions of Christian-Muslim unity were exchanged. The acting Patriarch with a number of Coptic Priests returned the call at al al-Azhar on December 14. The Rector spoke in favor of visits of this nature as strengthening Muslim-Christian ties.

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94 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 75.

95 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 77.

96 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations*, December 19, 1956, designed by Alexander Schnee the Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3952, Egypt 1955–1959, Internal Affairs, Reel 13, 1.

The Acting Patriarch responded in kind, adding expressions of support for Nasser and the Revolution. Similar speeches were reportedly made by priests and '*ulama*'. Following a ceremonial exchange of copies of the Bible and the Quran, the Rector, the Acting Patriarch, and their entourages called on Nasser, who, according to *al-Ahram* newspaper, asked them to express to their congregations his pleasure with the unity and cooperation between Christian and Muslims in Egypt, the county of both groups. The delegations left after suitably inscribing the visitors' book.

A program seemed also to have been undertaken in which Christian priests gave sermons in mosques and Muslim sheikhs at Christian churches. On December 8 a priest at Disuq delivered a sermon on Christian-Muslim unity from the *minbar* of al-Mahdi Mosque in that city and on December 9 Sheikh al-Baquri, Minister of Waqfs, was the guest preacher of the Evangelical Church in Cairo. The al-Baquri's visit was given especially good publicity. Pictures of the Minister appeared in the extreme nationalist daily *al-Sha'ab* and in the moderate nationalist daily *al-Akhbar*.<sup>97</sup>

In an answer to the reporting US officer's query as to the motivation behind these obvious official overtures to the Christian community, a Coptic source explained that in his opinion the government wished to demonstrated both to the Christian community and to outside world that it did not intend to use the recent events as an excuse to pursue a policy of extreme Islamism. During the hostilities, the source said, there had been almost no incident between Muslims and Copts although there had been talk that the Copts who traditionally had maintained a high degree of association with foreigners were perhaps somewhat less enthusiastic in their nationalism than were the Muslims. Such incidents as had occurred were very minor. One, which the source mentioned, involved an exchange of insults between Muslim adolescents and two Coptic priests in Upper Egypt, the latter having finally been arrested, handcuffed and released the next day. Another case involved the investigation and suspicion of a Coptic doctor on the staff of the Ministry of Public Health in Upper Egypt who was accused of spreading defeatist rumors. In the source's opinion, the doctor's religion was probably less of factor than professional and largely personal jealousies.<sup>98</sup>

The reporting officer inquired as to the case of a prominent Coptic woman whose name had been placed on the sequestration list where it remained for about a week before being removed. The source said that the woman in question, a cousin of his had been sequestered, he understood, because in the course of examining the sequestered account of large Jewish broker it had been found that this capital and hers were inextricably mixed. Her husband, a prominent businessman, who had been in the United States during the hostilities and had just returned, has been temporary imprisoned, presumably, the source said, for having made

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97 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations*, 2.

98 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations*, 2.

uncomplimentary remarks regarding the government.

The source was of the opinion that the government's present policies were not only intended to reassure the Coptic and other Christian communities but were also deigned to divert attention from the Government's policy towards Jews. The Government could point to these measures as evidence that steps taken against Jews were solely political, i.e. they were directed against the security threat allegedly posed by the British, French and Zionist Jews, and were not based on religious discrimination.<sup>99</sup>

The US Embassy commented that the attitude of the Copts during the crisis has been approximately what might be expected. They welcomed the nationalization of the Suez Canal although as weeks went by they became increasingly concerned as to the effects the move might have on the Egyptian economy. They supported the government during the invasion as did nearly all Egyptians although, having a broader knowledge of world politics and an instinctive reserve regarding the Government's propaganda methods, they were inclined to be chary of some of the Government's more extravagant claims of military and political success, preferring to balance reports against those broadcast by the enemy. Following the end of the hostilities the Copts appear to have largely reverted to their previous patterns of concern as to (a) their economic interest (b) their place in the Egyptian social and political structure and, as usual, they tended to exaggerate their difficulties (while at the same time disparaging their opponents) in speaking to foreigners. Like other minorities in the area, they continued to combine an instinctive desire to seek a form of foreign protection with a highly skillful capacity to maneuver within the local framework. In the long-run, the Copts seemed to expect, probably with some justification, increasing pressure to conform to the attitude and opinion of Egyptian Muslims. The more sophisticated and cosmopolitan Copts seems to think, probably with some justification, that would be increasingly expected to demonstrate their loyalty by reducing the frequency of their association with foreigners and by making sure that such association as they do maintain were consistent with the Government's politics. The less well-to-do Copts were probably more concerned by a potential increase in religious discrimination which they felt to be inherent in the growing emphasis being placed by the key government leaders on the Arab nationalism and, at least by implication, on Islam as its fundamental binding force.<sup>100</sup>

*Al-Sha'ab* newspaper mentioned on October 10, Sheikh Hassan al-Baquri, Minister of Waqfs, at 10.00 am visited the Qasr al-Dubarah Evangelical Church. Ibrahim Sa'id, the representative of the Church, delivered a speech in which he greeted the Minister of Waqfs. When the pastor of the Church finished his speech, the Minister of the Waqfs stood up and in a patriotic speech said: when the imperialist attacked to humiliate our country and destroy

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99 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations*, 2.

100 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations*, December 19, 1956, 1-3.

it, this aggression disturbed the whole world to be extent that humanity really lost its faith in religion because those who profess to be religious attacked Egypt.

He went on to say: Every person could be strict about his religion so long as it was a true religion but what was wrong was for one to be intolerant by his faith against society. Sheikh al-Baquri said: the split between Muslims and Christians in the East was not a result of religion. The imperialist forces tried to achieve this but failed. When the service was over Ibrahim Said announced that the Evangelical Churches in the provinces had donated L.E 1.000 for the people of Port Said while the World Council of Churches in Geneva had allocated relief worth several thousand dollars, which was due to arrive in Egypt on December 28.<sup>101</sup>

*Al-Gil al-Gadid* magazine mentioned on December 17, 1956 that Dr. Ibrahim Sa'id stood on the pulpit with a one pound banknote in his hand then said: "I have an Egyptian Pound note in my hand I hereby tear it in two. If I give half of it to Sheikh al-Baquri and keep the second half and both of us keep apart, the two halves are valueless, but if we come together and put the two halves together the value of the pound will be restored."<sup>102</sup>

Dr. Ibrahim Sa'id's sermon was about penitence. His example was Nobel, the author of the peace Prize who made a great fortune from his destructive inventions and when he realized that he had harmed the human race instead of benefiting it, his conscience rebuked him over to fortune which he made from the destruction for the human race and he repented to God and allocated all his fortune to provide the revenue for the Nobel Peace Prize. Sheikh al-Baquri finally said that war doesn't differentiate between the blood of Christians and Muslims. The blood of Muslims has been mixed with that of Christians in battles old and new.<sup>103</sup>

Edward Wakin saw that this national crisis was the best time for the Christians Copts to bargaining for their deprived rights. Wakin argued that the President, in this international political crisis, would need the minority's support as a best tool of his propaganda internationally. In Wakin's view, the Copts' peaceful cooperation with the Muslim majority did not leave them a chance to best use this crisis for their benefit. He assured that Nasser's speeches before and after the crisis in al-Azhar was address to the Muslims only, while ignoring four millions of Copts.<sup>104</sup>

### **The Copts' Complaints of Discrimination**

Regardless the Coptic loyalty that was shown in the Suez crisis to their homeland, Egypt, the year 1956 carried a new disappointment with the new regime. The new constitution of 1956 proclaimed Islam to be the religion of the state. Against what Nasser used to deny in public,

101 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations, al-Sha'ab*, December 10, 1956, From American Embassy, Cairo, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3952, Egypt 1955-1959, Internal Affairs, Reel 13, 1.

102 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts Relations, Gil al-Gadid*, 1-2.

103 The US Department of State, *Muslim-Copts relations, Gil al-Gadid*, 2.

104 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 78-80.

the Copts resumed their claims of discrimination and inequality not only in their press but also in their talks with foreign embassies, particularly the US' one.

In a call on Mr. Antoine Francis, Consul General of Lebanon and Dean of the Alexandria Consular Corps, he told Heyward G. Hill, the American Consul General, that there had recently come into his hands a copy of a petition to President Nasser, signed by the leading Christian elements of the Egyptian community in Alexandria, and dated August 2, 1956, protesting the alleged unfair manner in which Christians in Egypt were treated.<sup>105</sup>

Briefly, the writers, called themselves the "Ministers of the Egyptian Christians," as telling of "the pains they feel, the difficulties they encounter and hopes they have."<sup>106</sup> They mentioned that they had unanimously decided, as per Church Council proclamations of February 18, and April 3, 1957, to bring frankly to Nasser's attention as President of the Republic and the person responsible for the welfare of all Egyptians without consideration of faith, creed or religion, the complaints listed herein and see that justice was done. They continued that this was a right granted to all people by the laws of freedom, justice and equality; also proclaimed by the Holy Orders, the charters of the Rights of Man and constitution of the Revolution. The specific points of protest then took up in the petition were:<sup>107</sup>

- 1) The restrictions made on the absolute freedom to construct Christian churches and other places of worship. Such restrictions completely contravene the rights of freedom of worship for all citizens alike, a right which had been continuously confirmed by the Egyptian jurisprudence.
- 2) The promulgation of new Ordinances contradicting Christian Personal laws by contravening basic Christian beliefs. Christian's marriage was a holy bond which couldn't be broken except by the Church itself.
- 3) Creating obstacles for Christian schools by issuing laws which resulted in closing them down for trivial reasons; also with holding Christian benevolent societies from managing schools, and prohibiting the persons responsible for such schools from executing their legal rights while giving the same rights, which were denied to Christians, to other societies and institutions. Such clearly contravened the basic object of creating the schools and in many ways tempers with the holy orders to the Church which the school followed.

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105 The US Department of State, *Transmitting Translation of Letter of Protest from Egyptian Christians to President Nasser*, August 38, 1957, From Heyward G. Hill, the American Consul General, Alexandria, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3952, Egypt 1955–1959, Internal Affairs, Reel 13, 1-2.

106 The US Department of State, *Transmitting Translation of Letter of Protest from Egyptian Christians to President Nasser*, 1.

107 The US Department of State, *Letter of Protest from Egyptian Christians to President Nasser*, August 28, 1957, From Heyward G. Hill, the American Consul General, Alexandria, Egypt, Central Files, Box 3952, Egypt 1955–1959, Internal Affairs, Reel 13, 1-4.

- 4) The ever increasing threat of creating difficulties for Christians in the fields of business and employment by following a policy which had no explanation other than being sheer fanaticism. The same had also been felt in matters of promotions and the holding of official posts, such a thing created an undesirable spirit of fanaticism which the country had fought to do away with. Unfortunately it was apparent that Egyptian Christians were never given major posts in the fields of Administration, justice, Diplomacy or Military. The Copts grievances were increased by the new employment policy applied by companies and other private commercial and industrial establishments who openly refuse employment of Christians on the basis of verbal instructions received in this respect. It has also been noticed that the Egyptian Christians had almost had no share whatever in the distribution of lands such as that of the Tahreer Province, the Modern Commercial Establishments and the National Domiciling Projects.<sup>108</sup>
- 5) Ignoring the rights of Christians in matters concerning the broadcasting of church masses. A few hours, generally on feast days, were all what the Church got broadcast of its masses all the year round; in spite of the frequent request made for a weekly service broadcast.
- 6) The confiscation of the lands of churches and monasteries and other Christian societies. Such property had been donated by the early Egyptian Christians for the maintenance of the Church and welfare of the poor. Inevitable result of such actions would be the dissolution of the Church and all that it stood for, a thing that no Christian would ever allow.
- 7) The anxiety caused by the new association laws and its possible generalization which would undoubtedly affect Christian Benevolent Societies. The work of such societies was to tend to the education and welfare of the Christian youth which the Copts consider as the basis of the Church.

The petition ended with an appeal to the President to rectify their complaints, and affirms the loyalty of the Copts towards Egypt.

Some Copts claimed that since the end of the 1955, the Catholic Copts were planning to send a petition to Nasser, but according to Wilton Wynn, the Associated Press correspondent, they received an oral message from Nasser mentioning that “let me confirm that, we will never allow any religious fanaticism to exist. The Muslim Brotherhood tried it before and you

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<sup>108</sup> Tahreer Province was planned to be the Front to all Afro-Asian visitors who were supporters to the new revolutionary regime in Egypt. Before 1956 there had not been any Coptic family there; soon after, four Coptic families were imported to join the other four hundred families there. Later on the number of the Copts reached 350 of doctors, engineers, and employees who were professional in their career and the new community would benefit from them. The total number of its population reached 12 thousands. Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 37.

know what happened to them; and you have not to forget that, you are not in the same power of the Muslim Brotherhood.”<sup>109</sup>

Mr. Francis informed Hill that he had learned from a completely reliable source that President Nasser was considerably disturbed by the receipt of this petition, and he sent his Coptic Minister of Supply, Dr. Kamal Ramzi Stino, to consult with the writers of the message and to request that they withdrew it. However, they refused to do so.<sup>110</sup>

This petition could be explained from two different points of views. From patriotic view, the Copts were keen to continue their loyal policy that they had already started during the aggression. When they felt that the matter had reached to the point that it could no longer be kept a secret in the hearts of Christians, they complained to their President frankly and clearly. May 1957 was the good chance for the Copts to complain: after the evacuation of the last soldier of the aggression troops to proclaiming their demands, their patriotic role against the aggression, and before starting a new phase of Egypt’s history under Nasser with his new political success. From other view, the Coptic Church could not contact, directly or indirectly, ask help from foreign power, particularly the United States, as before the 1952 Revolution, especially after the new policy of Nasser against it. The aggression proved that Israel and its ally the United States wanted to impede the development of Egypt and to cut the lion’s nails to force Nasser to sign peace treaty with Israel.

Concerning the Copts’ complaints, there were some reasons behind the Coptic fear. Some related to their business such as the nationalizations and squeezing of the private sector; others were related to their political role as in 1957, in the first parliamentary election to be held after the Revolution, no Copt was elected.<sup>111</sup> Adding to these, were the religious reasons; the increased number of convertor to Islam in Cairo to 242 in 1957, in compare with just 195 in 1956, was considered by the Copts as a direct impact of the abolition of the religious courts.

There was no serious restriction in constructing the churches after the 1952 Revolution. In December 1952, the State Council, under the presidency of Abdel Raziq al-Sanhuri, canceled the administrative decree of the Ministry of Interior of 1950 concerning performing the religious rituals in Church of al-Qassasin in al-Isma‘iliya, confirming that the Ministry

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109 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtiyah wa Ta’rikh-ha al-Mu’asir*, 30.

110 The petition was signed by Copts Orthodox Patriarchate; Qommus Dumian al-Mihriky, Coptic Catholic Patriarchate Qommus Gabriel Ghattas, Anglican Copt Patriarchate Qommus Sameul Wahba, Qommus Bassilios Ishaq, Qommus Ishak Ibrahim, Priest Fahim Iskander, P. Samuel Tawfiq, Qommus Abdel Massih Maqar, Qommus Yusuf Magly, P. Yusuf Istifanos, P. Musa Abduh, Qommus Labib Qaldas, P. Girgis Gad al-Rab, P. Fawzi Fanus, P. Mina Iskander, Qommus Antonios Michael, P. Rushdy Morqos, Qommus Ghubriel al-Bermoussi, Qommus Philips Butrus, Qommus Aghabios al-Mihriky, P. Halim Tawfiq, Qommus Morqos Bassilios, Qommus Girgis Risk Allah, Qommus Bishay al-Anda Boula, Qommus Antinios al-Makari, Qommus Michael Sa’ad, P. Yuhanna Henien, Qommus Mansi al-Bermusi, P. Butrus Riad, Qommus Butrus Abdel Malak, Qommus ‘Awad al-Bermusi, Qommos Athenassious Butrus (Qommus: Head of a Diocese - P: Priest).

111 D. Pennington, “The Copts in Modern Egypt,” 164–167.

had no rights to prevent these rituals to be performed in any place which was confiscated for that.<sup>112</sup>

For the restrictions to construct Christian churches it was approved that there had never been a governmental deny to construct or to close a church; all complaints were about the necessary construction permission.<sup>113</sup> While Vivian Ibrahim argued that before the Revolution the government's policy of giving importance to Islamic institutions, all contributed to making it necessary for the government to provide increased sums of money from the public treasury to supplement the inadequate return of the waqfs. The Egyptian government had not shown the same solicitude for Christian religious institutions and works, especially as large sums of public money, the product of the taxation of both Muslim and Copts alike, was being used to fund such programs. Whilst it is certainly true that the massive deficit in the public treasury was increased by the upkeep and restoration of Muslim religious heritage, there is also evidence that public money was used for the benefit of the Coptic Church in the same manner. In 1932, the Egyptian government provided LE 3,000 to help in the payment of priests' salaries, which had fallen into arrears owing to inadequate funds at the disposal of the *Majlis al-Milli*, combined with maladministration of resources. In 1933, a further LE 2,000 was granted by the Egyptian government to the Coptic Patriarchate. This policy was continued into the post-revolutionary period when, on two occasions, President Abdel Nasser supplied funds to the depleted Church finances to pay for salaries.<sup>114</sup> Which was really weird, the Copts did not complain or tried to change the ten conditions of church construction that were issued in 1934 by al-Izabi Pasha, the Minister of the Interior.<sup>115</sup>

Anwar al-Sadat, who was a member of the RCC, in 1953, went in person to Kom

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112 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtiyah wa Tarikh-ha al-Mu'asir*, 139.

113 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts*, 54.

114 Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, 76–79.

115 Samira Bahr, *al-Aqbat fi al-Hayat al-Siyasiyah al-Misriyah*, 171–172.

- 1) Is the land on which the church is to be built empty or agricultural land, and does it belong to the person presenting the request?
- 2) What is the distance between the proposed church and surrounding mosques?
- 3) If the land is vacant, is it near to Christian or Muslim settlements?
- 4) If it is close to Muslims, do they have any objection to it?
- 5) Is there another church belonging to this denomination in the same town or village?
- 6) What is the distance between the nearest church belonging to this denomination and the town in which the requested church is to be built?
- 7) What is the number of Christians in the area?
- 8) If the land on which the church is to be built were close to the Nile, or bridges or public utilities belonging to the Ministry of Irrigation, and approval would be sought from the Ministry itself. Also, if it is near to railway lines, the railway authorities should also give their approval.
- 9) An official report should be made on all of the above points, and it should indicate the surrounding buildings to the requested spot on which the church is to be built, including the nearest shops, and the distances between these shops and the church.
- 10) The person making the request should have all these papers signed by the head of the denomination, and the engineer who is responsible for that area, in addition to the aforementioned approvals, and present all the requested papers.

Hamada to open a new mosque and construct a new church. Nasser also was the first ruler of Egypt who mentioned the Patriarch in formal documents as Pope to be equal to Rome Pope. In a press conference that was held after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, a journalist asked Nasser if it was true that they just build one church, he said “one church? This is a country of Egyptians: Muslims and Copts since hundreds of years, the mosque is Egyptian and the church is Egyptian; we say Religion is for the God and the Nation is for all. We don’t have religious policy, our policy is Egyptian. Our enemy is threatening us with declaring a war; they threat us all Muslims and Christians. The Arabs who were exiled from their lands were Muslims and Christians.”<sup>116</sup> Nasser did give permission to build 25 churches a year, including the new Cathedral of St. Mark.<sup>117</sup>

Following Nasser’s abolition of Muslim and Christian religious courts, Copts suffered from legal discrimination when, in cases involving Muslims and Copts, they had to appear before *shari’ah* trained Muslim judges seconded to the new civil courts. This might be the reason of the Christians to feel worry about the marriage as a holy bond which could not be broken except by the Church itself. Adding to this, they were worry about misusing this new law to convert to Islam to get the marriage or divorce.

Education was also an area of discrimination for the Copts before and after the 1952 Revolution. They claimed that all schools were under state supervision, with Islamic culture included as a main component of the curriculum. Copts could not teach Christian culture to Coptic children, and Coptic teachers could not teach Arabic in state schools because it was the language of the Quran. The Coptic students used to have two Christian language classes per week in primary schools and just one in secondary schools. The Coptic teachers had to teach other classes beside the Christian language as well; and in most cases, they were not well qualified to do so.<sup>118</sup>

The nationalization under Nasser included also the educational institutions, aiming to bring about social justice and increasing the educational chances for all lower class Egyptians. In spite of the free education and common curriculum introduced during Nasser, the Copts’ complaints continued.<sup>119</sup>

Another area of discrimination was the unwritten policy of appointing only Muslims to senior state positions, with the exception of a few public Copts. Actually, it was the Copts’ complaints even before the Nasserite Period, but they figured out that the new regime let them down. The deterioration of the Copts number in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies between 1952 and 1959, while tripling the number of the Muslims in the same institutions and

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116 Antonious al-Antony, *Wataniyat al-Kanisah al-Qibtayah wa Ta’rikh-ha al-Mu’asir*, 122.

117 David Zeidan, “The Copts-Equal, Protected or Persecuted?,” 57.

118 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt’s Copts*, 58.

119 E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt*, 83.

allowing them to occupy the higher echelons, increased the claims that Nasser's Pan Arabism policy was the reason behind this phenomenon.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusion

The Copts under the Muslim Brotherhood violent actions particularly after the 1948 war and their feeling of discrimination pushed some them, according to the documents, to contact the US Embassy in Cairo asking for intervention of the USA as a superpower in the Middle East. But this was like other minorities in the area; they continued to combine an instinctive desire to seek a form of foreign protection with a highly skillful capacity to maneuver within the local framework.

After 1952's Revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood supportive relations with the Free Officers increased the Copts' fear towards the new regime. Although this organization was vanished by 1954, the Copts' fear of the Arab unity that might lead to Islamic unity was the reason for their worry about Nasser's regime; and the reduced Coptic presence in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was an evidence of that. But the fact that, for President Nasser, the Arab unity was a political project to unify the Arabs; later in 1956 the government approved to both the Christian community and outside world that it did not intend to use the Suez crisis as an excuse to pursue a policy of extreme Islamism.

The kidnapping of Patriarch Yussab II in 1954, was approved to be a pure inner conflict inside the Coptic Church. The threat was directed against Pope Yussab's handling of the question of waqfs, along with the actions of his personal servant Malak Girgis who, was accused of simony. According to the American official documents, there had been abnormal relation between the Patriarch and Malak that agitated the anger of the Coptic Nation members.

Some members of the Church, a monk and a priest, contacted the US Embassy after the kidnapping of the Patriarch Yussab II. Through their undeclared talks, it was clear that the Coptic community and hierarchy did not sympathize with these young men and disagreed with their approach. The Copts thought that they were too weak and should not even attempt to use force in self-defense since God was the only real protection. While few secular Copts seemed to be worried by the implications of Abdel Nasser's Islamic unity campaign, feeling that it would adversely affect the Copts, Coptic elements were endeavoring to exert effort to eliminate from the new Egyptian constitution the declaration that Islam was the religion of the state.

During the critical incident of the kidnapping of Anba Yussab II, the state policy was presented through a Coptic Minister and just to work out a settlement; therefore, Minister of Interior forestalled any possible action on the part of the Bishops by telling them that the time was not opportune for the publications of resolutions antagonistic to the Patriarch and by

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120 S. S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 171.

advising them to the patient.

After the Tripartite Aggression on Suez in 1956, the Copts confirmed that during the hostilities, there had been almost no violent incidents between Muslims and Copts, although there had been talks that the Copts who traditionally had maintained a high degree of association with foreigners were perhaps somewhat less enthusiastic in their nationalism than were the Muslims. Both the Copts and the government showed all scenes of unity between the Muslims and Copts during the invasion. The Government could point to any measure as evidence that steps taken against Copts or any of their claims of discrimination were solely political. All the governmental measures were directed against the security threat allegedly posed by the British, French and Zionist Jews, and were not based on religious discrimination.

The land reform and the nationalization were on top measures of the government that the Copts considered it as a hit to their upper class and rich families to reduce their economic influence. The Copts' discrimination petition that was presented to Nasser in 1957 did not mean that they reached the point that they no longer keep silent, but it meant that their fear of Nasser's Arabism policy, after his political success in 1956, pushed them to talk. Some of their claims started even before the 1952 Revolution, but the abolition of the religious courts and making Islam as an obligatory educational course in all school levels increased it.

The Copts confirmed that there had been no governmental refusal to construct a new church, but Copts also were convinced that they were not among Nasser's interests. Their worry about conversion to Islam soon proved to be untrue as the number of the convertors was again reduced in 1959 to be 191 in Cairo which were less than the years before. This might be explained by the restricted Coptic laws which were the actual motive for this religious conversion. And if there was an alleged governmental support towards conversion to Islam, the numbers were supposed to increase and not to decrease? Simply, conversion to another religion was a magical solution to Christians to get divorced in Egypt. The only explanation of this Coptic fear is that the conversion to Islam was not acceptable in such conservative Coptic society in Egypt. Later on, these complaints disappeared under Nasser's regime which proved a high degree of equity and equality between both Muslim and Coptic Egyptians.