

The ‘sectarianization’ of Egyptian society

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What are the particular circumstances in modern Egyptian history that have imparted such weight to sectarian appeals and permitted the emergence of two solitudes?



In a sense, the attacks on Coptic Christian churches and institutions that have plagued Egypt in recent days are the denouement of a decades-long process – what one might call the ‘sectarianization’ of Egyptian society. Although journalists are wont to use the language of eruptions and explosions when characterizing such violence, there was nothing sudden about the anti-Coptic sentiment that motivated the attacks. While Muslim Brotherhood incitement may well prove the proximate cause of the violence, the Brotherhood is operating in a political landscape in which sectarian appeals carry considerable weight – arguably, far greater weight than at previous points in modern Egyptian history.

This is emphatically *not* to suggest that anti-Coptic attitudes are primordial or immutable. Indeed, one can only understand sectarianism as the product of particular historical circumstances, and this holds as much for Egypt as for contexts readily associated with sectarianism like Iraq or Lebanon. The question then becomes: What are the particular circumstances in modern Egyptian history that have imparted such weight to sectarian appeals?

One of the factors, perhaps the most obvious of them, is the rise of Islamism or the Islamic trend. And here I have in mind not so much the development of political organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather the vast expansion in media, social, and educational institutions oriented to issues of faith. Since the 1970s, Egypt, and for that matter the entire Arab world, have witnessed virtually uninterrupted growth in institutions that are actively engaged in the interpretation of holy scriptures, and the application of these interpretations to everyday life. From the televangelism of Amr Khaled to the Azhari institutes of the educational system, the presence of faith-oriented institutions in the public sphere is greater now than ever before in Egypt's modern history – and continues to grow.

While these faith-oriented institutions have enjoyed material support from a wide spectrum of generous benefactors – not least, the Egyptian state – civic institutions in the public sphere have, on the whole, suffered a steady decline over the past 30-40 years. One of the consequences, then, of the Islamic trend for Egyptian Muslims, is that reference to one's faith has become at least as common in the current Egyptian public sphere as reference to one's national feeling.

In tandem with the Islamic trend whose rise since the 1970s I have described above, there has grown a Coptic trend likewise embracing media, social, and educational institutions. But in contrast to the institutions of the Islamic trend, which have had varied origins and benefactors, those of the Coptic trend have overwhelmingly developed within the organizational framework of the Coptic Orthodox Church – and if not literally within that framework, then at least with the knowledge and blessing of the Church hierarchy.

The astonishing success of Church leaders in keeping these institutions within their orbit owes much, perhaps ironically, to the Egyptian state. Back in the 1950s, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Coptic Church hierarchy shared a foe – Coptic landowners and notables. Nasser sought to dispense with these elite Copts given their participation in the old regime, while the Church hierarchy saw them as a threat to their control of Church finances and endowments. As a result, Nasser and the Coptic Patriarch made common cause to marginalize the Coptic elite. Since that time, the Egyptian state has recognized the Coptic Patriarch not merely as the spiritual, but further, as the chief political representative of the Coptic community. And patriarchs have used this position of prominence to make the Coptic Orthodox Church the dominant institution in the lives of most Copts.

Rounding out the narrative, just as Egyptian Muslims have found themselves bombarded in recent years by admonitions about faith from the institutions of the Islamic trend, Copts

have, for their part, found themselves enveloped by institutions controlled by or affiliated with the Church – and all this while the civic institutions of the bygone post-independence era withered for lack of funds. These are the circumstances under which two solitudes – one Christian, and one Muslim – have emerged in Egypt.

The cycle of sectarianism that Egypt faces is certainly vicious, in the sense that anti-Coptic violence invariably prompts still further withdrawal by Copts into the orbit of the Church, and still further separation from the everyday lives of Egyptian Muslims. But the revolutionary moment of February 2011, with Copts and Muslims standing side-by-side in Tahrir Square, was the surest demonstration that sectarianism is assuredly not immutable – that sectarianism is contingent on history, and people make that history.