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## **Alber Saber convicted of blasphemy by Egyptian Court; sentenced to 3 years in prison**

AP (12.12.2012) - A Cairo court on Wednesday convicted a Coptic Christian blogger who shared an anti-Islam film on social networking sites and sentenced him to three years in prison for blasphemy and contempt of religion.

The case of Alber Saber is one of several seen by rights advocates as a campaign led by Egypt's ultraconservative Islamists to curb free expression. Many of those targeted in the campaign are Christians, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population of 85 million.

Saber was arrested Sept. 13, after neighbors complained he had shared on Facebook the amateur film made in the United States that sparked protests across the Muslim world. His arrest came during a wave of public outrage over the film, produced by an Egyptian-American Copt.

At the time, an angry mob surrounded Saber's house, calling for his death and accusing him of heresy, atheism and of promoting the "Innocence of Muslims" – the short film that portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, womanizer and buffoon.

Saber's verdict comes as Egypt has been plunged into a political crisis over a draft constitution. Islamist supporters say the charter is a step toward stability while critics warn it will open the door to increased suppression of freedom in the name of religion.

In announcing the verdict, the court in Cairo said Saber can be released on a bail pending his appeal.

Amnesty International condemned the verdict and said it considered Saber "a prisoner of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression." The London-based group also demanded Saber be freed immediately and that all charges against him be dropped.

"This is an outrageous verdict and sentence for a person whose only 'crime' was to post his opinions online," said Amnesty's Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"The court should have thrown the case out on the first day, yet now he's been branded as having insulted religion," added Sahraoui, deputy chief of Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa program.

Last month, another Egyptian court convicted in absentia seven other Coptic Christians and a Florida-based American pastor, sentencing them to death on charges linked to the "Innocence of Muslims."

The charges were largely symbolic because the defendants, most of who live in the United States, are all outside Egypt and are thus unlikely to ever face the sentence. The man behind the anti-Islam film, Mark Basseley Youssef, was among those convicted. He was sentenced in a California court in November to one year in federal prison for probation violations in an unrelated matter.

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## **Terry Jones, Florida Pastor, sentenced to death in Egypt over Anti-Islam film along with 7 Coptic Christians**

By Sarah El Deeb

AP (28.11.2012) - An Egyptian court convicted in absentia Wednesday seven Egyptian Coptic Christians and a Florida-based American pastor, sentencing them to death on charges linked to an anti-Islam film that had sparked riots in parts of the Muslim world.

The case was seen as largely symbolic because the defendants, most of whom live in the United States, are all outside Egypt and are thus unlikely to ever face the sentence. The charges were brought in September during a wave of public outrage in Egypt over the amateur film, which was produced by an Egyptian-American Copt.

The low-budget "Innocence of Muslims," parts of which were made available online, portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, womanizer and buffoon.

Egypt's official news agency said the court found the defendants guilty of harming national unity, insulting and publicly attacking Islam and spreading false information – charges that carry the death sentence.

Maximum sentences are common in cases tried in absentia in Egypt. Capital punishment decisions are reviewed by the country's chief religious authority, who must approve or reject the sentence. A final verdict is scheduled on Jan. 29.

The man behind the film, Mark Basseley Youssef, was among those convicted. He was sentenced in a California court earlier this month to one year in federal prison for probation violations in an unrelated matter. Youssef, 55, admitted that he had used several false names in violation of his probation order and obtained a driver's license under a false name. He was on probation for a bank fraud case.

Multiple calls to Youssef's attorney in Southern California, Steve Seiden, were not returned Wednesday.

Florida-based Terry Jones, another of those sentenced, is the pastor of Dove World Outreach, a church of less than 50 members in Gainesville, Fla., not far from the University of Florida. He has said he was contacted by the filmmaker to promote the film, as well as Morris Sadek, a conservative Coptic Christian in the U.S. who posted the video clips on his website.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Jones said the ruling "shows the true face of Islam" – one that he views as intolerant of dissent and opposed to basic freedoms of speech and religion.

"We can speak out here in America," Jones said. "That freedom means that we criticize government leadership, religion even at times. Islam is not a religion that tolerates any type of criticism."

In a statement sent to The Associated Press Wednesday, Sadek, who fled Egypt 10 years ago and is now a Coptic activist living in Chantilly, Virginia., denied any role in the creation, production or financing of the film.

He said the verdict "shows the world that the Muslim Brotherhood regime wants to shut up all the Coptic activists, so no one can demand Copts' rights in Egypt."

Coptic Christians make up most of Egypt's Christian minority, around 10 percent of the country's 83 million. They complain of state discrimination. Violent clashes break out occasionally over land disputes, worshipping rights and love affairs between Muslims and Christians.

The connection to the film of the other five sentenced by the court was not immediately clear. They include two who work with Sadek at a radical Coptic group in the U.S. that has called for an independent Coptic state, a priest who hosts TV programs from the U.S. and a lawyer living in Canada who has previously sued the Egyptian state over riots in 2000 that left 21 Christians dead.

In a phone interview, one of the men sentenced who works with Sadek, Fikry Zaklama, said he had nothing to do with the film and hadn't even seen it.

"When I went to look at it (on the Internet), they told me it had been taken down," said Zaklama, 65, a Coptic activist and retired physician who practiced in Jersey City, N.J. "I'm not interested. I'm not a clergyman. I'm a political guy."

Nader Fawzy, a 53-year old jewelry store manager and president of an international Coptic rights organization from Toronto, Canada, said he planned to file a lawsuit against the Egyptian government in Canada for what he said was a wrongful prosecution.

He said he's terrified of being kidnapped and spirited to Egypt. Fawzy, who came to Canada in 2002 from Sweden and lost his Egyptian citizenship in 1992, denied any involvement in the film. He said the Egyptian government has long been out to get him because of his Coptic Christian activism.

"Of course, I'm worried about this death penalty," Fawzy said, adding that the verdict has limited his ability to travel freely. "Who will give me guarantees that the Egyptian government will not try to kidnap me, to take me to Egypt?"

The other person is a woman who converted to Christianity and is a staunch critic of Islam.

The official news agency report said that during the trial, the court reviewed a video of some defendants calling for an independent Coptic state in Egypt, and another of Jones burning the Quran, Islam's holy book. The prosecutor asked for the maximum sentence, accusing those charged of seeking to divide Egypt and incite sedition. All the defendants, except Jones, hold Egyptian nationality, the agency added.

Some Christians and human rights groups worry that prosecutions for insulting religion, which existed to a degree under the secular-leaning regime of deposed President Hosni Mubarak, will increase with the ascent of Islamists to power in Egypt.

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## **Conservative Muslim religious leaders seek to allow child marriage**

IPS (14.11.2012) - An ultraconservative Salafi cleric recently sparked outrage among Egypt's liberal circles when he attempted to justify his opposition to a proposed constitutional article that would outlaw the trafficking of women for sex.

Speaking on privately-owned Al-Nas satellite channel, Sheikh Mohamed Saad El-Azhary said he feared the proposed article could conflict with the local practice of child marriage. He explained that in Egypt, particularly in rural areas, there is a culture of marrying off girls as soon as they hit puberty.

"The important thing is that the girl is ready and can tolerate marriage," El-Azhary declared.

He went on to protest proposed laws protecting women from violence, warning that if allowed to pass husbands could be prosecuted for beating their child brides or forcing themselves upon them.

"If you have intercourse with your wife against her will, she will be able to file a complaint against you," he said. "That's where things are headed."

Followers of the Salafi trend believe in a literal reading of the Quran and hadith (traditions of Prophet Muhammad) and aspire to emulate the lifestyle of the Prophet and his companions. Their puritanical approach to Islam has put them at odds with secular Muslims and minority groups, who denounce their intolerant worldview.

For Salafis, the fundamental justification for child marriage is passages in the hadith that state Prophet Muhammad married his third wife when she was six years old, and consummated the marriage after her first menses at nine.

Sheikh Yasser Borhamy, spokesman for the Salafi Dawah, outlined his interpretation of the Quranic texts during an interview with TV presenter Wael El-Ebrashy. He argued that Egypt's marriage laws contradict the provisions of Sharia (Islamic law), as girls should be married off once they reach puberty, or before "if she can".

"If Islam allowed it during the Prophet's time, it will be permissible until the End of Days," Borhamy asserted.

While Salafis represent just a small but vocal minority of Egyptians, the recent election of an Islamist parliament and president has extended their political clout.

But what deeply concerns child rights advocates is that El-Azhary and Borhamy are members of the committee tasked with drafting Egypt's new constitution. And they are not alone. Other members of the Islamist-stacked panel are known to share their views on child marriage and may be attempting to enshrine them in the constitution.

"We fought for years to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls (from 16) to 18, and now the Islamists want to lower it," says women's rights activist Azza Kamel. "There are Salafis arguing it should be as low as nine."

Some battles may have already been lost.

When a copy of the constitution's first draft circulated last month, rights advocates were shocked to find that a proposed clause banning the trafficking of women had been omitted. Salafi members of the drafting committee had argued to have it removed on the grounds that human trafficking "does not exist in Egypt" and its mere mention "tarnishes Egypt's image."

International agencies strongly disagree. According to a 2010 report by the U.S. State Department, human trafficking exists at many levels in Egypt. The country is a transit point and destination for trafficked African and Asian women and children, who are subjected to forced labour and prostitution.

It is also a source of trafficked women, including young girls exploited under the guise of marriage.

Local NGO Memphis Foundation for Development says the phenomenon of child marriage is widespread in Egypt, particularly in rural areas where parents often marry off their daughters early to escape grinding poverty. Research conducted in 2008 found that nearly a quarter of all marriages involved girls under 16.

Afaf Marei, director of the Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement (EACPE), says many of these underage girls are sold by their parents to wealthy Gulf Arabs who come to Egypt in search of "summer brides".

The marriages are arranged by lawyers who act as brokers, and may last from hours to months according to the "dowry" paid to the parents. Often the transaction is made without the girl's knowledge or consent.

"These marriages are a form of trafficking women (under the pretence of) Islamic law," says Marei.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the conservative Islamic group that dominated this year's parliamentary and presidential polls, has kept a low profile in the discourse on child marriage. While some reformists in the group reject the practice, its hardline leaders were the principal opponents of the 2008 law that raised the minimum marriage age of girls to 18.

Now, as pressure mounts on the constitutional drafting body to have the document ready by a Dec. 12 deadline, the Brotherhood's weight could prove decisive both on the panel

and at the polls. If the constitution goes to a referendum without a clause explicitly banning the trafficking of women, it is likely to pass given the Brotherhood's ability to rally public support, say liberal activists.

"We're fighting to win, but rationally I don't think we can," concedes Amal Abdel Hadi, head of the New Women Foundation. "This is just one battle and we're fighting the Islamists on even greater issues such as (to guarantee) the equality of citizenship."

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## **Egyptian Salafist scholar calls for the destruction of "Pyramids and Sphinx"**

***For Murgan Salem al-Gohary, pro-Taliban Salafist leader, they must go the way of the Buddhas of Bamyan (Afghanistan), which were blown up in March 2001. Egypt's tourist operators slam President Morsi and the authorities for doing nothing against the extremists.***

AsiaNews (13.11.2012) - Egypt's tourist operators are afraid of Islamism and have attacked Murgan Salem al-Gohary, a Salafist Jihadist leader who during a TV programme, aired on privately owned *Dream TV2* channel, proposed the destruction of Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx because they symbolise idolatry.

The Salafist's statement follows dozens of threats made by Salafists against Egypt's artistic heritage and holiday resorts, which represent one of the main sources of employment in the country.

Ihab El-Badry, leader of the Coalition to Support Tourism, said he would sue President Morsi, the prime minister and the ministers of tourism and monuments for doing nothing to control the Islamists.

He added that such statements are having a devastating effect on Egypt's already struggling tourism industry.

"International media picked up these statements up and this will negatively affect tourism and the Egyptian economy in general," El-Badry said, adding that tourists are now afraid to travel to Egypt.

Known for his extremist positions, Murgan Salem al-Gohary spent time in jail under the Mubarak regime for his pro-Islamic terror activities.

On TV, El-Gohary recounted proudly how he participated in the blowing up of the statues of the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan in 2001 with the Taliban. He explained that the statues and archaeological heritage of ancient Egypt could end up the same way.

"All Muslims are charged with applying the teachings of Islam to remove such idols, as we did in Afghanistan when we destroyed the Buddha statues," he said. "God ordered Prophet Mohammed to destroy idols," he added.

Al-Gohary's controversial comments came one day after a large Salafist rally in Tahrir Square in favour of the introduction of Sharia law, causing not only a row with the country's tourist operators, but also adding fuel to the controversy between pro-democracy advocates and Islamists over the place of Islamic law in the new constitution.

In the wake of Egypt's revolution, the ultraconservative Salafist al-Nour party has risen to become the second most influential force in parliament, behind the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to Egyptian author Ahmed Osman, the Salafists sympathise with Al-Gohary's view, and have demanded that statues be destroyed or covered up to hide the parts that offend Islam.

However, Al-Gohary's position is not shared by all Islamists. The vice president of Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party, Sheikh Abdel Fattah Moro, said Al-Gohary's interpretation of Islam is wrong.

"The Prophet destroyed the idols because people worshipped them", he said. "But the Sphinx and the Pyramids are not worshipped;" hence, there is no need to destroy them.

Despite reassurances from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties on keeping religion and politics apart, the former is gradually creeping into the country's institutions. Things once inconceivable are now more and more justified by the authorities.

In November 2011 for example, the al-Nour Party covered up the mermaids that embellish the fountain of Zeus in the centre of Alexandria.

Another example of the gradual Islamisation of Egyptian society is the recent decision taken by 250 Egypt Air stewardesses to wear the veil on board, like those working for the airline companies of Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Founded in 1932, Egypt's national carrier has never enforced the Muslim veil. Under Mubarak, it was a sort of taboo. (S.C.)

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## **Egypt Air stewardesses begin wearing hijab**

New Zealand Herald (12.11.2012) - Women working in television and at EgyptAir had campaigned for permission to wear the hijab.

EgyptAir stewardesses who campaigned to wear the Muslim headscarf have begun donning the hijab for the first time since the national carrier was founded in 1932, a company official says.

The first flight attendants dressed in the hijab, which mainstream clerics say is mandatory, worked on flights to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia on Saturday.

Under president Hosni Mubarak, who was toppled in an uprising in early 2011, the hijab was taboo for women in some state institutions such as public television and the national carrier.

But after the election of the Islamist President Mohamed Morsi in June, women in television and EgyptAir campaigned for permission to wear the hijab, like most Muslim women in Egypt.

The company had agreed to allow the stewardesses to wear the hijab after a strike by cabin crew in September that also demanded better pay.

An EgyptAir official said a foreign company has been contracted to design a cap and headscarf for the estimated 250 stewardesses who want to wear the hijab, out of 900 women working for EgyptAir.

In September, an anchorwoman was the first woman to appear on state television wearing the scarf, which traditionally covers the hair and neck. Some more liberal women wear the hijab to cover only their hair.

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## **Baha'is in Egypt**

Egypt Daily (14.10.2012) - The 25 January revolution gave everyone hope for change, and the Baha'i hope for acceptance.

Baha's cheerful smiling face belies his family history. When Baha's father, a Quranic sheikh in a village in Upper Egypt, converted to the Baha'i faith, their neighbours accepted his choice and the small community lived in peace. This changed early one morning in 2001, when armed men in army fatigues took away his father, mother, two uncles' and one uncle's wife. His father was sent to Tora prison for nine months, his mother for seven.

After this event and his father's public admittal to being a Baha'i, "the village started to get a reputation for its Baha'is," Baha remembers. "People from the other districts would gossip and it hurt the pride of the people in the village."

All this came to a head in 2009, when Baha's father and Baha'i activist, Basma Moussa, went on the TV show "Al-Haqiqa." Gamal Abdel Rahim, a journalist on the show, accused them of being apostates. "You are an infidel and should be killed," he told the two. "Go build a country in Israel." Soon afterwards, the Baha'i homes in Baha's village were looted and torched. The Baha'is had to flee and have not returned since. Rahim, this year appointed editor-in-chief of Al-Gomhuria newspaper, congratulated the attackers.

Whether living accepted in communities around Egypt or being attacked for being Zionists spies, the fortunes of Egypt's estimated 2,000 Baha'is have fluctuated since their arrival in the 1860s.

Today, the draft Egyptian constitution only recognises three state religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism, meaning the Baha'is could be written out of Egypt's future. So who are the Baha'is and what are they going to do about it?

One Thursday night in Cairo, Baha is sitting on a large grey sofa, it is one of many gathered in a circle in the white apartment. Young men and women trickle in to the room, greeting each other warmly. In what seems an unwritten rule, no one questions each other's religion; attendees have come from all faiths. "We have come to discuss our similarities, not our differences," announces the host as the session starts. Slips of paper are handed out, printed with sayings from the Torah, Quran, Bible and other holy books. Sitting here you might not even guess it is a Baha'i devotional meeting, save for the framed photograph standing in the corner; a portrait of a turbaned man with violet coloured eyes.

### **Origins**

The violet coloured eyes belonged to a Persian named Abdul Baha. He was the son of Mirza Hussein Ali, or Baha'u'llah, prophet of the Baha'i religion. Hussein Ali claimed to be the latest in a line of prophets including Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster,

Christ and Muhammad. He believed humans were progressing towards a global society without conflict or prejudice. He promoted gender equality, universal education and the elimination of poverty. Baha'is believed in the independent seeking of truth, abrogation of the clergy, and election of Baha'i representatives. For these beliefs, Baha'u'llah was persecuted in his birthplace of Iran and imprisoned in Acre, modern-day Israel, where he died.

Abdul Baha toured the Middle East after his father's death, spreading word of the new religion.

While in Lebanon he met a kindred spirit; the Egyptian Mohamed Abduh. Abdul Baha would go on to spread a faith which now has seven million followers and is the second most geographically widespread religion after Christianity. Abduh would become the father of the modern idea of an Islamic state and a great influence on Hasan Al-Bana, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their friendship indicates Egypt's openness to Baha'is at the time.

"They discussed matters which concerned the east; how to progress and develop while protecting eastern and religious values and principles," says historian Suheil Bushrui. "It was not an issue that he [Abdul Baha] was not a Muslim; at that time in the culture of the Arab world, and especially Egypt, there was a great deal of discussion and especially dialogue opening up and investigating new ideas."

### **Early acceptance**

By 1924, a Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, the elected governing body of the Baha'i faith in Egypt, was established. It was the fourth in the world. Egypt became a hub for Baha'i pilgrims travelling to Acre. In 1925 in Beba, Upper Egypt, a Shari'a appellate court annulled the marriages of three Baha'i men who had married Muslim women. However, in so doing the judge legitimated the Baha'i faith, declaring it "a new religion, entirely independent with principles and laws of its own." The Baha'i faith was officially recognised in 1934. By the late 1950s, there were approximately 5,000 Egyptian Baha'is, local Baha'i assemblies in 13 cities and towns and the community had purchased 17,000 square meters of land on the banks of the Nile for a Baha'i house of worship.

Basma Moussa, the Cairo University professor who appeared on television with Baha's father, sits in her garden looking through photos. In one, her mother peers excitedly from behind a large crowd inside the National Spiritual Assembly building in Cairo. She remembers her mother's stories of the assembly, "there were always people coming and going, visits from different countries and an equal number of men and women, which was quite unusual at the time. People in the area accepted the assembly as something normal."

### **Persecution**

This acceptance was not to last. Forty years after Saad Zaghloul led a revolution under the slogan, "religion belongs to God and the homeland to all," Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser became concerned about the rise of Baha'is and their links to a nascent expansionist Israel on his borders. In 1960, he issued Decree 263, paragraph six of which proclaimed "all Baha'i assemblies and centres [are] hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended." Baha'is were allowed to practice in their homes, but all official Baha'i properties, funds and assets were confiscated. They have still not been returned. Nasser's actions were driven by a desire to reinforce secularism, but subsequent administrations would target Baha'is for their perceived heresy. The 1971 constitution promised, "the state shall guarantee the freedom of belief and the freedom of practice of religious rites." Four years later, however, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of

Decree 263 and ruled constitutional protections only extended to the three "heavenly" religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

From 1965 to 2001 there were 236 arrests of Baha'is, charged under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code which proscribes "disparaging contempt of any divinely-revealed religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity or social harmony." It was rare for these cases to be followed by prosecution; most were simply released after being detained. Albert-Ludwig University of Freiberg's Professor of Islamic Studies, Johanna Pink, has suggested the government was not so much concerned with the Baha'i being a real threat, but was attempting to "legitimise" its authority in the eyes of the people, presenting themselves as "defenders" of Egypt as an Islamic state.

### **Public attitudes**

The government's opportunistic discrimination against Baha'is was based on the fact public perception was generally negative and based on rumours. After the 1960s, "the tone of the press became much more negative and even polemical," wrote Pink in a 2005 paper on freedom of belief. She added that by 2005, a connection between the Baha'i faith and Zionism was taken for granted in the media. In 2008, the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and anti-Violence Studies noted many national newspapers' reports "imply[ng] direct incitement to hatred against Baha'i." Baha'is were also often seen as a security threat, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, cites claims made most frequently by conservative clerics such as Abdel Moneim Al-Shahat, a prominent Salafi leader, that "Baha'is deserve no rights in a new constitution and...should be tried for treason." From 1910 to 2010, 15 *fatwas* (Islamic religious rulings) labelled Baha'is heretics, based on the fact that Baha'is believed in a prophet after Muhammad.

All this affected the personal lives of the descendants of those converted by Baha'i Iranian traders years ago. Sumaya Mohamed Ramadan, winner of the Naguib Mafouz prize for literature, remembers her introduction to the Baha'i faith in England. "I saw a picture of this oriental man with a turban and I thought what is he doing in this living room in Brighton? I started to ask and I missed the train home that night." Coming back, Ramadan's conversion was accepted by her family, although occasionally her religion would cause others embarrassment. "One time we were talking about equality, everyone was agreeing with what I was saying and then I mentioned some of my ideas were based on the fact I was a Baha'i, and the whole room went silent," she recalls.

Moussa graduated in the top ten of her class in dental medicine and started working in Cairo University. When her colleagues questioned her different fasting patterns, she revealed her religion, "some started not to speak to me or eat with me." Some started to accuse her of missing work, she says. Moussa was continually overlooked for promotion and spent a long time fighting the administration of her university. "I lost five years of my life and career complaining about it and I had to do it alone," she says. "I couldn't mention the discrimination was because I was Baha'i."

A more positive wave of support followed a court case in 2009, when Baha'is won the right to declare their religion on their ID card. Not declaring their religion would have removed their entitlement to a range of rights including education, housing and franchise. Their only other option was to commit fraud or lie about their religion. Many media outlets highlighted the case, helping create more public understanding. "The media was biased before... in 2009 there was a legitimate and neutral report," a reporter in Masry Al Youm told Daniel Perrell, author of a 2010 study on Baha'i rights. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also got behind the case. Despite this, Pink says other "Egyptian human rights groups have been reluctant to take up the case of unpopular minority religious groups like the Baha'i Faith... fear[ing] that this might compromise their ability to speak out on other issues which they consider more important."

## ***The revolution***

The 25 January revolution gave everyone hope for change, and the Baha'i hope for acceptance. The Baha'is of Egypt released an open letter to the nation enthusing about the possibilities for the future. Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly before 1950. concentrates on the negative aspects to Baha'is... but we want to help build the country, all Egyptians together, and since the revolution we are more able to do that," says Baha'i NGO worker, Shady Samir. Moussa noticed a great difference in her treatment since the revolution. "People started stopping me in the street and saying 'I'm not a Baha'i but I respect your struggle.' Before they were scared to speak about religious freedom, after the revolution everyone started to speak about his opinion." Her employer's attitude also changed, "last March they promoted me to professor... and I didn't have to push for it," she smiles.

## ***Where to now? The constitutional question***

The current debate about the new constitution raises many issues of concern for the Baha'i community. For example, the proposed Article 8 which states, "freedom of religion is absolute and practices shall be conducted in accordance with public order. The state shall ensure freedom to establish places of worship for adherents of Abrahamic religions in accordance with the law."

The clause would mean Baha'is would not be able to practice their religions in public or build places of worship. Nor does it suggest that the state would be involved in protecting freedom of religion.

Much depends on how the constitution is interpreted by the new legal system. "Anything written in a constitution is only as valuable as the enforcement of it," says Perrell. "Constitutions have tremendous normative value and by listing only a few religions... they inhibit legitimate conversation about what constitutes a religion and validates those who would discriminate against any unlisted religion."

Mohsen Kamal, deputy director of the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti Violence Studies, suggests further implications. The 2009 ruling on ID cards could be nullified, he says. It could be even harder for Baha'is to go to the media and talk about their rights. "If they are talking about their religion they could be accused of insulting Islam." The article of the new constitution implementing "the principles of Shari'a law," could result in Baha'is being punished as apostates.

"In plain words," wrote Baha'i blogger Bilo, "and according to the current rhetoric, promulgated by Islamists and many of those participating in drafting Egypt's new constitution, if you are a Baha'i in Egypt, you are not recognized or protected under the constitution or any laws that enforce equal rights because only adherents of the three religions are entitled to such protections."

Mahmoud Ghozlan, spokesperson of the Muslim Brotherhood and a member of the new Egyptian National Council of Human Rights, defends the implementation of Article 8.

"Baha'ism is not a religion," he asserts, before describing how the constitution will not negatively affect Baha'is. "They will have the freedom to worship but they will not be recognised as a religion."

This sentiment was echoed by a Constituent Assembly member, Farid Ismael, in a recent broadcast television programme, Akher Kalam. Ismael claimed this article should not cause Baha'is to fear for their safety, stating the assembly did not condone attacking

anyone because of their religion and if Baha'is were threatened then the government would protect them.

"There is something called the general order. We won't let a minority promote their religion, which would go against the general order, and jeopardise social peace," justifies Ghazlan. This attitude was similarly recorded in a paper by academic Daniel Cantini in 2009, "the view of Egyptian jurisdiction is that public interest, even as vaguely defined ones [such] as Shari'a, respect of recognised religions, social peace or national unity, have priority over the individual right of freedom of belief."

The importance of the Baha'i case for Egypt rests on what it tells us about the attitude of Ghazlan and other decision makers. Their fate indicates how much fundamental change Egyptian institutions have undergone since the revolution.

"Why do we point to what has happened to the Baha'is?" asked Faraj Fuda, a renowned secularist, before his assassination by Islamists in 1994. "What happens to the Baha'is today may happen to others tomorrow and that the chain [of events] that starts with the Baha'is will inevitably end with enlightened Muslims."

### **The future**

The Constitution remains in draft and much debated. What can Baha'is do to influence its provisions? Fundamentally, the problem Baha'is have always faced is ignorance and prejudice in a society in which religion is often a crucial aspect of identity. Legal changes are essential, but the importance is in the implementation, and this is grounded in the attitude of the people. As recorded in an interview with the former UN secretary general, Boutros Boutros Ghali in 2010, "there is still a lot of work to be done socially...according to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, there is still limited success, 'when the small administrator may consider the Baha'i the devil.'"

Baha reflects three years on from when his family's houses were torched. "Even the people who attacked [my family] were usually nice people" he says, "friends of friends, I think people did not know about the religion. They believed rumours... if there has been a misunderstanding, as a Baha'i it's my fault. I need to clear that misunderstanding."

Shady Samir is the grandson of one of the Baha'i men whose marriage was annulled in the Beba case in 1925. He works for an NGO which helps young people learn how to use information technology. It is a job he has chosen, he says, as part of the "service" all Baha'is must perform in order to promote unity and peace. Samir says Baha'is should not just focus on their rights, but wider issues, such as the position of women. By demonstrating their positive contribution to society inclusive of all Egyptians, Baha'is might gain the trust and change attitudes of those around them. "When I was growing up, the community was more afraid and enclosed," he says, "more of a minority mentality. Now especially we are being more open."

Running youth groups, volunteering in their community, helping their neighbours are all ways in which Baha'i are encouraged to foster understanding and acceptance of their faith. Ramadan suggests, "evolution can be a revolution. Plant a seed and it will cost you, but with work and perseverance and faith there will be fruit. There is no point revolting to try to make the tree grow in a second. The revolution is a learning process for everyone, just because it has aspects that don't suit me doesn't mean it is not a good thing... you choose to be grateful and work with what there is."

The Baha'is appear determined to keep on preparing for the time of unity predicted by their holy books. At the end we have to "grin and bear it" says Ramadan. She intends to "build little circles of influence and big circles of concern... so you can influence your circle and change society."

Back in Zamalek at the inter-faith meeting, the slips have been read out and people gather in groups to discuss the subject of "peace."

What is peace, we are encouraged to ask ourselves. How could we achieve it? Some think that you should understand yourself, others reject this. "Just being at peace with yourself is selfish. We need to think about world problems." Some quote Martin Luther King Junior, others religious texts. "What's so great about peace anyway?" grumbles one participant, initiating a string of refutations and strong admonitions from the Martin Luther King fan.

Afterwards, I ask people what the session means for them. One attendee tells me it helps him to think about his life. He goes back to the people at work, his family and talks about the other perspectives he's heard.

"Many people here come to learn about others and have the freedom to express ideas," notes the organiser.

"It might be the first time they read the Bible for example," and certainly the first time to gain an understanding of Baha'i texts.

In 2009, Baha's father was being accused on television of being an infidel and threatened with death. His words then reflect a hope which continues with Baha'is today. "I would like to tell the nation, [quoting from the Quran] 'if a wicked person brings any news to you, you shall first investigate, lest you commit an injustice towards some people out of ignorance and become sorry and remorseful for what you have done,'" he said. "I ask the Muslims and Egyptians to seek the truth."

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## **Brief Salafi occupation of Coptic land part of larger problem, Copts say**

### ***Incident follows new pope's call on government to protect Christians***

Open Doors News (11.11.2012) — It was a quick skirmish and no one was hurt, but it was typical of what Egypt's Coptic leaders say are increasing attempts to harass Christians since the country's 2011 revolution.

The latest incident occurred Monday, Nov. 5 in the Shoubra el Kheima district of northern Cairo, where a Coptic Orthodox Church service center is under construction.

Following the afternoon Muslim prayers, a group of Salafi Muslims occupied the construction site. They hung a sign: Masjed El Rahman, or "Mosque of the Merciful."

The Maspero Youth Union, a Copt activist group, said on its [Facebook page](#) that the intruders insisted the church did not have the necessary permits to build. Government officials later determined the church had all the required permissions in place.

For about 24 hours, however, members of the Coptic Church had to reckon with a group of Salafis who insisted Christians had no right to the land. In the early-morning hours of Tuesday, several members of the Maspero Youth Union made their way to the building site and began asking questions of the occupiers.

"We have a small mosque at the end of the street and the presence of a church here will offend us," one of the Salafi occupiers said, according to one of the youth union members.

"And this small mosque has a license?" the Copt youth said he asked in reply.

"Do the houses of God need a license?" he quoted the Muslim as saying.

"I was shocked by the answer," the Copt youth said.

Coptic Bishop Antonius Marcos, who oversees that region of Cairo for the church, urged Christians to avoid direct confrontation with the Salafis even as he lodged complaints with the government officials.

"The church doesn't intend or wish to have any kind of confrontation with anybody. We are all brothers living in a same country," Bishop Marcos said.

According to [Middle East Concern](#), a Britain-based Christian human-rights association, the church's construction project has the support of the governor for that region of Egypt.

The Salafi occupiers left the construction site Tuesday.

The brief occupation of the construction site occurred only one day after Copts selected their new pope, Bishop Tawadros II, who will assume the throne on Nov. 18. He succeeds Pope Shenouda III, who died in March. Copts make up more than 10 million of Egypt's 80 million people.

In a television interview Monday before the Salafis took over the Copt parcel of land, Tawadros said the Egyptian government must do more to protect Copts, who have been the object of an increasing number of assaults. The incoming pope also said the proposed new Egyptian constitution, currently under debate across the country in advance of an upcoming national vote, should not be built upon Islamic law as hard-line Muslims, such as Salafis, are insisting.

It's not known if the Salafis were responding directly to Tawadros when they took over the Coptic construction site. But that's the way it looked to Fr. Rafic Greiche, pastor of St. Cyrille Greek Melkite Catholic Church and a spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt.

"Such an action is nothing new in Egypt, but this is the first time that extremists directly go after a high-profile Coptic prelate," Greiche [told Vatican Radio](#).

The episode prompted denunciations from the Coptic hierarchy, and from liberal allies such as the Free Egyptians Party and Egyptian Social Democratic Party.

Salafism is a movement that advocates a strict adherence to the form of Islam as practiced by the earliest generations of Muslims. The Salafist Nour Party in 2011 won a quarter of the seats in the Egyptian parliament, second only to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Together with other conservative Muslim groups, Salafis staged a demonstration Friday in Cairo's Tahrir square to demand a prominent role for Islamic law, or sharia, in the new constitution. More moderate Muslims, together with Christians and other liberal elements, are trying to keep the constitution as neutral as possible on the issue of religion. They held their own demonstration a few weeks earlier in Tahrir, though they are greatly outnumbered in the Constituent Assembly, which is drafting the constitution and is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Nour.

The Maspero Youth Union takes its name from the huge building that is home to the Egyptian Radio and Television organization, where youths staged a demonstration in October 2011 to protest the earlier destruction of a Christian church in southern Egypt. Security forces and the Army killed 28 of the protesters, most of them Copts.

Egypt ranks [No. 15 on the World Watch List](#) of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

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## **Egypt's Brotherhood: Shariah must be charter base**

Mercury news (31.10.2012) - Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said Wednesday it is committed to enshrining Islamic Shariah law as the main source of a new constitution, seeking to mollify ultraconservative Islamists who accuse the group of not advocating strongly enough for Islamic rule.

Islamic influence in Egypt's governance is the most inflammatory issue following last year's ousting of longtime President Hosni Mubarak. Islamists have swept elections since then, and the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi is the president—but the Brotherhood faces criticism from even more stringent Islamists as much as from liberals.

Ultraconservatives known as Salafis have pushed for firm language in the new constitution to ensure implementation of Shariah, even calling for demonstrations on Friday. Top Salafi clerics threatened to rally voters against the constitution when it is put to a vote in a referendum before end of this year, if their demands are not met.

Together, Salafis and the Brotherhood dominate the 100-member assembly writing the new constitution.

The controversy centers on the phrasing of key articles that expand the role of Islamic Sharia laws.

The previous constitution said "the principles of Shariah" are the basis of law in Egypt. Liberals favored such phrasing, which they say allows greater leeway, meaning legislation can meet the broad ideas of Islam.

Salafis wanted that changed to "the rulings of Shariah," implying Egypt's laws would have to abide by the strict letter of what clerics say is meant in Islamic law.

Liberals fear that could bring heavy restrictions on many rights and would forge a new role for religious scholars similar to clerical rule in Iran.

In its statement, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to try to accommodate liberals' demands by keeping the phrase "principles of Shariah," while adding an article explaining what that means: the principles would include "the juristic rules" of Shariah agreed upon by scholars and the "accepted sources" of the Quran's interpretation.

Yousseri Hamad, spokesman of Al-Nour party, the most popular political arm of the Salafi movement, commented on the phrasing by saying, "this satisfies us and we agree on it."

Critics fear such wording could make it easier for hard-liners to challenge laws they feel don't adhere to Shariah and empower legislators to pass laws that could impose heavy-handed limits on freedoms of expression, worship, faith and other civil liberties.

The Muslim Brotherhood repeated its stance that the Shariah penal code should not be implemented for now by saying that the penal code determines punishment according to the crime after "preparing society first to understand Shariah and accept it." However, it is not clear who would decide on when society would be ready for Shariah punishment for crimes, and such vague phrases spark more concerns.

Many Egyptians fear the implementation of Islamic penal code as they watch neighboring Saudi Arabia punishing people convicted of murder, drug trafficking, rape, adultery and armed robbery with execution, usually with a sword, cutting off limbs or stoning to death.

The Brotherhood also defended its hard-line position on an article related to women rights.

The proposed article, supported by the Brotherhood and Salafis, states that "women are equal to men without violating the laws of Islamic Shariah." Liberals and rights advocates fear that would enable Islamist legislators to pass laws that violate women's rights, such as lowering the age of marriage or permitting female genital mutilation.

A new constitution would be a key step in establishing a democracy to replace the Mubarak's regime, ousted last year in an uprising led by progressive, secular activists.

But in the nearly 20 months since then, Islamists have emerged as the strongest political force. Morsi was elected president after the Brotherhood and the Salafis swept parliamentary elections, leaving the liberals with minimal representation. The parliament was later disbanded.

The panel drafting the constitution said it could be ready for public discussion as early as the first half of November. The new constitution then would have to be put to a public referendum within 30 days.

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## **In Egypt streets, Islamists throw weight around**

Reuters (07.11.2012) - Mohamed Talaat didn't like the fact Christian music was being played at a party to promote interfaith harmony in the Egyptian town of Minya south of Cairo, so together with a group of like-minded Islamist hardliners, he showed up to put a stop to it.

It was simply un-Islamic to broadcast Christian songs, Talaat explained.

"Egypt is Islamic and so we all have to accept Islamic rules to halt any strife," he said by telephone.

Four months since Egypt elected veteran Muslim Brotherhood politician Mohamed Mursi as president, human rights activists say hardliners are trying to impose Islamist ways on society.

Although reliable data on social trends is hard to find in Egypt, many people believe that cases of religious intimidation have increased.

"There is no doubt that the rate of strange and violent practices by strict Islamists has increased tremendously since the election of Mursi," said Gamal Eid, founder of The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, a human rights group.

"We have in a few months seen many more of such incidents than we have seen in years before Mursi," he said.

Seemingly sporadic incidents are turning into what rights activists describe as an emerging pattern of abuses in the street by radicals, defying both the authority of the state and Mursi's own promises to protect personal freedoms.

From the fatal stabbing of a young man who was out with his fiancée to the case of a conservative teacher who cut schoolgirls' hair because it was uncovered, the examples are stacking up.

Such actions have grabbed local headlines and fuelled the worst-case-scenario fears of moderates worried by the rise of Islamists who were tightly reined in by Hosni Mubarak but have emerged as a major force since he was swept from power.

In Cairo, it seems little has changed. The capital is still a place where teenagers hold hands in public, Egyptian-brewed beer is sold and pleasure boats cruise the Nile blasting out the kind of pop music frowned upon by the hardliners.

And importantly for a tourism industry that employs one in eight Egyptians, it is business as usual at Red Sea beach resorts that are a major draw for Western tourists.

Yet, say activists, the hardliners are flexing their muscles more than before, particularly in some of the more far flung corners of a country of 83 million.

### ***Christians fear violence***

Egypt's Christian minority, the Middle East's largest, has lived with increasing fear of sectarian violence, which worsened in Mubarak's final weeks and the early days of the interim military rule that followed his ouster in February 2011.

Weeks before Mubarak was ousted, 23 Coptic Christians were killed in the bombing of a church on New Year's Day 2011. Five months later, with generals still in charge of the country, several churches in Cairo were torched and Christian houses and businesses destroyed. Fifteen people died and hundreds were wounded in the May 2011 religious unrest.

The period since Mursi took power has so far been spared violence on last year's scale, but there have been flare-ups, such as in August when about 16 people were injured in attacks on a church in a village near Cairo.

Christians say overall the atmosphere has become increasingly menacing as the presence of hostile Salafi Muslim hardliners in public life has grown more pronounced.

"Extremists' actions are worrying all Egyptians and not only Christians," said Karim Goher, a Christian and one of the organisers of the halted interfaith celebration in Minya.

### ***Intimidation***

Since a group of youths killed a young man while he was out with his fiancée in the port city of Suez in July, there have been a steady stream of reports in a similar vein.

This week, a Suez grocer filed a legal complaint against a group of Salafis, or ultra-orthodox Muslims, who had threatened to enact religious justice against his son by cutting out his tongue. The Salafis accused the boy of insulting religion, according to Gharib Mahmoud, the grocer.

Self-appointed "committees for the propagation of virtue and elimination of vice" have surfaced elsewhere. The name evokes the religious police of Saudi Arabia, whose strict brand of Wahhabi Islam has inspired Salafis in Egypt in recent decades.

In Kafr el-Sheikh, a town in the Nile Delta north of Cairo, one such committee handed out flyers in late October warning it would "use force against violators of its instructions". Similar acts of intimidation have been reported by Christians in the middle-class Cairo district of Shubra.

"We warn you Christian people to give up your filthy trade in filthy statues and paintings," read a letter warning Victor Younan, an 83-year old Christian shopkeeper, to stop selling images of Jesus. Eight other Christians told Reuters they had received similar notes.

During his presidential campaign, Mursi reassured Egypt's Christians, estimated to represent about a tenth of the population, they would be protected. Yet many remain uneasy.

The same can be said for many moderate Muslims in a country where piety runs deep but a history of violent Islamist radicalism in the 1980s and 1990s has made many suspicious of hardliners willing to take the law into their own hands.

The radicals present a headache for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties that have entered mainstream politics since Mubarak was toppled, such as the Nour Party, a salafist group which has distanced itself from what it describes as individual acts of vigilantism.

Mahmoud Ghozlan, the spokesman for the Brotherhood, said of the vice committees: "They don't represent the Brotherhood or most of Egypt's moderates, but only a group of minority, hardline individuals."

"We hope such incidents vanish soon."

But the Brotherhood has been criticised for failing to adequately spell out a moderate interpretation of Islam, leaving space for hardliners to propagate their ideas on the rights of women and Christians, for example.

"They say they will not discriminate, but don't say what that means in terms of actions," said Nabil Abdel Fattah, an Egyptian political analyst and expert on Islamist groups.

The authorities appear to be applying the law where possible: the three youths behind the Suez stabbing were handed 15-year sentences in September. The Christians who received the threatening letters in Shubra reported the incident to the police, though they say there have been no arrests.

The teacher who cut the hair of her unveiled pupils was given a suspended six-month jail sentence by a Luxor court this week.

The police did not get involved in Minya, where the organisers cancelled the interfaith celebration to avoid trouble. Planned for the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, the Oct. 28 event had been named "Light in Times of Darkness" and marked an effort to ease friction in the shifting political landscape.

Musicians at the event were playing both Christian and Islamic music, before Islamists ordered them to stop, said Alaa Kabawy, a Muslim who was one of several thousand attendees.

"Similar events used to happen during Mubarak's time and nothing like this happened before. It was so shameful to see that happen," he said.

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## **Minorities fear end of secularism in Egypt**

Der Spiegel (31.10.2012) - Egypt's president sat cross-legged on a green rug with his eyes closed and hands raised in prayer. His lips moved as Futouh Abd al-Nabi Mansour, an influential Egyptian cleric, intoned: "Oh Allah, absolve us of our sins, strengthen us and grant us victory over the infidels. Oh Allah, destroy the Jews and their supporters. Oh Allah, disperse them, rend them asunder."

This was a Friday prayer service held in the western Egyptian port city of Marsa Matrouh on October 19. The words of this closing prayer, taken from a collection of sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, seemed quite familiar to Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's new president. A video clip obtained by the US-based Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) shows Morsi murmuring the word "amen" as this pious request for the dispersal of the Jews is uttered.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which backs Morsi, has since removed a note concerning the president's visit to Marsa Matrouh from its website, and the daily newspaper al-Ahram has reported that the president must have been "very embarrassed" over the matter. Are such statements enough to dispel the incident?

### ***Fighting to Keep Church and State Apart***

Morsi has been in power for four months. In June, with the backing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi won a narrow victory over a representative of the country's former regime. Many voters supported Morsi only out of fear of a return to the days of dictatorship. But the new president has remained an enigma to his people. Who is this man with an American Ph.D. in engineering, who sometimes presents himself as a democrat and a peacemaker and sometimes as a hard-line Islamist?

The tasks facing Egypt's first freely elected president remain unresolved. Indeed, these are immense economic and social problems that can't simply be waved away. At the same time, precisely the thing that secularists, leftists and Christians have long feared is coming true: Egypt is growing ever more religious.

For the last three weeks, the activists who previously protested against the country's military council and the old regime of Hosni Mubarak have once again been gathering regularly on Cairo's Tahrir Square. Their new opponent is the Muslim Brotherhood, which the demonstrators believe is in the process of establishing a new dictatorship -- but an Islamist one.

The protests are primarily directed against the Islamists' attempts to push a religious constitution on the country. A constitutional council convened by Egypt's parliament has suggested redefining the roles of church and state, with the "rules of Sharia" becoming the basis for the country's laws. This would also entail re-examining and renegotiating the issue of equality between men and women.

The committee is dominated by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and by Salafists; the secularists and Christians who once sat on it abandoned it in protest. "Laws like these will land us in the Middle Ages," says Ahmed al-Buraï, a lawyer who stepped down from the committee. "This would be the end of our 200-year-old civil state."

### ***Broken Promises***

On October 12, when Morsi's detractors took to Tahrir Square for the first time, buses of Muslim Brotherhood supporters arrived, as well. These bearded men set one of the secularists' platforms on fire, threw stones at their opponents and shouted: "We love you, oh Morsi." More than 150 people were injured.

One Muslim Brotherhood spokesman later claimed that those who committed the violence were not organization members. Instead, he said they were so-called *baltagiya*, or groups of thugs hired by "dark forces" trying once again to drag the Brotherhood's name through the mud. Yet bloggers have proved that the Islamists had long-established plans to sabotage the event.

Images of protests against the president don't look very good on television, especially not when they are held on the very square that has become the global symbol of the Arab Spring. But although the atmosphere in Egypt is tense, Morsi is doing little to connect with his critics. After his electoral victory, he promised to be the president of "all Egyptians." He even announced his intention to leave the Muslim Brotherhood so as to be able to perform his role neutrally as well as his plan to install women and representatives of the country's Coptic Christian minority in high government positions. So far, nothing has come of those promises.

"He has yet to internalize the idea that the existence of an opposition is an important instrument of democracy," says Amr Hamzawy, a Cairo-based political scientist. "He's well on his way to creating a single-party system, just as it was under Mubarak."

### ***The 'Ikhwanization' of Egypt***

Egypt's critical newspapers call this trend "ikhwanization," with "ikhwan" meaning "brothers." The process has seen the president and the Muslim Brotherhood bringing all state-run institutions under their control within a short period of time. This includes state-owned media, where critical editors-in-chief have been replaced with Morsi supporters.

The "Holy Koran," a state-run radio service that has traditionally been moderate in terms of religion, has also become "ikhwanized." It has declared that so-called liberals are nothing more than immoral heretics who have "fallen" from Islam and are bent on the single goal of destroying society, and it has asserted that only the president can lead the country to "true Islam."

In some parts of the country, Egyptians seem to be trying to outdo one another in their displays of piety. A teacher in the Luxor governorate, in southern Egypt, recently cut off the hair of two 12-year-old students after the girls refused to wear headscarves. The incidents sparked protests, and the teacher was transferred to another school.

When a Coptic Christian tried to order a beer in a suburb of Cairo last week, the waiter reacted violently. The government plans to massively restrict the consumption of alcohol, a move whose effects will also be felt by members of the country's Christian minority. Especially in Upper Egypt and in Alexandria, where religious tensions already existed under Hosni Mubarak, thousands of Christians are believed to have applied for visas for the United States and European countries.

## ***The Men Behind the President***

What has become of Morsi's promise to be an impartial president? "The boundaries between the office of the president and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood aren't defined," says Hamzawy, the political scientist, in an understated way.

Many Egyptians believe Morsi is still taking his cues from two men in particular. One is Mohammed Badie, a 69-year-old professor of veterinary science and the man to whom all members of the movement swear lifelong loyalty as the Brotherhood's "supreme guide."

The other, Khairat el-Shater, was initially the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate, but he was disqualified before the election on account of having once been imprisoned for money-laundering -- although this was admittedly under Mubarak, who used his justice system to sideline political opponents. Shater, a millionaire with good connections to the Gulf states, is considered an important financial backer of the Muslim Brotherhood and is believed to have been Morsi's direct superior within the organization.

Shater has considerably expanded his empire of supermarket chains and textile and furnishings shops in the new Egypt. Likewise, he's viewed as a model businessman among the Muslim Brotherhood, which has so far continued Mubarak's neoliberal economic policies. It's an approach meant to win the trust of the foreign investors that Egypt so desperately needs.

Mubarak left his successor a country deeply in debt, where millions of people are unemployed and a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line. For years, salaries were constantly kept low and unions were suppressed.

Keeping Egypt from national bankruptcy will eventually require unpopular decisions, such as cuts to gas and bread subsidies. But, so far, Morsi has decided to wait it out. The only area where he has been active is a different one entirely: In a television address last week, Morsi announced a new religious campaign that will see an army of preachers fan out through the country "spreading the true word among the people." It's a re-education measure that may yet help to dislodge Western ideas from people's heads -- such as the absurd belief that religion is a private matter.

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## **Egypt's Brotherhood: Shariah must be charter base**

AP (31.10.2012) - Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said Wednesday it is committed to enshrining Islamic Shariah law as the main source of a new constitution, seeking to mollify ultraconservative Islamists who accuse the group of not advocating strongly enough for Islamic rule.

Islamic influence in Egypt's governance is the most inflammatory issue following last year's ousting of longtime President Hosni Mubarak. Islamists have swept elections since then, and the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi is the president — but the Brotherhood faces criticism from even more stringent Islamists as much as from liberals.

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Together, Salafis and the Brotherhood dominate the 100-member assembly writing the new constitution.

The controversy centers on the phrasing of key articles that expand the role of Islamic Sharia laws.

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A new constitution would be a key step in establishing a democracy to replace the Mubarak's regime, ousted last year in an uprising led by progressive, secular activists.

But in the nearly 20 months since then, Islamists have emerged as the strongest political force. Morsi was elected president after the Brotherhood and the Salafis swept parliamentary elections, leaving the liberals with minimal representation. The parliament was later disbanded.

The panel drafting the constitution said it could be ready for public discussion as early as the first half of November. The new constitution then would have to be put to a public referendum within 30 days.

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## **Islamists protest in Cairo, call for Islamic law**

Reuters (02.11.2012) - More than 1,000 Islamists rallied in Cairo on Friday and called for the implementation of sharia Islamic law, highlighting divisions in society as rival factions jostle to shape the new Egypt.

Liberals have locked horns over the role of Islam with Islamists who dominate a 100-strong assembly that is drawing up a new constitution, which must be approved in a referendum before a new parliamentary election can be held.

"Islamiya, Islamiya," the protesters chanted in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the centre of the uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak who spent 30 years keeping a tight lid on Islamists.

The turnout at Friday's demonstration was smaller than had been expected after some of the main groups that espouse the ultraconservative Salafi school of Islamic thinking backed out. Some groups said they would demonstrate next Friday.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which propelled President Mohamed Mursi to power earlier this year and which takes a less conservative approach, was also not involved in the protest.

Unlike many of the rallies since the fall of Mubarak that Ads by Google have packed the square, Friday's numbers were modest and traffic flowed with relative ease even as the demonstration went on.

"No to liberalism, no to secularism, I don't want anything other than sharia," the protesters also chanted, some waving black flags emblazoned with Islamic slogans.

Drafts of the constitution drawn up by the assembly so far indicate it will have more Islamic references than the previous constitution, worrying more liberal-minded Egyptians and Christians, who make up about a tenth of the nation of 83 million. They fear the imposition of social restrictions.

A key article stating that "the principles of sharia" are the main source of legislation has until now remained unchanged from the old constitution but a new article seeks to spell out what those principles are in Islamic terms.

However, that is not enough for many Salafis who want an unequivocal call to implement sharia rather than wording that they say liberals will use to water down the meaning.

"I want Islamic sharia to be the only source of legislation, not the 'main source'," said Hany Mohamed Ahmed, a 38-year-old Finance Ministry accountant, who was among those demonstrating.

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## **EGYPT: Timeline of religious intolerance events in 2012**

By Jordan McMurtrey

HRWF (29.10.2012) -

### **26 January**

Two Copts were killed in the village of Bahgourah, a suburb of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, after a Muslim racketeer opened fire on them for refusing to pay him extortion money.

### **28 January**

A mob of over 3000 Muslims attacked Copts in the village of Kobry-el-Sharbat (el-Ameriya), Alexandria. Coptic homes and shops were looted before being set ablaze. Two Copts and a Muslim were injured.

### **2 February**

One of the Arab world's best-known comedians was sentenced to three months in jail for offending Islam, just weeks after Islamist parties won a majority in parliament.

### **4 March**

A priest in Egypt was sentenced this week to six months in jail for a minor construction violation at his church building, while no one in a mob that burned the same structure down has been arrested.

### **4 March**

Two nuns in Upper Egypt faced "unimaginable fear" – with one later hospitalized over the emotional trauma – when 1,500 Muslim villagers brandishing swords and knives trapped them inside a guesthouse last week and threatened to burn them out.

### **18 March**

Islamist leaders of the Salafist movement issued a litany of insults, calling the late Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church the "head of the infidels" and thanking God for his death.

### **4 April**

A juvenile court in Egypt sentenced a Coptic Christian teenager to three years in prison for allegedly insulting Islam. The court claimed that he posted cartoons on his Facebook account that mocked the Islamic religion and its prophet, Muhammad. After the incident came to light, Muslims in Assuit, where Massoud lives, rioted. They fire-bombed his home and burned down at least five other Christian-owned homes in several Assuit villages.

### **5 April**

A judge in Upper Egypt has upheld a six-year prison sentence for a Coptic Christian wrongly convicted of "blasphemy" against Islam and inciting sectarian strife.

### **10 April**

An Egyptian court suspended a 100-member panel selected by lawmakers from the Islamist-dominated parliament and tasked with drafting the country's new constitution.

### **9 May**

A judge in Upper Egypt has dismissed all charges against a group of Salafi Muslims who cut off the ear of a Christian in a knife attack and tried to force him to convert.

### **21 May**

A judge sentenced 12 Coptic Christians to life in prison for their alleged part in a riot in Abu-Qurgas village, in Minya Province, that left two Muslims and one Christian dead. Eight Muslims charged with the same crimes in the same riot were all acquitted.

### **22 July**

Along with month of Ramadan, Egyptians won't be able to purchase alcoholic beverages during 4 other major Islamic holidays, according to new decision by minister of tourism.

### **26 July**

Dr Maher Ghaly looked out from his window at dawn and asked a group of Muslim Salafis who have a shop in the same building not to fire their weapons in the air in celebration of another day of the Ramadan fast. They then shot at him. One of his eyes was blown away and there is no hope of replacing the cornea in his other eye.

### **27 July**

Fighting broke out between the Muslims and a man, Sameh, and his family, during which Molotov's cocktails, firearms and knives were used. The priest explained that Sameh faced this huge mob in "self-defense," threw a Molotov's cocktail which hit the passer-by Moaz.

### **30 July**

A Muslim attacked a church in the area of Sheikh Zayed, Qaliubya. Prosecution did not make any charged against him as he is "mentally unstable," and was subsequently released.

### **1 August**

Coptic villagers were terrorized today after a Muslim Brotherhood cleric roamed the village vowing that the village church of St. George will be burned down, its pastor and all the entire Christian inhabitants killed and their homes torched after the burial of Moaz.

### **1 August**

Angry Muslims attacked a church and Christian homes outside Cairo on Wednesday, sparking clashes that wounded 16 people, a security official said, after a Muslim died of wounds from a fight with a Christian.

### **10 September**

Controversy erupted Sunday during the Constituent Assembly's discussion of an article on the freedom of faith and worship, which was handled in a session attended by a number of intellectuals and artists.

### **11 September**

Abdullah, also known as Abu Islam, was filmed during a protest outside the embassy two weeks ago as he stood before the crowd and ripped up the holy book. "Next time I will urinate on it," he says in another video. Both videos were posted online.

### **25 September**

Egyptian prosecutors referred to trial a well-known radical Islamist who tore up an English copy of the Bible during a protest outside the U.S. Embassy in Cairo against an anti-Islam film produced in the United States

### **5 October**

A court in Egypt has ordered the release pending investigation of two Coptic Christian children detained for blasphemy against Islam. A Muslim cleric in Izbet Marco, a village in Beni Suef province, said he saw the boys, aged nine and 10, take pages of the Koran and urinate on them.

### **11 October**

Muhammad Badi, the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, confirmed the necessity for every Muslim to strive to save al-Quds [Jerusalem] from the hands of the rapists [Israelis] and to cleanse Palestine from the clutches of the occupation, deeming this an individual duty for all Muslims. More specifically, he called on all Muslims to wage jihad with their money and their selves to free al-Quds.

### **11 October**

The case involving two boys accused of blasphemy for urinating on pages of the Koran has been closed. The charges were dropped and the children were released after a deal was reached between Muslims, Christians and security officials in the area.

### **17 October**

An Egyptian school teacher was fired on Wednesday for cutting the hair of two 12-year-old girl pupils because they were not wearing Islamic headscarves, an act condemned as an illegal violation of human rights by a leading woman's organization.

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## **Egypt's Copts vote for successor to Pope Shenouda III**

BBC News (29.10.2012) - A council of Coptic Christians in Egypt is set to vote for a successor to Pope Shenouda III, who died in March.

Two bishops and three monks are short-listed to become the 118th head of the region's largest Christian minority.

The council will pick three, writing their names on separate pieces of paper that will be placed in a box on the altar of St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo.

A blindfolded child will be asked to draw out one of the names on 4 November, thereby picking the new Pope.

The individual chosen will become the new Coptic Pope who will be enthroned in a ceremony on 18 November.

The five candidates are:

- Fr Pachomios al-Syriani - a monk from the Paromeos Monastery in Wadi al-Natrun; currently lives in Italy; aged around 49
- Bishop Raphael - an auxiliary bishop in Cairo; a former aide to the late Pope; a member of the Church's Holy Synod, the Coptic Church's highest authority; aged around 58
- Fr Raphael Ava Mina: A monk at St Mina Monastery near Alexandria; aged around 60
- Fr Seraphim al-Syriani: A monk from the Paromeos Monastery; currently lives in the US; aged around 53
- Bishop Tawadros - an auxiliary bishop to acting head of the Coptic Church, Bishop Pachomios; member of the Holy Synod; aged around 60

The Coptic Church has about 16 million members worldwide, and Copts make up 10% of Egypt's population of 80 million.

Pope Shenouda III died at the age of 88 on 17 March, reportedly after suffering cancer.

He had urged officials to do more to address Coptic concerns after numerous attacks on churches in recent years.

He had led the Church, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, for four decades.

His successor faces the task of reassuring the Coptic community during the Islamist resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, correspondents say.

Many younger Copts will be looking for a leader who can help redefine their community's role in a rapidly changing post-Mubarak Egypt, they add.

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## **Egypt teacher fired for cutting girls' uncovered hair**

Reuters (17.10.2012) - An Egyptian school teacher was fired on Wednesday for cutting the hair of two 12-year-old girl pupils because they were not wearing Islamic headscarves, an act condemned as an illegal violation of human rights by a leading woman's organization.

Iman Abu Bakr Kilany, a science teacher who wears a full veil, said she had been dismissed from her school in the southern town of Luxor following complaints by relatives of the girls - the only two in her class who did not wear headscarves.

"It started as a joke with the girls when I told them I would cut their hair if they don't wear headscarves," Kilany told Reuters by telephone. "Last Wednesday, one of my boy students reminded me and gave me scissors from his school bag and I used them and cut small amounts of their hair."

Though apparently a symbolic act, the incident was seen as the latest example of hardline Muslims trying to impose their values on others in Egypt - a country now governed by Islamists.

"Without exaggeration, we feel that many of the hardline Islamists feel empowered by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power to impose their strict views on society," said human rights activist Gamal Eid.

Many Egyptian women wear the headscarf, but the country's Islamic scholars typically say it should only be out of free choice. That view is shared by the Muslim Brotherhood - the group which propelled President Mohamed Mursi to power in June.

Kilany said she had asked all her girl students to put on the headscarf, saying it was required for girls older than 10 to do so - a view not shared by many Muslims. "Our religious traditions makes it obligatory," she said.

The National Council For Women (NCW) condemned Kilany in a statement on Wednesday, saying her act "violates Egyptian law, the rights of humans and the rights of children".

While Mursi and his administration have repeatedly said they will not seek to impose strict Islamic codes on Egypt, the rise to prominence of an array of Islamist groups is alarming more secular-minded Egyptians and the country's sizeable Christian minority.

In one headline-grabbing incident, a young man out with his fiancée was stabbed to death by three Islamist zealots in Suez in July. The killers were sent to 15 years in jail last month.

Kilany said she would be reassigned to a role in the bureaucracy and docked one month's salary.

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## **Egyptian Christian boys accused of desecrating Quran cleared of blasphemy**

Christian Post (11.10.2012) - The Egyptian courts have closed the case of two young Christian boys accused of blasphemy for allegedly desecrating a Quran, a decision that has prompted critics to question the direction of Egypt's freedom of speech laws.

"The case has been closed [...] and today we knew that the charges were dropped and the children were released after a deal was reached between Muslims, Christians and security officials in the area," Gamal Eid, one of the defense lawyers in the case, told Ahrum Online.

Two brothers, Mina Nadi, 9, and Nabil Nadi, 10, were accused of tearing up a copy of the Quran and urinating on it in early October after two residents in their small town of Marco, south of Cairo, filed complaints with authorities.

The boys were placed in juvenile detention on Oct. 2, according to the Daily Mail, but were eventually released on Oct. 10.

The "deal" which was reached between Muslims, Christians, and security officials in this southern area has yet to be revealed.

This case serves as another example of Egypt's exercise of its anti-blasphemy laws.

In late September, Egyptian courts practiced a rare flexing of their "anti-blasphemy laws" when they decided to hold a trial for radical Muslim blogger Ahmed Mohammed Abdullah, known as Abu Islam, who tore up pages of the New Testament Bible while protesting in front of Cairo's U.S. embassy in mid-September.

Traditionally, the majority of Egypt's anti-blasphemy court cases revolve around the defense of the Quran and the Muslim religion. Christians make up only 10 percent of the country's 834 million people, according to recent censuses.

Critics contend that the new use of these blasphemy laws could be a prelude to the country's new constitution, slated to be minted in late October.

Although it is unclear what the country's new freedom of speech and freedom of religion rights will be in the new constitution, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi has previously made it clear that he will not stand for acts or language that insult one's religion.

"Egypt respects freedom of expression [but] not a freedom of expression that targets a specific religion or a specific culture," Morsi said in a speech at the United Nations in mid-September.

In reference to this most recent case involving the two young brothers, Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, told Daily News Egypt that blasphemy court cases in Egypt are increasing.

"These incidents are on the rise and we are seeing an increase in contempt of religion cases and unfortunately most of the cases end up with jail sentences," Ibrahim told the local paper.

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## **Muslim brotherhood supreme leader calls for Jihad on Israel**

Jihad Watch (12.10.2012) - This would be the same "leader" of Egypt's new president, the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi—and the man whom some have even portrayed as the true power behind Egypt's presidency, with Morsi acting as his puppet.

According to last Thursday's edition of Al Wafd, during his weekly sermon, "Muhammad Badi, the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, confirmed the necessity for every Muslim to strive to save al-Quds [Jerusalem] from the hands of the rapists [Israelis] and to cleanse Palestine from the clutches of the occupation, deeming this an individual duty for all Muslims."

More specifically, he "called on all Muslims to wage jihad with their money and their selves to free al-Quds"—the same exact language one finds in al-Qaeda's tracts.

If this is the position of the Supreme Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, what can one expect from the Muslim Brotherhood president of Egypt?

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## **Egypt's radical preachers enjoying freedom of airwaves**

By Shaimaa Fayed and Yasmine Saleh

Reuters (10.10.2012) - When Islamic scholar Zaghoul el-Naggar recommended the consumption of camel urine, describing it as an Islamic remedy for incurable diseases on a television show last month, the channel's switchboard was bombarded with angry phone calls within minutes.

"Medicine is based on evidence ... Surely I don't need to be teaching you this?" well-known doctor Khaled Montassir told Naggar on the show, barely concealing his frustration. "I am not happy with what's happening to Muslims because of your ideas."

Egypt's media, once tightly controlled by the state, has become a free-for-all platform for ideas, theories and advice, which can range from the ignorant to the bizarre and to what some see as outright dangerous.

Much of the talk is the largely innocuous and inevitable product of democratic reforms promoted by the revolutionary movement of the Arab Spring, opening up space to new voices.

But some Egyptians are concerned that such freedoms are being exploited by hardline Islamists and self-appointed religious experts to extend their influence in a society still finding its feet after months of turmoil.

The Grand Mufti, Egypt's most senior Islamic legal official, has denounced edicts made by unqualified preachers and declarations such as those suggesting that treating the ill with camel urine is somehow an Islamic teaching. "Such talk is wrong," said spokesman Ibrahim Negm.

Egypt's Islamist leader Mohamed Mursi won elections in June promising to be a president for all Egyptians, and one of his big tests will be how he deals with radicals whose ideologies worry mainstream Muslims and minority Christians.

His allies in the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a conservative vision of society while vowing to support democracy, are under pressure to take a clear line.

### ***Policing the airwaves***

"The Brotherhood is now in power. They need to act as rulers and ... state their position regarding such radical views and preachers," said political analyst Nabil Abdel Fattah.

When Mursi's predecessor Hosni Mubarak was in power, the government strictly policed the airwaves, and managers of private TV channels were often harassed by state security if their guests displeased the authorities.

The restrictions stifled pro-democracy activists and criticism of the Mubarak regime, but they also put a lid on advocates of religious extremism.

While some Egyptians welcome today's lively public debates, others say that airing fanatical or eccentric ideas makes them seem more acceptable and encourages bigotry and intolerance, sometimes playing on ignorance in a religiously conservative society where many are illiterate.

Government officials and media commentators were quick to condemn Abdel Moneim el-Shahat, a well-known ultra-orthodox Salafi Islamist, when he suggested last year that ancient statues including the Sphinx guarding the Pyramids of Giza be covered up as they might be idolatrous.

In February, Shahat suggested that soccer matches should be forbidden and only horse and camel races allowed, seen as part of his drive to strictly emulate the days of the Prophet Mohammad and shun modern activities.

Other Salafi leaders have said it was against Islam to salute Egypt's flag or to sing the national anthem, called on Muslims to declaim as an infidel anyone who is "secular, liberal or modern", and argued against English being taught in schools.

The Grand Mufti has condemned such declarations in the name of religion.

"Untrained amateurs who attempt to issue fatwas are not authentic scholars, and their fatwas are more like independent unscholarly statements made according to their whims and desires," his spokesman Negm said.

### ***Thin edge of the wave***

While there have been few indications that any of these suggestions have been taken seriously, they alarm moderate Egyptians who worry that they are the thin edge of the wedge at a particularly sensitive time.

A 100-strong assembly of scholars, politicians, academics and others is drawing up a new constitution to determine the role of Islam and Islamic law in Egypt's government and legal system. Liberals and Islamists have been at loggerheads.

Moderates also are concerned about how the riot of ideas may be subtly influencing the way people think and act.

Many viewers were indignant when the female host of a popular talk show agreed to a request from Assem Abdel Maged, a leading figure of the ultraorthodox Salafi group al-Gama'a al-Islamiya, to be interviewed through a screen because she was not wearing a veil.

"It would have been better for Hala Sarhan to apologize for not running this shameful episode than to accept this situation," wrote one viewer on YouTube, where the interview was shown.

Muslim lawyer Sherif el-Hosseiny, 35, reflected the views of many Egyptians by saying: "One of the reasons I risked my life in protests last year is to have the country go forward and definitely not have it go backward to pre-historic times."

But for others, the public outcry shows a society still uncomfortable with an open democracy.

"In the United States a film was produced insulting the Prophet Mohammed ... and here too we have people who express rational and irrational views," said political analyst Mustafa al-Sayyed, adding the government had a duty to promote moderate thinking.

"This is the price every society has to pay for freedom of speech," he said.

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## **Arab Christians must fight for recognition in new regimes**

***To reach out to post-revolution states, Arab Christians must focus on common interests and offer support in return for rights***

The Guardian (25.04.2012) - Hopes that Arab Christians can enjoy full recognition in their countries' post-revolution politics appear to have suffered a setback. The political parties that have swept to power in Egypt and Tunisia are attempting to define their nations in narrow ethno-religious terms – as Islamic with sharia as the principal source of law. In Tunisia, for example, the constitution explicitly prohibits Christians from fielding candidates in the presidential election.

[Attacks against Coptic churches](#) and Christians in Egypt have increased during and since the revolution, and Arab Christians have allegedly [been attacked in Syria](#). This has led to much soul-searching in the Arab Christian community, whose numbers and political influence have dwindled significantly over the past two decades owing to significant bouts of emigration.

The fact that the new political parties have been elected with significant majorities certainly complicates matters for minority groups – including Arab Christians – as their rights and aspirations could easily be ignored by the majority.

Nevertheless, the fragile state of the Egyptian and Tunisian economies represents an opening for minority groups.

First, the difficulty of governing in such a challenging environment may encourage the new ruling parties to reach out to minorities in order to forge a broad-based domestic coalition for their economic and social reform programmes.

Second, economic difficulties make overseas aid and foreign direct investment a valuable commodity – and calls for foreign aid to be linked to progress on human rights may further strengthen the position of minorities.

That said, though, foreign support for minorities is not guaranteed. Some Christian leaders, including [Father Rifat Bader of the Catholic Centre for Media Studies in Jordan](#), worry that the west will prioritise strategic interests and stability over the promotion of values.

It would therefore be a strategic mistake for Arab Christians to rely on foreign governments. Rather, they should reach out to the new ruling elites by identifying areas of common interest and pressing for guarantees on minority rights in exchange for political support.

One important test will come during negotiations over the new Egyptian constitution, where Arab Christians are pressing for the right to maintain their own religious laws. In that respect, they have some support from secular and socialist groups and activists. Arab Christians might also be able to broaden their domestic support by emphasising civic rights in general rather than focusing exclusively on their own sectarian interests.

While the future of Syria remains unclear, Arab Christians who have historically aligned themselves with the ruling Assad elite in exchange for certain rights and privileges should

begin to develop alliances with opposition groups to identify areas of common interest and concern – as well as working with other civil society elements and the business community.

The situation in Jordan is even more uncertain as the momentum for reform seems to have stalled. Arab Christians make up approximately 6% of Jordan's population and – as in Syria – have historically aligned themselves with the ruling elite. While this has afforded them certain political rights, including the right to vote and field candidates in parliamentary elections, they have been prevented from holding the office of the prime minister under the constitution.

Jordanian Christians – much like Palestinian-Jordanians who make up approximately 70% of the kingdom's population – are also largely underrepresented in the cabinet and in the security-military apparatus. Looking ahead to any future reform in Jordan, the Arab Christians should consider distancing themselves from the Hashemite regime by building alliances and reaching out to Palestinian-Jordanians as internal and international pressure to democratise continues.

While the Arab spring has certainly unleashed democratic forces in the Middle East, including free and fair elections, it has yet to create fully fledged democracies. Arab Christians have a tough task ahead in navigating the rough new political terrain but they must work hard to cultivate new alliances with emerging ethnic and religious elites to ensure that their rights and identities are adequately bulwarked as a matter of law – but also as a matter of practice.

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## **Egypt releases Coptic children held in blasphemy case**

BBC News (05.10.2012) - A court in Egypt has ordered the release pending investigation of two Coptic Christian children detained on Tuesday for blasphemy against Islam.

A Muslim cleric in Izbet Marco, a village in Beni Suef province, said he saw the boys, aged nine and 10, take pages of the Koran and urinate on them.

A Coptic priest said local Islamists attended demonstrations calling for revenge for the desecration of a Koran.

Human rights groups say allegations of contempt of religion are on the rise.

Seventeen cases have been filed since the 2011 uprising, many of them against Copts, who make up about 10% of Egypt's 82 million people.

Tensions have also been heightened in the past month by the posting online of Innocence of Muslims - an amateur video made by a Coptic Christian in the US which mocks Islam and has sparked violent protests worldwide.

### **'Feared for their lives'**

A neighbour of the boys detained in Izbet Marco said he doubted the allegations were true because they were illiterate and could not have recognised the Koran.

"We brought one boy and asked him if he knew this is the Koran. He didn't know it was the Koran. He can't even read or write, like most kids in the village," he told the Associated Press news agency.

The neighbour said a police officer had detained the boys for their own safety because Islamists from outside the village had gathered at the mosque calling for revenge.

"We begged him to leave the kids. They can't spend night outside their home. The officer said he feared for their lives and he wanted to keep them with him."

On Thursday, a senior security official in Beni Suef, Gen Attiya Mazrou, said police had been ordered to release the boys, but that they would remain under investigation.

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## **Egypt refers man who tore Bible to trial**

AP (25.09.2012) - Egyptian prosecutors referred to trial Tuesday a well-known radical Islamist who tore up an English copy of the Bible during a protest outside the U.S. Embassy in Cairo against an anti-Islam film produced in the United States.

The case against Ahmed Mohammed Abdullah is a rare example of Egypt's blasphemy laws — often condemned by rights groups as restrictive of freedom— used against someone who allegedly insulted a religion other than Islam.

Abdullah, also known as Abu Islam, was filmed during a protest outside the embassy two weeks ago as he stood before the crowd and ripped up the holy book. "Next time I will urinate on it," he says in another video. Both videos were posted online.

The subject of the protest, the film "Innocence of Muslims," has enraged many Muslims for its portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, a womanizer and a child molester. At least 51 people, including the U.S. ambassador to Libya, have been killed in violence linked to protests over the film, which also has renewed debate over freedom of expression in the Middle East, U.S. and in Europe.

Contempt towards "heavenly" religions — a term usually taken to include Christianity, Islam, and Judaism — is punishable by up to five years in Egypt. But lawyers and rights groups say the definition of contempt of religion is vague and has been used frequently against critics of Islam only, not other faiths.

In the wake of the anti-Islam video, many clerics and politicians in Egypt have called for an international law criminalizing contempt for religion. Egypt's new government, headed by Islamist President Mohammed Morsi, may be under pressure to show that it is applying Egypt's contempt law evenhandedly.

Critics say the recent moves are a retreat from freedoms gained during the uprising against Morsi's predecessor, Hosni Mubarak. The contempt of religion laws were also used under Mubarak.

A prosecution official said Abdullah's son and a journalist who interviewed him afterward were also referred to trial. The official spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Abdullah is known for having put together a new Islamic TV channel that is run primarily by women veiled from head to toe, with only their eyes showing. He is a frequent guest on other television channels.

He told The Associated Press he is not guilty of contempt to religion because he targeted the book of a specific group of Christians who have offended Islam.

"I had always wished to go to court to explain to the world that there is no such thing as the Bible. Every church in the West has its own holy book," he said.

He said his trial begins Sept. 30. The other two defendants could not immediately be reached for comment.

Another Egyptian, a Coptic Christian who had questioned both Islam and Christianity on his social networking pages, has also been referred to trial, which begins Wednesday, on charges of contempt to religion. Alber Saber was originally arrested in the wake of the anger of the offensive film, and accused of sharing it online.

The prosecutors didn't find the film on his web pages, but still prosecuted him for contempt. Another Coptic Christian was sentenced to six years in prison last week for insulting Islam and the president on his Facebook page.

"There seems to be a direction toward restricting freedoms," said Ahmed Ezzat, a human rights lawyer who is defending Saber.

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## **Freedom of belief stirs controversy in constitutional debate**

Egypt Independent (10.09.2012) - Controversy erupted Sunday during the Constituent Assembly's discussion of an article on the freedom of faith and worship, which was handled in a session attended by a number of intellectuals and artists.

Article 8 of the Rights, Freedoms and Duties section of the constitution draft put together by the assembly stipulates that the "freedom of belief and worship is preserved, and the state protects the freedom of establishing places of worship, in the way defined by the law and in line with public order."

In the outgoing constitution, freedom of belief was a standalone article that read, "The state guarantees freedom of belief and the free practice of religious rites." Meanwhile, there was no allocation to the right to build places of worship, an issue that proved contentious as many sectarian clashes erupted over Copts' right to build churches.

During the discussions, author Salah Eissa stressed the need to separate between the freedom of belief and the freedom of worship, so that freedom of belief would not be interpreted as something regulated by the law. He predicted the article would be a subject of dispute when offered to the public.

Actor Mahmoud Yassin supported Eissa's argument, saying that the practice of religious rites should not be regulated by a law.

The head of the Constituent Assembly's Rights and Freedoms Committee, Edward Ghaleb, noted that the phrase "in line with public order" would be removed for being too loose.

During the session, Culture Minister Saber Arab brought up a number of questions, such as whether any group would have the right to practice its rituals in its own places of worship, whether the right of worship would be limited to followers of "heavenly" faiths, and whether the law would entitle certain religious sects, such as Shias, to build places of worship.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Mohamed Mahsoub, a rapporteur for the assembly's Wording Committee, said all countries' constitutions guarantee unrestrained freedom of belief, while some documents place restrictions on the practice of some rituals, which he said is also suggested by some committee members.

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## **16 wounded in sectarian clashes outside Cairo**

AFP (01.08.2012) - Angry Muslims attacked a church and Christian homes outside Cairo on Wednesday, sparking clashes that wounded 16 people, a security official said, after a Muslim died of wounds from a fight with a Christian.

Police fired tear gas to prevent the mob setting fire to the church but the crowd returned and torched several homes in the village of Dahshur as well as three police cars, the official said.

Six villagers and 10 police were wounded in the violence.

It was the second assault on the village following last week's fight between the Muslim and the Christian, a laundry worker whom he accused of singing his shirt while ironing it.

On Friday, Muslims set fire to several homes and traded fire bombs with villagers, leaving at least one person wounded.

The Muslim died of his injuries on Tuesday and was buried during the night.

Muslims have in the past burned the homes of Copts during sectarian clashes, with dozens of Christians killed in the past 18 months alone since president Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in a popular uprising.

The Copts, who make up roughly 10 percent of Egypt's 82-million-strong population, were also the target of sectarian attack before Mubarak's ouster in February last year.

Mubarak's overthrow was followed by this year's election of Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, who has pledged to respect the rights of Christians and says they will be represented in his government.

Muslim-majority Egypt has for decades been marked by deep sectarian tensions, with religious violence between Muslims and Christians often sparked by disputes over land or love affairs between members of the two communities.

In January 2011, a suicide bomber killed more than 20 Christians outside a church in the

country's second city Alexandria, amid accusations by Islamists that the Coptic Church had detained a woman who converted to Islam.

The United States warned on Monday that despite gestures by Egypt's interim military leaders towards greater inclusiveness, sectarian tensions and violence had increased.

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## **120 Christian families flee Egyptian village following death of a Muslim**

AINA (01.08.2012) -- The sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians which took place last week in the village of Dahshur has prompted over 120 Christian families to flee their homes today after news that a Muslim man who had suffered 3rd degree burns in the incident died this morning in a Cairo hospital. Before his death, the father and brother of Moaz Hassab-Allah told the media yesterday that should he die, "the whole village will avenge his death."

Coptic villagers were terrorized today after a Muslim Brotherhood cleric roamed the village vowing that the village church of St. George will be burned down, its pastor and all the entire Christian inhabitants killed and their homes torched after the burial of Moaz tonight, reported Coptic activist Maariam Ragy.

Coptic professional garments presser Sameh Samy accidentally burned the shirt of his Muslim client Ahmad Ramadan. "They agreed to meet after the Muslim breaks his fast and settle the damage," said father Takla of St, George's church to MidEast Christian News, "however, Ramadan came back before the appointment." He added that after breaking their Ramadan fast nearly 2000-3000 Muslims congregated; Mr. Samy locked his launderette and his home.

Fighting broke out between the Muslims and Sameh's family, during which Molotov's cocktails, firearms and knives were used. The priest explained that Sameh faced this huge mob in "self-defense," threw a Molotov's cocktail which hit the passer-by Moaz.

"This made the villagers extremely angry and they torched his home and his launderette and his brother's home after they looted the contents, a loss of nearly 400,000 Egyptian pounds. They prevented the fire brigade from reaching the fire," said Takla. The mob wounded Sameh, his father, his cousin and another Copt. Father Takla said that over 500 moderate village Muslims stopped the Salafist mob from storming the church, until security forces arrived and secured it.

Prosecution ordered the arrest of five Muslims, while Sameh Samy, his father and brother were detained pending investigation on charges of attempted murder and possession of explosives. Today, prosecution renewed their detention for 15 days and changed the charged to contemplated murder. No Muslim has yet been arrested.

In another incident in Shubra el Khayma, Qaliubya province, On July 26, Dr Maher Ghaly looked out from his window at dawn and asked a group of Muslim Salafis who have a shop in the same building not to fire their weapons in the air in celebration of another day of the Ramadan fast. He explained to them that in his household there are sick persons and children who are greatly disturbed. "Their answer was to shoot at him. One of his eyes was blown away and there is no hope of replacing the cornea in his other eye," said his brother Fayez. He said that the Muslims wanted to break the main building door and go to his flat but were unable. "Although the police issued a report, they have done nothing to arrest the culprits."

Dr. Ghaly is hospitalized in the French hospital in Cairo.

Two days ago, a Muslim attacked a church in the area of Sheikh Zayed, Qaliubya. Prosecution did not make any charges against him as he is "mentally unstable," and was subsequently released.

"Since Morsy became President of Egypt, there is systematic persecution of the Copts," said Dr. Naguib Gabriel, head of the Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organization. He said that in the last ten days of the Muslim Ramadan fast, twelve incidents took place against the Copts, including the arrest of the six Copts in Dahshur, while no Muslim was arrested.

"Displacement of Copts has become fashionable," said Gabriel. "Now any small melee between a Muslim and a Copt is used by Islamists, turning it into a sectarian incident, pushing for Coptic arrests, torching of their homes or enforced displacement, while not a single action is taken against the Muslim culprits."

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## **Egypt unnerved by rising religious fervor**

***Scattered violent incidents of 'moral vigilantism' break out in Egypt, which is trying to come to terms with Islam's place in public and private life***

LA Times (29.07.2012) - An engineering student is killed for walking with his fiancée by men reportedly linked to a group called the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Women are harassed for not wearing veils, owners of liquor stores say they're being threatened, and fundamentalists are calling for sex segregation on buses and in workplaces.

Egypt's recent election of an Islamist president has rekindled a long-suppressed display of public piety that has aroused both "moral vigilantism" and personal acts of faith, such as demands that police officers and flight attendants be allowed to grow beards. Scattered incidents of violence and intimidation do not appear to have been organized, but they represent a disturbing trend in Egypt's transition to democracy.

Emerging from decades of secular rule, the country is unsteadily calibrating how deeply Islam should infuse public and private life. President Mohamed Morsi, a religious conservative, has called for tolerance, but many Islamic fundamentalists see a historic moment to impose sharia, or Islamic law, on a country left off balance by political unrest and economic turmoil.

Rising religious fervor is the latest echo in the battle between moderate and ultraconservative Islamists to reshape society after the overthrow of autocrats across the Middle East and North Africa. It is particularly pointed in Egypt, where Morsi must appease a powerful, secular military and dominant Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and ultraconservative Salafi parties.

The battle lines have unnerved women's rights groups and Coptic Christians, who, fearing radicalism, have protested in front of the presidential palace. The most extreme case was the recent arrest of three men charged in the killing of the engineering student in the port city of Suez.

Egyptian news reports have described the suspects as fundamentalists angered by the couple's display of affection. The men reportedly were part of a Facebook group called the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, a name similar to that of the morality

police in Saudi Arabia. Morsi's office suggested that the attack was the work of remnants of the secular old regime out to taint his presidency.

Much of the problem stems from a lack of protection from security forces that have been in disarray for 17 months, leaving a vacuum that ultraconservatives have filled. Salafi leaders insist that they have no desire to see the country tilt toward radicalism. But with no central Islamic authority, a wide array of religious voices has found resonance in mosques, television studios and on the Internet.

"The Salafi movement has a fear of extremists," said Sheik Mustafa Albadry, an ultraconservative preacher on the outskirts of Cairo. "Scholars need to be aware of this rising current. The oppression of the old regime created radicalism because the youth didn't have proper guidance. And today's financial problems are making people more prone to extremism."

Mubarak persecuted and manipulated Islamist groups for decades, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. His secular police state led to anger that inspired terrorist attacks and provoked preachers and scholars who are now restive and unbound. Some former militants have renounced violence and formed political parties.

This new atmosphere has elevated piety - and public expressions of it - to an important social barometer. Egyptian men have been distinguished by the callused brown spots on their foreheads that come from years of prostrating themselves. Police officers and Egypt Air flight attendants are now demanding the right to grow beards, which was forbidden under Mubarak.

But the crucial battle is over how deeply sharia will influence the new constitution.

This has led to intense debate between Salafis and moderate thinkers, such as scholars at Al Azhar, Sunni Islam's most prestigious university. Salafis demand a constitution that mirrors the Koran and its harsh punishments, including amputating the hands of thieves. Moderates call for a document based on the "principles" of sharia, which would be less strict and offer broader civil liberties to women as well as Christians and other non-Muslims.

The Salafis "believe that the ruler's responsibility is to implement Islam, but they demand impractical and radical ideas that he cannot fulfill," said Diaa Rashwan, an expert on Islamists at Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. He said that Morsi "cannot apply a religious state like in Saudi Arabia. It is not in accordance with Egypt's international agreements or its culture. So these radicals will rise to the occasion."

The struggle between ultraconservative and moderate Islamists has reverberated through generations. It is as critical a balancing test for Morsi as his battle to pressure the Egyptian military to relinquish control over the nation. Morsi courted Salafis during his campaign and is now confronted with their agenda and insistence that he not appoint a woman or a Christian as a vice president.

"President Morsi cannot hide from these issues," said Mahmoud Ashour, former deputy for Al Azhar and a member of the Islamic Research Center.

Ultraconservatives traditionally viewed politics as a distraction from God. But after Mubarak's fall, they realized they could advance their religious mandate through elections; Salafis won about 25% of the seats in January's parliamentary poll. But with that came mixed signals on religion and embarrassing foibles inherent in political life, such as the ultraconservative lawmaker found in an uncompromising situation with a woman who was not his wife.

"People have gotten angry with religion, and this is dangerous. It has put the Salafi movement in a predicament," said Albadry, who sat in a white tunic and skullcap in his office off a prayer room filled with amber light. "Lies and games are not what political Islam intends."

But the country's political unrest and economic uncertainty are also drawing more young men to mosques. About 29% of Egypt's population is between 15 and 29, and many of the younger people, as they did under Mubarak, feel little sense of hope in a shrinking job market. Albadry said they are frustrated and searching.

"Their rising fear is that they worry about going against God. They're more willing to go to mosques and seek advice from religious scholars," he said. "But a lot of religious scholars are not necessarily angels and they have not always interpreted wisely."

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## **Egypt bans alcohol on Islamic holidays**

eTurboNews (22.07.2012) - Along with month of Ramadan, Egyptians won't be able to purchase alcoholic beverages during 4 other major Islamic holidays, according to new decision by minister of tourism.

Egyptian Tourism Minister Mounir Fakhry Abdel-Nour has decided that prohibitions on the serving of alcoholic beverages to Egyptian citizens would be applied on all major Islamic holidays and not just during the fasting month of Ramadan, Egypt's state news agency MENA reported on Sunday.

Serving alcohol to Egyptians during Ramadan has long been banned in Egypt out of respect for the holy month, during which Muslims tend to strictly abide by Islamic prohibitions and doctrine. According to Islamic precepts, the consumption of alcohol is strictly forbidden at all times.

Abdel-Nour has reportedly decided to apply the prohibition on four other days of the year: the Islamic New Year, the holiday commemorating the Israa and Me'rag, Prophet Mohamed's birthday and the day of Arafa.

According to MENA, Abdel-Nour's decision was made out of respect for "the feelings of Muslims."

The serving of alcohol to Egyptians by restaurants or bars on any of these days, the decision stipulates, will result in severe legal sanctions.

However, serving of alcohol to Egyptians on any of the aforementioned days has been banned for over 30 years.

An owner of a popular mid-town restaurant-bar told Ahram Online that he does not fully understand how the new decision would affect his business.

"My license of more than 20 years has prohibited me from serving alcohol to Egyptians during Ramadan and on those four holidays anyways, so I don't know what the minister's decision is about," he said.

Since the election last month of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as president, speculation has been rife that Islamist political forces would seek to ban the sale of alcohol altogether.

Parliamentary elections late last year saw the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the ultra-conservative Salafist Nour Party collectively capture roughly three quarters of the seats in the People's Assembly (the lower house of Egypt's parliament).

The concerns of the country's liberals and secularists, however, were eased somewhat after the democratically-elected People's Assembly was abruptly dissolved in June after a constitutional court ruled that the law governing last year's legislative polls was unconstitutional.

But fears of theocratic rule in Egypt were renewed once again after the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi was inaugurated as Egypt's first freely-elected president last month.

Morsi has yet to appoint a new prime minister, who, along with the president, will be responsible for drawing up a new government.

In the meantime, Egypt's interim cabinet - led by Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri - is expected to remain in place until the appointment of a new government.

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## **Abductions and forced conversions of Christian Coptic women dramatically increase**

By Myles Collier

The Christian Post (20.07.2012) - A report recently published describes the growing concern surrounding the increasingly common abductions and forced conversions of Coptic Christians in Egypt in the wake of the uprisings that overthrew former President Hosni Mubarak early in 2011.

The report, entitled "Tell My Mother I Miss Her," was commissioned by Christian Solidarity International (CSI) and reveals with certainty that "Coptic women and girls are deceptively lured or abducted into forced marriages with Muslim men" while also being forced to renounce their faith and convert to Islam. These actions generally occur after the women are threatened or even physically abused.

The findings added to a previous report by CSI published in 2009 entitled, "The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt," and aims to illicit action from government bodies and the international community.

The report was authored by Michele Clark, adjunct professor at George Washington University and Nadia Ghaly, a Coptic human rights activist. The research for the report was conducted in Egypt during the political uprising of the Arab Spring in November 2011. During that period Egyptians saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamental Islamist forces.

Clark and Ghaly have both connected the increase in Coptic women and girls disappearing and being forcibly converted, to the volatile period since President Mubarak was removed from power in February 2011.

"Denial and obfuscation will neither help victimized Christian women, nor challenge the religious bigotry and sexism that impedes the development of democracy in Egypt," Dr. John Eibner, CEO of CSI-USA, explained.

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Dr. Eibner has repeatedly sought help from not only the U. S. State Department but also various non-governmental organizations that specialize in women's rights, human trafficking and religious liberty. He has sought their help to increase pressure on certain government bodies that have taken little action over helping the persecuted women in Egypt.

"Abducting and converting Coptic girls to Islam is not only a result of the paranoid and racist incitation against the Copts, but it is an organized and pre-planned process by associations and organizations inside Egypt with domestic and Arab funding as the main role in seducing and luring Coptic girls is carried through cunning, deceit and enticement or through force if required," according to Magdy Khalil of the Middle East Freedom Forum.

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## **In the new Egypt, beards appear where they were once banned**

By Steve Hendrix

The Washington Post (17.07.2012) -Cairo, Egypt - The morning shave used to feel less soothing than sinful to Ahmed Hamdy, an observant Muslim police lieutenant in southern Egypt. Letting his whiskers grow was a duty to God, he believed. But working clean-shaven was the unwritten code at almost any government job.

"Every day when I shaved, I used to ask God for forgiveness," said Hamdy, 26.

And so in February, a year after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Hamdy decided it was time to wear his religious identity on his chin. One morning after a vacation, he arrived for work as a bearded policeman and immediately became part of Egypt's messy struggle to redefine its relationship with Islam in the post-revolution era.

All over the country, Muslim men are demanding to wear beards — and Muslim women the hijab hair covering — in police stations, banks, airliners, television news programs and other places where they have long been banned by law or custom.

For many, it's a blooming of self-expression that was dangerous under a regime that equated Islamic piety with terrorism, when having a beard was enough reason to be pulled over by state security officers or to draw extra attention at the airport. For others, it's part of the rise of Islamist governments in the wake of the Arab Spring and a disconcerting intrusion of religious identity into the public sphere.

"All of a sudden, the grip of the state is gone," said Ziad Akl,

a political sociologist at the Ahrum Center for Political and Strategic Studies. "There is a lot of Islamophobia in Egypt because Mubarak not only cracked down on Muslims, he created an image of them as devils."

Now Mubarak is gone, and Muslims have more room to express themselves. "But a lot of secular people who still fear the Islamization of society are seeing beards in more and more places," Akl said.

Perhaps the most shocking place to see facial hair is in the presidential palace. Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who assumed Egypt's highest office last month,

is not just the first democratically elected president whom living Egyptians have seen — he's also the first bearded one.

"As Muslims, when we see President Morsi, we feel just as the black people of the United States feel about Barack Obama," said Ali el-Banna, a lawyer and Brotherhood supporter. "Here is somebody who looks like me, who represents me. We had never had that before."

Banna is one of the attorneys representing Hamdy and more than 60 policemen around the country suspended for wearing beards. Most of them, like Hamdy, have been taken off regular duty at a fraction of their pay. Five officers in Alexandria remain barred in spite of having prevailed in their court cases against the Interior Ministry.

"My supervisor said I couldn't wear it during work hours," Hamdy recalled of his first bearded morning. "Like it was a fake beard I could take on and off. It was absurd."

This month, a group of male flight attendants filed suit against EgyptAir, demanding the right to sport "neatly trimmed" beards in the cabin, as some other airlines allow. At least one pilot has joined their efforts, according to an activist working on their cause.

Some female Muslim flight attendants, meanwhile, want to cover their hair. In response, the Civil Aviation Ministry set up a committee to study the request. One of its suggestions? Reworking the uniforms in a pharaoh motif, with the crown playing the role of the hijab, a traditional covering for the hair and neck of a Muslim woman.

"The attendants refused," said Maysa Abdelhadi, one of the flight attendants who has taken part in the negotiations. "It is an unsuitable design."

The issue is so difficult for Egyptians in part because the country lacks a strong tradition of individual freedoms or protections for them in the law.

A new constitution is due to be written and ratified this year. But that process is likely to be dominated by Islamists, and observers here would be surprised if the document codified a wide-ranging tolerance for self-expression.

"If the constitution were to say anyone can wear a beard, it will also allow anyone to wear a bikini," Akl said. "I don't expect it to go that far."

Secular and Coptic Christian Egyptians seem to have conflicted views of the new visibility of Islamic piety. The beard is a powerful symbol to many, shorthand for the extremism they see in other countries. But they also cherish the idea of a modern, cosmopolitan Egypt where people are not persecuted for what they wear on chin or hair.

"If a man wants to grow a beard, he should be able to," said Mohamed Ahmed, a 20-something systems engineer who was out with friends at a trendy restaurant overlooking the Nile. "But if the waiters here have beards, some people aren't going to come. For the owner, it's a business decision."

For Lameaa Mowafi, a well-known political reporter on Egyptian state television, the decision to cover her hair was an intensely personal one. One morning before the revolution, she came to the studio in a hijab and was immediately banned from doing on-camera work.

But last year, when the crowds filled Tahrir Square and Mubarak was tottering, she took to the air, her hair covered, and has been on ever since.

"It's a dream come true," said Mowafi, who broadcasts daily from the presidential palace and is one of several reporters who wear the hijab. "It was impossible to even imagine that a veiled presenter would be live on any channel in any part of Egypt. Now I cover the presidency."

Hassan El Naggar and Mohannad Sabry contributed to this report.

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## **Egypt's choice between Islamism and the old guard**

By Daniel Steinvorth

Der Spiegel (12.06.2012) - A search for the soul of the Egyptian people could begin in the narrow and dusty streets of Shubra al-Khaima, a northern suburb of Cairo. Donkey carts clatter across the potholes while scrap metal dealers and vegetable sellers jostle for space. Children play in front of houses next to old men sitting in plastic chairs.

They can be found here, in the midst of North Africa's largest metropolitan area, in a labyrinth of sandstone, clay and red bricks, people like coffee roasters Antar and Amgad Farid, two ordinary Egyptians -- just two of the nearly 51 million people who will be called upon to elect a new president on June 16 and 17.

It will be the first democratic election of an Egyptian head of state, made possible by a revolution that inspired the world and overthrew the autocratic, cancer-stricken former President Hosni Mubarak, who was sentenced to life in prison on June 2.

Brothers Antar and Amgad used to be looking forward to taking part in a unique experiment. Proud Egypt, the most populous Arab country, was to become a democracy after decades of authoritarian rule.

But now the Farids -- two amiable, slightly overweight gentlemen with moustaches -- are standing in their tiny shop feeling frustrated. It is hot and dry, and the tired-looking ceiling fan barely makes a difference, as flies buzz around the roasting machines. Like millions of other Egyptians, they feel cheated by their revolution.

### ***A General and an Engineer***

They were appalled to witness two hardliners turn out to be the frontrunners in the first round of elections on May 23 and 24: Ahmed Shafiq, 70, a former air-force general and member of the former Mubarak regime; and Mohammed Mursi, a 60-year-old engineer and senior official from the conservative core of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The Farids, like most people in their neighborhood, had voted for the left-wing candidate Hamdeen Sabahi.

"We now have a choice between someone who hates the revolution and someone who wants to introduce Sharia," says Amgad. "God have mercy upon us."

The two brothers will probably vote for former military man Shafiq in this weekend's runoff election. He is the lesser of two evils, says Antar, who has a small crucifix tattooed on his right arm. The Farids are Copts, members of Egypt's largest Christian minority. The Islamists' long-term plans are dangerous, says Amgad.

About a third of the people in Shubra al-Khaima are Christians, while an estimated 5 million to 8 million Christians, or up to 10 percent of the population, live in Egypt as a whole. The exact number is a matter of debate.

What is clear, however, is that the majority of Copts share the sentiments of the Farid brothers. Christians in Egypt have a deep-seated fear of religious intolerance. Although many Christians are more likely to be poor and socially disadvantaged, this has not led them into the arms of the Muslim Brotherhood, allegedly the country's most charitable movement. The Islamists' social network is restricted to fellow Muslims.

### ***Yearning for Stability***

Cut to Cairo's chic Garden City Club, an exclusive refuge where ice cubes tinkle in the whiskey glasses of the city's business elite, who are here to escape the noise and heat high above the roofs of the megacity. The guests, none of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood, are discussing the runoff election. Their views on Shafiq, the man Mubarak only recently praised as a "role model," also diverge widely.

"We need a president who is less polarizing," says one guest. "Shafiq is a military man. If he wins, the first thing he'll do is dissolve the parliament, which is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. That would be fatal."

Christians and liberals aren't the only ones who are apprehensive about having a president from the ranks of the Brotherhood. Many economic leaders, members of the military and the old security apparatus, as well as those Egyptians who yearn for "stable conditions," prefer Shafiq.

The retired general, a close associate of both Mubarak and former President Anwar Sadat, has vowed to reestablish a "strong state" and put an end to the "chaos." His attempts to connect with the supporters of the protest movement and "give them back the revolution" have seemed feeble by comparison. In fact, Shafiq's insincerity was reflected in his spokesman's comment, on the evening of the election, that "the revolution is over."

As the last prime minister installed by Mubarak, Shafiq himself is held responsible for much of the bloody violence on Tahrir Square. He also still faces corruption allegations from his days as minister of civil aviation. Cooperation with "that criminal Shafiq," says a young revolutionary, is "completely out of the question."

### ***'Egypt Has Many Problems'***

His opponents argue that Shafiq should not have been allowed to run in the first place. Under a law passed by the new parliament, senior members of the former regime are to be excluded from the election, and yet the election commission approved the general's candidacy -- evidence for many Egyptians of how much control the ruling military council still wields.

Shafiq's ties to the military and the old judicial system cast a shadow over the candidate. Even after the historic trial of former President Mubarak, he left no doubt as to his loyalty to the old regime. The trial ended with the acquittal of Mubarak's sons Gamal and Alaa, prompting thousands to take to the streets in anger and frustration. Meanwhile, Shafiq called upon Egyptians to accept the court's ruling.

Can Shafiq's adversary, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi, turn public anger to his advantage?

Ibrahim Saleh, an 83-year-old businessman and Swiss citizen, is an old friend and supporter of Mursi's. He lives in a villa in the southeastern part of Cairo.

Saleh, as the unofficial number-three man and one of the forward thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood, is much in demand these days in both the Islamic world and Europe. He studied engineering in Germany in the 1950s and, like many Egyptians, is a great admirer of German technology. Saleh says that it "isn't logical" that the West still has reservations about his movement. "Egypt has many problems, and we will tackle them," he says.

Saleh wants to solve Egypt's most pressing problems with an "Islamic economic model" based on large-scale government projects and an "interest-free capitalism." He envisions both an "agricultural revival of the entire Mediterranean coast, as in the days of the Romans" and the introduction of a common currency for the Islamic world.

His movement is down-to-earth, pragmatic and pro-business, says Saleh, who insists that these traits also apply to his friend Mursi.

### ***Election Boycott Possible***

But why then did the candidate capture only 24.8 percent of votes in the first round, while his party received almost 40 percent in the parliamentary election that ended in January? Was it because of Mursi's lack of charisma and the perception of him as the Brotherhood's "second choice," after the election commission had disqualified the businessman and multimillionaire Khairat el-Shater?

Or was it because of the Islamists' questionable initial behavior in parliament, which contributed to the demystification of the movement, and included bizarre theological debates and the refusal of some members to converse with women? In later TV appearances, Mursi tried to placate the Brotherhood's critics and make overtures to Copts and liberals. But then a newspaper quoted him as saying that the introduction of Sharia was a "matter of course."

Many Egyptians are alarmed by the prospect of a complete takeover by the Brotherhood, already the most powerful force in parliament.

Because of these concerns, it seems increasingly likely that many will boycott the runoff election. "Turnout will fall to less than 15 percent," says one expert. If that were the case, the new president would clearly lack meaningful legitimacy.

Whoever succeeds Mubarak, the Egyptians long for a new strong man, especially given the near-impossible challenges he will face. Egypt's population has exploded from 46 million in 1981, when Mubarak came into office, to 83 million today, and it is expected to increase to more than 120 million by around 2050. With deserts making up more than 80 percent of its landmass, the country must import millions of tons of wheat and other food products. Many Egyptians are already dependent on food vouchers.

### ***Just the Beginning***

For years, demographers have been warning of sharp declines, dramatic poverty and hunger riots. The Egyptian economy is in pieces, factories are being shut down and foreign investors are shunning the country. Unemployment figures are pure speculation, but even in pre-revolutionary Egypt some 40 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Hospitals, schools, roads and bridges are in terrible shape.

Social hardships and popular disappointment with the Islamists also explain the surprisingly successful performance of secular leftist candidate Hamdeen Sabahi in this election. Although he did not qualify for the runoff, Sabahi captured an astonishing 20.8 percent of votes in the first round.

Instead of touting Islam as the solution of all problems, Sabahi won over voters disillusioned with the Muslim Brotherhood by focusing on "social justice."

Sabahi himself believes that his performance could be the first sign of the advent of a "third approach" that will continue to play an important role in the future: a broad popular movement beyond Islamism and modern Pharaonism.

If he's right, this Sunday will not mark the end of the election in Egypt, the Arab world's biggest democratic experiment to date. In fact, it will just be getting underway.

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## **Islamist candidate reassures women and Copts**

AP (29.06.2012) - The presidential candidate for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood on Tuesday sought to expand his support base ahead of a tight runoff against an ex-regime figure next month, vowing to ensure the full rights of Christians and women if he is elected.

Mohammed Morsi also tried to reassure the pro-democracy youth groups who drove the popular uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak's regime 15 months ago, saying he will protect the right to stage peaceful protests and sit-ins.

Morsi claimed the top spot in the first round of Egypt's landmark election last week, putting him in the June 16-17 runoff vote against Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force commander and Mubarak's last prime minister.

Both candidates are highly polarizing figures, and are scrambling to broaden their base by appealing to groups that didn't support them in the first round.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday in Cairo, Morsi said he planned to appoint Christians as presidential advisers and name one as vice president "if possible," and said he would not impose an Islamic dress code in public for women.

"Our Christian brothers, they are partners in the nation. They will have full rights that are equal to those enjoyed by Muslims," Morsi said. "They will be represented as advisers in the presidential institution, and maybe a vice president if possible."

Women, he said, will have full rights in jobs and education. "Women have a right to freely choose the attire that suits them," he said.

Morsi also vowed to create a broad coalition government, and said the country's new constitution would be written by a panel that is truly representative of the nation.

The Brotherhood and other Islamists who control more than 70 percent of parliament's seats packed the original constitutional panel with their own supporters in a bid to influence the charter. However, a court ruling disbanded it on the grounds that it did not observe the rules of selection spelled out in a constitutional declaration adopted last year.

Morsi and Shafiq qualified for the runoff after they finished as the top vote-getters in the first round of voting on May 23-24. Morsi won close to 5.8 million votes, or almost 25 percent, while Shafiq garnered 5.5 million votes, or nearly 24 percent, according to final official results announced on Monday.

Morsi also pledged to lift the decades-old state of emergency, which gives police wide powers of arrest and detention.

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## **Christian teenager who was sentenced for 3 years in jail, for defaming Islam, loses his appeal**

HRWF (31.05.2012) - A Christian teenager sentenced to three years in jail for defaming Islam has lost his appeal before an Egyptian court, the government said.

An appeals court in the southern Egyptian city of Assiut upheld the prison sentence handed to 16-year-old Gamal Abdu Massoud, the Egypt Independent reported on 30 May.

Massoud was convicted of defaming religion for posting a drawing on his Facebook page in December that mocked Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

The drawing prompted Muslims to attack Christians and burn homes in Assiut which has a large Christian population.

On 3 April 2012, an Egyptian court sentenced a 17-year-old Christian boy to three years in jail for publishing cartoons on his Facebook page that mocked Islam and the Prophet Mohammad, actions that sparked sectarian violence.

Gamal Abdou Massoud was also accused of distributing some of his cartoons to his school friends in a village in the southern city of Assiut, home to a large Christian population and the hometown of the late Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda.

"Assiut child's court ordered the jailing of Gamal Abdou Massoud ... for three years after he insulted Islam and published and distributed pictures that insulted Islam and its Prophet," the court said in a statement seen by Reuters.

The cartoons, published by Massoud in December, prompted some Muslims to attack Christians. Several Christian houses were burned and several Christians were injured in the violence.

Human rights lawyer Negad al-Borai said the jail sentence was the maximum penalty under Egyptian law for such a crime.

Christians, who make up about 10 percent of the country's 80 million population, have long had a difficult relationship with Egypt's overwhelmingly Muslim majority.

Sources: UPI and Al Arabia

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## Can Muslim Brotherhood unite Egypt?

By Mohammed Ayooob

CNN (30.05. 2012) - On the surface, the first round of the Egyptian presidential election seemed to show that the Muslim Brotherhood and the remnants of the Mubarak regime are locked in mortal combat for the political soul of Egypt -- as Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi faces pro-military candidate Ahmed Shafik in a second round of voting in June.

Buying into this simplistic formula, however, would be a total misreading of the far more complex picture. To understand the political reality of Egypt and the strengths and weaknesses of the major political forces operating in the country, one needs to look more closely at all of the electoral results.

First, it is very clear that the Muslim Brotherhood, despite Morsi's emergence as the presidential front-runner, lost almost half its support base between the parliamentary and presidential elections -- from 47% to 25%.

It is true that the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood was able to mobilize its political base in the presidential elections more effectively than its competitors. But the support of a mere quarter of the electorate is nowhere near sufficient for the Brotherhood to govern the country by itself.

Only part of this decline in support can be attributed to former Brotherhood leader Abdelmonem Abol Fotoh's 2011 defection from the party and his decision to run for president as an independent. The decline also reflects a disenchantment with the Brotherhood's poor legislative performance, its attempt to pack the constituent assembly with its supporters, reneging on its promise not to run a presidential candidate and its tendency to compromise with the military on important issues.

The election results also demonstrate that the total Islamist vote is somewhere around 40% of the electorate. That might be overstating its strength. Islamist Abul Fotoh garnered many votes from secular liberals who mistakenly considered him to be the anti-establishment front-runner. Many voted for him to prevent Mubarak-era candidates Amr Mousa and Shafik from winning.

The real surprise of the election was the emergence of Hamdeen Sabahy -- whose campaign was built on nationalism and demands for social justice -- with 22% of the vote.

Sabahy was often referred to as the Nasserist candidate who represented the legacy of the Gamal Abdul Nasser, the leader of the 1952 revolution and Egypt's first president. His campaign did not get going until very late in the day; otherwise it is more than likely that the runoff would have pitted him against Morsi. That would have given Sabahy a real shot at winning the runoff, given the anti-Islamist search for a viable candidate untainted by the Mubarak regime.

Sabahy's performance in the first round indicates that many who voted for the Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary elections, especially the working classes, were disillusioned with its advocacy of a free market economy and lack of attention to social justice and welfare issues.

Sabahy's message of social justice worked, as demonstrated by his lead in Cairo's working-class district Imbaba, long considered a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold. Sabahy

carried the two most populous cities, Cairo and Alexandria, without much organizational support -- a remarkable performance by any standards.

The fact that pro-military Shafik, the leading remnant of the Mubarak regime, took almost a quarter of the votes seems remarkable. But the superior financial capability and patron-client network of the former ruling party NDP, especially in the Nile Delta, and covert support from the military brass played a big role.

Reports are emerging that the security services and military-linked pro-Mubarak landlords coerced many of the Delta peasantry to vote for Shafik. It appears that pressure was also put on public servants and their families.

Shafiq's law-and-order message also attributed to his success. The security situation in much of the country has deteriorated markedly -- some argue deliberately engineered by the military. But his performance can also be read as the last gasp of the old regime, which can be well and truly buried if its opponents, from the Brotherhood to the Nasserists and liberals, can form a coalition capable of providing effective and legitimate government.

***This should not be an impossible task.***

It is clear that the Islamist forces are fractured and the Brotherhood's base is shrinking, as the political playing field becomes increasingly level in a democratizing Egypt. There are indications that the Brotherhood is aware of its limitations, which has forced it to mellow considerably, sacrificing some of its ideological purity at the altar of political pragmatism.

If the leaders of the various trends of political opposition to the Mubarak regime demonstrate adequate wisdom and put together a governing coalition that includes no remnants of the old regime, Egypt's democratic experiment could be securely launched on the road to maturity.

It is most important that the Brotherhood and Sabahy's campaign come to an understanding that would allow them to share power, possibly with Morsi as president and Sabahy as vice president of a democratic Egypt. The Brotherhood must also give the Nasserists and liberals a voice in writing a new constitution that would guarantee the fundamental rights of citizens and delineate a process for orderly political transition, based on periodic elections for the executive and the legislative branches of government.

A consensus will also have to be built on the role of Islam in the new political order. The Muslim Brotherhood has demonstrated remarkable flexibility in the past on this issue. It may be even more flexible now that it realizes a consensus on Islam that is acceptable to the majority of political parties and factions would be essential to creating a coalition.

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## **Court rulings mirror fears, hopes in Egyptian vote**

***Death sentence upheld for Muslim, but in another trial, shocking bias persists***

By Wayne King

May 30 (Compass Direct News) – In the lead-up to the country's first democratic presidential election, a court ruling confirmed fears that justice will continue to elude the Christian minority in post-revolutionary Egypt, while another verdict offered some hope.

On May 21 a judge sentenced 12 Coptic Christians to life in prison for their alleged part in a riot in Abu-Qurgas village, in Minya Province, that left two Muslims and one Christian dead. Eight Muslims charged with the same crimes in the same riot were all acquitted.

The ruling shocked even Copts accustomed to biased and brutal legal judgments.

The sentencing came against the backdrop of the first round of what is being touted as Egypt's first truly democratic presidential election. After the first round of elections held May 23-24, unofficial results show the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi leads with ex-prime minister Ahmed Shafiq following close behind.

Mursi and Shafiq will face each other again in a run-off election scheduled for June 16-17.

### ***Brazen Bias***

On April 18, 2011, a wealthy Coptic Christian lawyer in Abu-Qurgas, Alaa' Rushdy, had placed a speed bump in front of his house, and a minibus driver angered by it got into an altercation with security guards posted at Rushdy's home.

Many of the particulars about the start of the ensuing riot cannot be confirmed conclusively, but multiple Egyptian news outlets stated that guards at Rushdy's home or others at his house armed themselves at the sight of a gathering Muslim throng and began shooting in order to prevent an attack on their village. Reports agreed that Muslims then swept over Abu-Qugas, leaving dozens of Coptic homes and businesses in ashes.

There were no reports of any damage to Muslim-owned homes. Two Muslim men and one elderly Christian woman were killed.

In all, 20 men – 12 Christians and eight Muslims – were all arrested and charged with multiple crimes, including murder, disturbing the peace, inciting "sectarian strife," arson and possession of unlicensed firearms. All the Coptic Christian defendants were found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. All the Muslim defendants were released.

Athanasious Williams, a Coptic Christian human rights lawyer in Egypt and a leader in the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, said the trial was completely unjust but that injustice in the courts toward Christians is normal in Egypt.

"There is a history of unfair trials against the Christians when Muslims attack them," Williams said. "So the court is seen as being unfair."

### ***Glimmer of Hope***

A rare verdict in the case of a Muslim who killed a Christian, however, held out some hope for Copts. On May 14 an Egyptian court led by Chancellor Mahmoud Salama upheld a death sentence against Amir Ashour Abd al Zaher, a police officer who in 2011 boarded a train, attacked a group of Christians and shot one dead.

Samia Sidhom, managing editor of *Watani* newspaper in Cairo, said the ruling went against "an unwritten rule" that judges cannot give the death penalty to a Muslim who kills a Christian.

"It is very rare. For many of us, the ruling came as a good surprise," she said. "Most of us expected he would be declared mentally deranged."

On the afternoon of Jan. 11, 2011, Al Zaher, 29, a police officer posted in the province of Minya, boarded train number 979, began shouting "God is great" and opened fire on six Coptic Christians with a service pistol, according to witnesses.

Al Zaher killed Fathy Mousaad, in his 70s, with a shot to the chest. He turned the pistol on five others, wounding Mousaad's wife, Emily Hanna Tadaly, 61; Sabah Shenoda Soliman, 52; Marian Nabil Zaki, 25; Magy Nabil Zaki, 26; and Ehab Ashraf Kamal, 30. The survivors were taken to the Christian-run Al Ray Al Saleh Hospital, treated and released.

All those shot were Copts. According to witnesses, Al Zaher identified his victims by their lack of the head covering. The vast majority of Islamic women in Egypt now wear some type of veil.

In court, Al Zaher claimed that he wanted to sit in an empty seat next to Mousaad's daughter, and when Mousaad refused to let him, the two got into an argument ending with the Muslim pulling out his pistol and opening fire. Al Zaher's defense also made some effort to portray him as being mentally ill, with his wife testifying to support this claim.

In the end, the evidence against Al Zaher was overwhelming. A forensic report stated that bullets removed from the victims were fired from Al Zaher's service pistol, which was in his possession when he was arrested after the shooting.

On March 12 a judge in Upper Egypt sentenced Al Zaher to death, a sentence that had to be approved by Egypt's Grand Mufti, a state appointed Muslim leader. No execution date has been set.

### ***Election***

The first stages of Egypt's first democratic presidential election left two at the top: former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, an independent candidate who at one time was a member of the Mubarak administration, and Mohamed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party, an Islamist party connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Cases like the Abu-Qurgas trial maybe a portent of the things to come for Christians in Egypt regardless of who wins the election, said rights attorney Williams; persecution of Christians will continue in Egypt; the question is how bad will it be, he said.

"I am expecting the worst in all cases," Williams said. "Either the Islamists will take over, or Ahmed Shafik will. If the Islamists take over, we will be like Iran, and they will enforce *sharia* law, and there will be no freedom of religion. There will be no freedoms of any kind. There will be no freedom in art, opinion or anything. If Shafik takes over, it will be the same way it was before."

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## **Egyptian judge frees attackers who knifed Christian**

***Hard-line Salafi Muslims cut off Copt's ear, terrorize his family.***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (09.05.2012) – A judge in Upper Egypt has dismissed all charges against a group of Salafi Muslims who cut off the ear of a Christian in a knife attack and tried to force him to convert.

The Salafists, who say they base their religion on the practices of the first three generations of Muslims after Muhammad, had falsely accused 46-year-old Ayman Anwar Metry of having an affair with a Muslim woman, the Christian told Compass. On April 22 the judge exonerated the assailants only after Metry, under intense pressure in a "reconciliation meeting," agreed to drop charges, said his attorney, Asphoure Wahieb Hekouky.

"Him dropping the case and accepting the reconciliation meeting is shameful," Hekouky said of the Egyptian justice system.

The same Salafi Muslims who attacked Metry terrorized him and his family for a year, Hekouky said.

### ***The Attack***

On the afternoon of March 20, 2011, in Qena, in the province of the same name, a group of about 20 Salafi Muslims attacked Metry. Earlier that day, someone had set fire to an unoccupied rental apartment he owned in the city.

While waiting in another part of the city for workman to arrive to fix a metal door on the burned-out unit, two men approached Metry and convinced him that he needed to go back to the remains of his apartment. After his arrival, the Salafi Muslims pounced on him. They accused him of having an inappropriate relationship with one of his former female tenants and began beating him.

"I didn't know that there were any more of them than the two who were talking nicely to me at the beginning, so I was shocked when I went with them to the flat," Metry said. "There were 20 more waiting for me there, and they caught me and started beating me up."

The men interrogated Metry as they beat him, demanding he "confess" to the affair and tell them where the woman was. Metry said he told them he didn't do anything wrong and didn't know where the woman was, but the Salafists were able to find her and brought her to the charred apartment.

They demanded that the woman admit to an affair of some sort, but, like Metry, she said they had never been romantically involved. Then the men broke into two groups; one set upon the woman, and the other began beating Metry. During the beating, the men restrained Metry, took a knife and began sawing open the back of his neck. They told the woman that they would kill him if she didn't say she had had some type of affair with him. She did as they ordered.

Metry said his attackers demanded he say the *Shahada*, the Islamic creed for conversion, and that when he refused, they cut off his ear.

Covered with puddles of his blood, the apartment looked like a slaughterhouse, Metry said.

"If you saw how I looked then ... My shirt, if you squeezed it, it dripped an unbelievable amount of blood. With all the blood that was on the floor, it looked like there was a sheep slaughtered there," he said. "They thought that I was dead, so then they called the police and said, 'We took our *sharia* [Islamic law] rights, now you come and take your civil rights from him.'"

The police came and took Metry and the woman to the hospital. The two, along with a Muslim friend of Metry's who witnessed the attack and happens to be a police officer, were then taken into police custody.

"Officer Khaled was with me and worked hard to help me – he witnessed the whole thing and he testified at the police station," Metry said. "Also, the girl came to the police and said that there was nothing between me and her. She said that the Salafi men forced her to say there was."

Somehow the Salafists found out what the woman said to police, and when officers released the woman after questioning, the hard-line Muslims caught up with her, Metry said.

"Then when they heard that the girl didn't say what they wanted her to say, they beat her up again and broke one of her fingers and threatened her and told her if she didn't change what she said at the police station, they would kidnap her sister," Metry said.

None of the Salafi Muslims who committed the attack were arrested.

### ***Intimidation***

Almost as soon as the police questioning ended, the assailants began pressuring him not to prosecute anyone, Metry said.

"They used all sorts of ways to persuade me to let it go and drop the case against them – they shot at us; about 500 Salafi gathered around the house trying to set it on fire. When they threatened to set the house on fire and kidnap my sisters, I had to drop the charges against them," he said.

As the date for a hearing drew near three months ago, the Salafi Muslims shot at Metry's house in Qena and at his brother's car, he said.

"I went to see the police to get them to do something, and nothing at all was done to arrest anybody," he said. "It seemed like they were the police and the controllers of the city, those Salafis."

The attackers threatened all his family members, he said, including his brothers and sisters, to try to force him to drop the charges, he said

"Some of my brothers and sisters emigrated and left the country – they went to Italy," he said. "I tried to, but I wasn't allowed to leave the airport."

Metry said he informed criminal prosecutors what was happening, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

"During the first reconciliation meeting, I told the attorney general everything and told him that I am dropping the charges under the Salafi threats," he said. "After all that, I saw that the police did nothing to arrest any of them, and they are all free."

A final factor was a request from Bishop Sharoubeem, the Coptic Orthodox bishop of Qena, who asked him to drop the case, according to Metry.

"He asked me to drop the case, but I insisted on not dropping the case at all. I insisted on getting my rights back," he said. "But when a bishop comes and asks you to drop the

case, what else could you do other than following his advice? He told me that they might try and attack or burn the local church if I didn't drop the case."

Metry said the bishop, speaking for the Coptic Orthodox Church, agreed to compensate him for the property he lost in the fire and attack. The bishop could not be reached for confirmation.

Still, Metry said he was robbed of justice.

"They are free in the street threatening us when we come or go," he said. "Even when they shot at us, and we called the police and security forces thinking that they would arrest them, nothing was done at all."

### ***Emotionally 'Below Zero'***

The recovery for Metry and his family after the attack has been difficult, but he said it has brought him closer to God.

The Salafists were trying to beat him to death, Metry said, so they could "kill the facts" of the attack. In addition to slicing off his ear, they cut him all over his body and left bruises from a beating that "would have killed a camel," he said.

In total, he had to have 35 stitches and two reconstructive surgical procedures where his ear once was. The ear was too badly damaged to be reattached.

"It took me three months to recover from all the injuries and the two plastic surgeries on my ear," he said.

Metry and his immediate family spent most of the year after the attack fleeing from one part of Qena Province to another, making it impossible for his three children, ages 6 to 12, to attend school. Because his employer cannot or will not transfer him, he has had to take a year off from work and support himself with savings and what rental income he has left.

The attacks and the changes of residence have scarred his children, too, with his 6-year-old girl probably suffering the worst, he said.

"She shakes if she sees a bearded man walking down the street, because of what happened to me," Metry said. "The little girl asked her mother to let her take a knife with her to her kindergarten class in case somebody attacks her, so she can defend herself."

Metry's wife, Thanaa Yakoub Gerges, concurred.

"We were living well, the children and us, but after what happened emotionally we are below zero," she said. "It made us hate the house, the city and the whole country. Imagine when you lose your reputation and can't move. We were destroyed gradually, this happened more than a year ago, and the children are being destroyed gradually. I am willing to die for Christ, but these are my children who are being attacked."

Through it all, however, Metry said he found a glimmer of faith he previously had not known.

"I am not saying this to puff up my spirit, but at that moment when they were attacking me, I couldn't believe the faith that was in me. I couldn't believe that I actually had this faith, it was a testimony – I won, I didn't lose," he said. "They tried everything to convert

me to Islam, but I didn't care. I said they could do anything they wanted to me, I wouldn't convert."

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## **Christian's six year sentence upheld**

Compass Direct News (27.04.2012) – A judge in Upper Egypt has upheld a six-year prison sentence for a Coptic Christian wrongly convicted of "blasphemy" against Islam and inciting sectarian strife, his lawyer said.

The judge in Assuit on April 5 refused to strike down a sentence delivered to Makarem Diab, 49, of the town of Abnoub in Assuit Province. The charges stem from an argument that Diab had in February with Abd Al Hameed, a fellow employee at Deer Al Gabrawy Prep School.

The charges against Diab were inflated, according to his lawyer, Ahmed Sayed Gebaly. On Feb. 29, in a 10-minute court hearing with no defense attorney present, a judge sentenced Diab to six years in prison for "insulting the prophet" and "provoking students." Diab received an appeal hearing on March 16, but Al Hameed instigated a massive riot by a large throng of Muslim attorneys outside the courthouse, according to Gebaly.

The lawyers became so enraged that they burst into the courtroom during the hearing and assaulted Diab's attorneys. They also blocked access to the courtroom. The judge upheld the six-year sentence but immediately scheduled an appeal hearing. Gebaly said the judge upheld the sentence out of fear.

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## **Muslim assailants in Egypt escape prosecution**

***Government orders closure of school's guesthouse that villagers attacked.***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (20.04.2012) – A recent "reconciliation meeting" between members of a Muslim mob that attacked a Christian-owned school in Egypt and school administrators was nothing less than an attempt at legalized extortion, the director of the school said.

In exchange for peace, members of the sword-wielding mob that stormed the school last month without provocation – and held two nuns hostage for several hours – initially demanded in the meetings that the school sign over parcels of land that include the guesthouse the Muslim extremists attacked.

Magdy Melad, manager of the Notre Dame Language Schools in Aswan Province, told Compass that despite the risk of more attacks, he refused the assailants' demand. Doing so, he said, would set a precedent in Aswan of Muslims attacking and seizing Christian-owned property and then using reconciliation councils to give the appearance of legitimacy.

"If we give in to that, they will take everything," Melad said.

He conceded that although he escaped with the property, and the victims escaped with their lives, he may have given away something more precious – he agreed not to prosecute any of the hundreds of people who attacked his school.

“The only thing we had to give away was our rights,” Melad said sardonically, adding that the threat of future violence forced him to make the agreement. “This was all against the law.”

“Reconciliation meetings” are held throughout Egypt after incidents of “sectarian” violence in order to restore calm. Increasingly used during the administration of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the meetings are loosely based on traditional Arabic tribal councils. Supporters of the reconciliation process, mainly government and Islamic leaders, say the meetings offer a way to defuse tensions. Those who oppose the process, including numerous human rights groups and Coptic rights activists, say the meetings are just a way to pressure powerless groups and people into giving away what little rights they have.

On March 4, about 1,500 villagers chanting Islamic slogans and brandishing swords and knives surrounded a guesthouse at the privately run, public language school in the village of Abu Al-Reesh. The mob accused nuns trapped inside of building a church in the guesthouse and threatened to burn them out unless they surrendered. The situation lasted for eight hours until police were finally able to bring the nuns to safety.

The women faced “unimaginable fear,” Melad said, adding, “No matter what I say, I cannot give a picture of the fear and the worry they had.”

During the attack, Muslims began shouting over loudspeakers from three nearby mosques, summoning more villagers to surround the guesthouse.

“People of Abu Al-Reesh, get down [there] – the Christians are building a church and building a monastery; the Christians took our ancestors’ land and are building a church,” the Muslim leaders demanded, according to Melad Kamel Garas, owner of the school.

The mob ransacked the building, stealing security cameras, electrical equipment and a satellite dish on top of the guesthouse, among other items, Melad confirmed.

The attack continued into the next day. According to Melad, at least one member of the mob told parents, “If you care for the safety of your sons, you will stop bringing them [to school].”

In the days that followed, one of the members of the mob hung a huge “closed” sign on the main school building. When a policeman told the villagers to take down the sign, they attacked him with knives, Melad said. The officer recovered after basic first-aid treatment.

“It’s a very hard time in Egypt,” Melad said.

The formal reconciliation meeting took place on March 25, with the local governor, members of the national intelligence service and representatives of the national police force in attendance, Melad said. People representing the group of villagers went in first and met with the governor for almost an hour. When they emerged, the governor assured Melad he would “never have any problems again.”

Melad acknowledged that when the governor asked him to shake hands with one of the Muslims, he thought to himself, “Shake hands for what?”

The school still owns the guesthouse, but it has essentially been stripped bare – and government officials have ordered Melad not to use it. Ignoring the order could cost Melad more than a criminal charge, he said; it could cost him or one of his family members their life at the hands of a vindictive villager.

“Someone could stab you when you are walking down the street,” he said.

### **Possible Danger**

Melad said that Abu Al-Reesh is peaceful now, “but you can’t tell what’s going on under the surface.” Villagers are “distracted” by the political situation in the country, and Islamist groups have started quarreling with each other enough to care less about Christians in the community.

Attendance at the school is down by 30 percent, but Melad said it is hard to determine how much of the decline can be attributed to the attack. The school term is about to end, he said, and many parents traditionally keep their children home to make sure they study for upcoming examinations. Also, it is a holiday season in Egypt.

He added, however, that, “Some parents are afraid it may happen again.”

Two of the nuns are back at school, albeit in a reduced role. They only teach religious classes to Christian children. One of the nuns, however, could not come back to the school; she remains in Cairo, still suffering from the effects of a nervous breakdown caused by the attack.

As for how the children are faring, Melad said they have been resilient.

“They’re kids – they fight with each other, and 10 minutes later they are playing again,” he said.

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## **Egypt court suspends constitutional panel**

Associated Press (10.04.2012) - An Egyptian court on Tuesday suspended a 100-member panel selected by lawmakers from the Islamist-dominated parliament and tasked with drafting the country’s new constitution.

The ruling was a blow to the Islamists, who have catapulted into the center of Egypt’s political stage since the ouster 14 months ago of longtime authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak.

It followed complaints by political groups, secular politicians and constitutional experts over parliament’s decision to give lawmakers half the seats on the panel. Islamist lawmakers, combined with like-minded individuals selected from outside parliament, ended up with 60 seats on the panel.

The verdict also referred the case to a panel of senior judges to look into the legality of the panel.

Critics have maintained that the way the panel was picked violated a constitutional declaration adopted in a referendum last year. Some two dozen members — many of them members of liberal groups that engineered the popular, anti-Mubarak uprising — have quit the panel, protesting the selection process and alleging that it was not inclusive enough.

The Islamists' insistence that lawmakers get half the panel's seats prompted charges that they wanted to monopolize the process and give the new constitution an Islamist slant.

Ensuring their majority on the panel was one of a series of actions taken by the Islamists in their bid to tighten their control of the country.

Last week, the Muslim Brotherhood, the nation's largest political group, reversed an earlier decision not to field a candidate in presidential elections due on May 23-24. In a surprise move, the group put forward businessman Khairat el-Shater, the Brotherhood's deputy leader, as their choice for the presidency.

The Brotherhood's actions have led many to believe that the group, emerging from some 60 years on the sidelines as an outlawed organization under Mubarak, was more interested in dominating the country than in an inclusive transition that lays the foundation for a democratic and free Egypt.

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## **Court in Egypt sentences young Christian for 'insulting Islam'**

***In legal double standard, free speech takes a blow in conviction regarded as dubious***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (06.04.2012) / HRWF (10.04.2012) – [www.hrwf.net](http://www.hrwf.net) – In a show of partiality to Muslims who go unprosecuted for like offenses against Christianity, a juvenile court in Egypt on Wednesday (April 4) sentenced a Coptic Christian teenager to three years in prison for allegedly insulting Islam.

Gamal Abdou Massoud, 17, denies the charges. The court claimed that he posted cartoons on his Facebook account in December that mocked the Islamic religion and its prophet, Muhammad. The court also claimed that he distributed the pictures to other students.

After the incident came to light, Muslims in Assuit, where Massoud lives, rioted. They fire-bombed his home and burned down at least five other Christian-owned homes in several Assuit villages. Massoud's family left their village. It is uncertain if they were ordered out, left from fear or left because they had no home.

The sentencing was considered significant not only because violates the free speech clauses of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Egypt is a signatory, but also shows another area where justice is executed unequally between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. The sentencing also shows that rights are given to the Christian minority in Egypt only when Islamic sensitivities are not involved.

When Muslim public figures violate Egyptian laws related to insulting Christianity, which happens often, the laws are ignored, Coptic Christians said. But when Christians are accused of violating the same laws against Islam, they pointed out, even a minor is usually punished to the full extent of the law.

The court also held Massoud responsible for inciting the riots. No one responsible for burning down any of the homes has been charged.

Samia Sidhom, managing editor at Watani newspaper in Cairo, said the sentencing was a clear example of the double standard. When Coptic lawyers bring cases before the court about alleged instances of inflammatory speech broadcast publicly by Islamic or government leaders against Christianity, the Bible or Christians, the charges "are simply sidelined," with cases going on for years with no outcome.

"They never get any sentences," Sidhom said.

The three-year sentence was the maximum Massoud could have received.

Sidhom also called into question the veracity of the charges. She said her reporters could find no evidence that Massoud had even had a Facebook page, calling him "almost computer illiterate."

This is the third high-profile case of "insulting Islam" to be brought to court against Copts in Egypt in roughly a month. On March 3, a Cairo court dismissed a case against Naguib Sawaris, a Copt and telecommunications tycoon, who was accused of insulting Islam for placing a cartoon of Minnie Mouse in a veil on his Facebook site as a satirical comment on what Egypt would look like if Islamists gained political power in the country.

Two weeks later, on March 16, a group of Muslim lawyers blocked off a courtroom where Makram Diab, a Coptic Christian, was trying to launch an appeal against a six-year prison term levied against him for insulting Islam. A Salafi Muslim brought the accusations against him after the two had a quarrel at a school where the two worked. Salafists claim to practice the Islam of the first three generations after Muhammad.

Sentenced six days after authorities arrested him, Diab was not allowed to have a defense attorney present at his original court hearing. His appeal is pending.

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## **Egypt's Coptic Church withdraws from 'futile' Islamist-dominated panel drafting constitution**

Associated Press (02.04.2012) - Egypt's official news agency says the country's Coptic Church is withdrawing from a committee to draft the nation's new constitution.

The state news agency MENA reported Monday that the church called its participation "futile" under the current makeup of the panel, dominated by Islamists.

Out of 100 committee members, only two were chosen from the church among six Christians.

Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population. Most are Copts.

The Muslim Brotherhood's party and a smaller ultraconservative faction, which control the parliament, staked out a clear majority on the constitutional panel.

Some 25 public figures and liberals have pulled out of the body, saying it fails to represent the country's diversity and does not have enough constitutional experts.

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## **Salafist leaders celebrate death of Coptic Pope in Egypt**

### ***Open contempt for head of church of more than 40 years bodes ill for Christians***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (23.03.12) – As Christians across Egypt continued to mourn the loss of Pope Shenouda III this week, Islamist leaders of the Salafist movement issued a litany of insults, calling the late leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church the “head of the infidels” and thanking God for his death.

The vitriol indicated the level of hostility the Salafists, who now make up 20 percent of Egypt’s parliament, have toward Christians. In a recorded message released on the Facebook page of one leading Salafi teacher, Sheik Wagdy Ghoneim, the sheik celebrated the pontiff’s death.

“We rejoice that he is destroyed. He has perished,” Ghoneim said on Sunday (March 18), the day after Shenouda died at the age of 88. “May God have His revenge on him in the fire of hell – he and all who walk his path.”

After the cleric issued his statement, several others followed suit, releasing insults throughout the week. On Monday (March 19) in the lower house of Egypt’s parliament, the People’s Assembly, several Salafi members refused to stand in remembrance of Shenouda during an official moment of silence. Others left before the moment of silence took place.

Bishop Mouneer Anis, head of the Episcopal and Anglican Diocese of Egypt, North Africa and the Horn of Africa, said that insulting people after their death is considered one of the rudest things someone can do in the Middle East. Anis, a close friend of the pontiff, told Compass the comments and actions were “very sad.”

“I see this as being moved by hatred,” Anis said. “To be honest, I feel sorry for members of the Salafi – to criticize such a remarkable man.”

The provocative comments are not a good sign for Egypt’s Christians. Adherents of the Salafist movement, which obtained that one-fifth of the People’s Assembly through the Nour Party, have led most of the recent attacks against Christians in Egypt. The comments were thought to reveal the utter disdain the Salafists have toward Egypt’s Christian minority.

The Salafist movement claims it patterns its beliefs and practices on the first three generations of Muslims.

Shenouda, formerly known as Nazeer Gayed Roufail, died due to complications from kidney disease and other health issues. A former theology teacher, Shenouda was enthroned on Nov. 14, 1971 as the 117<sup>th</sup> Pope of Alexandria and head of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

He led the church through some of its most challenging times, often coming into conflict with the government. In 1981, he criticized then-President Anwar Sadat for what Shenouda characterized as an inadequate response to the rise of what is now called “political Islam” in Egypt. For this and the Coptic protests against Sadat that followed, Sadat banished Shenouda to a monastery in the desert.

Shenouda was released three years later, after Islamic militants assassinated Sadat, and after his successor, Hosni Mubarak, granted the pope amnesty. Last year, Mubarak was deposed after a series of pro-democracy protests roiled the country.

Shenouda's passing leaves many questions unanswered as to how the leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church will direct its followers to deal with the persecution leveled against them. Mubarak's removal from power brought heretofore unfulfilled promises of change by the transitional military-run government, but it has also unleashed a tide of violence against Copts unheard of in recent history.

In his statement, Ghoneim made a long list of accusations against Shenouda that, put together, portray the former pope as waging a war against Muslims in Egypt. The accusations were considered either twisted by lack of context or were blatantly false, such as the claim that Shenouda was holding two female Coptic converts to Islam against their will in a monastery. Ghoneim characterized Shenouda's well-known desire to see Egyptian society protect the human rights of Christians as impudence.

Most surprising was the claim that the former pope was somehow orchestrating the religiously motivated violence against Christians in Egypt.

"He wanted the sectarian strife," Ghoneim said. "He wanted to burn Egypt."

The irony of the comments has not been lost on most Copts. In May, Salafist leaders publicly threatened to kill Shenouda over the rumors about hiding the two women against their will. This was after groups of Muslims, led by members of the Salafist movement, held massive protests in April and blocked rail and road ways because the transitional military government appointed a Copt to be governor over the province. The rioting stopped only after the appointment was withdrawn.

Though it all, Anis said, Shenouda remained ardent in trying to engage Muslims in a peaceful way.

"He was a friend of many Muslim leaders. He was a peacemaker," Anis said. "He was even criticized by Christians for making peace with those who persecuted the church."

The last public meeting Shenouda had was with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a little more than a week before he died.

"Pope Shenouda met members of the Muslim Brotherhood even when he was in pain," Anis said.

Most Muslims in Egypt did not share Ghoneim's sentiments. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic group in the country, issued a statement expressing his condolences over the Coptic pope's death.

Shenouda was buried on Tuesday (March 20) in the Monastery of St. Bishoy in Wadi el-Natrun, with several thousand followers attending. Before Shenouda was buried, Naguib Ghobrial, lawyer and head of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights, filed suit on Monday (March 19) against Ghoneim for contempt of a revealed religion.

Undeterred, Ghoneim released a statement the next day denying any wrongdoing and issued a challenge to all Christians.

"You believe in your Bible and say its words are holy," he concluded. [Your Bible teaches] 'Love your enemies and bless all who curse you.' Your enemies – you love them and those who curse you – you bless them. So I say, God curse you! Bless me now. Bless me. Isn't this your religion? I am going to say it again – I am your enemy, and I say, God curse you. Now, say it, 'We love you Wagdy. And God bless you Wagdy.'"

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## **Nuns traumatized after school attack**

### ***One hospitalized for breakdown after sword-wielding Muslims converge***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (16.03.12) – Two nuns in Upper Egypt faced “unimaginable fear” – with one later hospitalized over the emotional trauma –when 1,500 Muslim villagers brandishing swords and knives trapped them inside a guesthouse last week and threatened to burn them out.

The next day, the assailants frightened children at the school; attendance has since dropped by more than a third.

Accusing the nuns of building a church at the site, the throng on March 4 chanted Islamic slogans as they surrounded the guesthouse of a privately run, public school in the village of Abu Al-Reesh, in Aswan Province. Two nuns, volunteer teachers at Notre Dame Language Schools, barricaded themselves into the school’s guesthouse for about eight hours.

The women were “terrified,” said Magdy Melad, director of the school.

“No matter what I say, I cannot give a picture of the fear and the worry they had,” Melad said.

School workers hid a third nun from the mob in a separate building on the campus out of fear that the mob would attack her as well. While two of the three nuns are Egyptian, one with a French name holds both Egyptian and French passports.

Conservative Muslims began milling around the school and accosting school employees at 2 p.m. on March 4. A group of men with swords stopped one employee and accused him of “building a church, and we are coming to attack the place,” the employee told Melad, who was at the scene of the attack.

“Huge numbers of people with swords, knives and daggers were gathering,” Melad said. “All that was in my head was that I was worried about the nuns. So I called and told them not to open the door and not to move until I came to get them.”

The Muslims tried to push their way into the building as the nuns kept calling for help. The door to the guesthouse is made of heavy reinforced metal, according to Melad, which prevented the building from being breached. Members of the mob ransacked the entire building, stealing security cameras, electrical equipment and a satellite dish on top of the guesthouse, among other items.

From three mosques near the school, people began shouting over loudspeakers in minarets, summoning more Muslims to surround the guesthouse.

“People of Abu Al-Reesh, get down [there] – the Christians are building a church and building a monastery,” the loudspeakers blared, according to Melad Kamel Garas, owner of the school. “The Christians took our ancestor’s land and are building a church.”

School workers tried to get the nuns out of the building, but the Muslims sent them away.

“When we tried to get them out, they refused to let them out, and they wanted to burn them alive in the guesthouse,” Garas said.

School employees called police, but initially only three officers showed up, according to Melad. The mob set upon them. Four more trucks arrived with reinforcements, but authorities were still unable to control the mob.

Eventually, school workers began talking with moderate Muslims and were able, along with the police contingent, to get all the nuns out. As the women were pulled through the crowd, different men began shouting that they were "pigs" and "infidels" who wanted to "build a church," according to Garas.

The two nuns suffered cuts and bruises in the attack, and one fainted during the ordeal, according to Garas. The women were taken to a Catholic church in Aswan, except for one, who suffered what Melad characterized as a "major" nervous breakdown and had to be transported on March 8 to Cairo, where she was hospitalized.

The three nuns, who range in age from 30s to mid-50s, were part of a volunteer contingent brought to the school to teach manners to younger students. The nuns have been there for a year and are certified teachers. They did not teach religious classes other than to Christian students; school officials inspected all of their course work and materials, and their texts were approved by the national Ministry of Education, Melad said.

"They are committed to teach what the Ministry of Education has told them to teach," Melad said.

The next day, the mob started intermittently attacking the school itself.

"They scared the children in a very, very bad way," Melad said. "The children were so scared, terrified."

Notre Dame Language Schools enrolls about 560 students ranging from preschoolers to ninth graders. It is open to students from all faiths; roughly 360 of the students are Muslim, the rest being members of the Coptic minority. Having opened two years ago, the school has about 170 employees, 60 of them Coptic Christians and the rest Muslims.

After the nuns were removed from the guesthouse, members of the mob refused to let anyone inside, even after police inspected the building's interior and found no place of worship.

Leaders of the mob told school officials that they were not allowed to use the guesthouse. They also said the school could no longer continue doing construction work around the guesthouse.

Eventually the Muslims left the school property, and police posted a guard outside the building. But now the Islamists have enlisted a group of children who mill around the guesthouse and tell them if anyone goes inside, according to Melad.

This poses a problem because the guesthouse is also the utility control room for the school; all electrical switches, and the valves for the school water supply, are located there. School workers find themselves in the strange position of having to ask people from the mob to use school property. Police, Garas said, have done nothing to regain control of the guesthouse.

As a result, attendance at the school has dropped by 34 percent, something Garas said he understands.

"All the loss in property, that can be replaced," Garas said. "But all I am worried about is I don't want to lose one of the children. Because God forbid, if in an irrational act like

this, one of the children got injured or hurt, all the money in the world wouldn't be able to fix or replace that."

An attempt is underway to force school officials into a "reconciliation meeting," which in Egypt usually results in Christians having to accept concessions with nothing in return. In September another group of Muslims in Aswan rioted outside another guesthouse, wrongly claiming that church officials were building a house of worship inside. In a reconciliation meeting, church officials agreed to remove the crosses outside the building and not to ring any church bells.

This wasn't enough, and eventually Salafis and other hard-line Muslim villagers began rioting again. Ultimately church officials entered another series of reconciliation meetings. Altogether, the priests conceded to every major demand the Muslim villagers made but received no conciliatory offers in return. While the domes on top of the church building were being removed in accordance with the meetings, the villagers attacked and burned it to the ground.

The priest of the church was later charged with a building violation and sentenced to six months in jail. None of the Muslims who attacked the church building have been charged. The priest will appeal the sentence.

Reconciliation meetings are, in theory, arbitration meetings between two equal entities that are loosely based on traditional tribal councils. But most human rights activists in Egypt say that the reconciliation process works to deny rights to powerless groups while maintaining an image of legality and fairness.

All in all, Garas said, the persecution in Aswan echoes what seems to be an unofficial motto there, "No Christians allowed."

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## **Court sentences priest from attacked church building**

***Assailants uncharged, but clergyman gets six months in jail for building violation.***

By Wayne King

Compass Direct News (07.03.2012) – A priest in Egypt was sentenced this week to six months in jail for a minor construction violation at his church building, while no one in a mob that burned the same structure down has been arrested.

The Rev. Makarious Bolous of the Mar Gerges Church in Aswan was sentenced on Sunday (March 4), but neither the imams who called for the attack nor the Muslim villagers who destroyed the church building last September have been charged with any crime.

Bolous said the ruling, coupled with the absence of prosecution against those who burned down the church building, is clear evidence of persecution and a legal double standard between Christians and Muslims.

"I feel it is unjust," Bolous said. "It's not fair."

The lower court that made the ruling also fined Bolous 300 Egyptian pounds (US\$50). Bolous remained free Tuesday (March 6) awaiting appeal.

Local government officials said the building was 2.5 meters taller than what they had approved on a series of architectural drawings. Bolous said the citation was issued days after the fire.

The priest said the charges surprised him. A significant percentage of construction projects in Egypt are done without permits, he said, and even when permits are issued, adherence to their stipulations is casual and enforcement is lax. The village where the church building once stood is surrounded by homes that have two or three extra floors built outside of permitted specifications and by others that were built with no permit at all, according to Bolous.

"The whole village is full of people who are building against their licenses," Bolous said. "So the whole thing is, 'Why did they only cite the church and pick on the extra bit of building?'"

Bolous' attorney, Osama Refaat, said the citation was unusual because by law contractors, not property owners, are responsible for permit violations.

"The right law was used, but in the wrong way," Refaat said.

### **The Attack**

On Sept. 30, 2011, shortly after afternoon prayers, approximately 3,000 villagers set fire to and then demolished the Mar Gerges building in the El Marenab village of Aswan. The mob also razed four homes near the church building and two businesses, all Christian-owned. Widespread looting was also reported.

"Imams in more than 20 mosques called for crowds to gather and destroy the church and demolish the houses of the Copts and loot their properties," Michael Ramzy, a villager from El Marenab, told local media in September.

The tension in El Marenab began the last week of August, when Muslim extremists voiced anger over renovations taking place at Mar Gerges. Muslim villagers claimed that church officials were turning a guesthouse on church property into a church. They were also upset that symbols of the Christian faith, such as crosses, could be seen from outside the church building.

That same week, Muslim villagers began blockading the entrance to the church building and threatening Copts on the street – in effect making them hostages in their own homes.

On Sept. 2, a meeting was held with military leaders and village elders in which the local leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church agreed to remove all crosses and bells outside the building. Peace returned briefly to the village, but by early the next week, the Muslim villagers abandoned the agreement and went back to harassing local Christians. They demanded the removal of domes newly constructed on top of the church building, and the hard-line Muslims – ignoring pleas by priests to leave the church building alone – called for it to be burned.

Throughout the dispute, Muslim leaders in the village claimed that the renovations were illegal because the building wasn't a church but a hospitality facility – even though the original structure on the site was used as a church building for roughly 100 years.

The governor of Aswan, Mostafa al-Sayyed, sided with the rioters and cast blame for the attacks on the Copts and local leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church. He claimed he had never given permission to turn a guesthouse into a church, in effect blaming the Copts for bringing the attack on themselves. But documents produced by church officials and

independently verified by a non-sectarian group, The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, showed that Al-Sayyed signed off on construction permits that authorized the renovation of an existing altar area inside the building.

Bolous said Tuesday (March 6) that tensions remain in the village. Despite government guarantees to fund and build a new church structure to replace the old one, the promises have proven empty.

"It's been six months now, and even after Field Marshall Tantawi gave the permission to rebuild the church, I cannot go back to the church or hold any prayers there or even go to the village at all," Bolous said, adding that part of the problem is that Al-Sayyed blocks all attempts to build the replacement. "He keeps saying, 'Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after - we are going to do it,' but it never happens."

The villagers who burned down the church building and have escaped criminal prosecution, Bolous said, are the same ones blocking the construction of a replacement. Because he can't go back to the village, approximately 40 Coptic families in El Marenab are without a priest and cannot meet for Mass or other meetings traditionally held at a church building.

### **Protests and Death**

Copts across Egypt were incensed at being blamed for the destruction of the Mar Gerges Church building. Coptic leaders also accuse the government of playing a colluding role in the violence by not enforcing the law, which requires imprisonment as a penalty for acts of sectarian strife, "thuggery" and vandalism of private property.

On Oct. 9, thousands of people marched through the streets of Cairo to protest the governor's statements, the government's lack of action to stop attacks against Christians and its refusal to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Christians.

The protest turned into a blood-bath after counter-protestors opened fire on some of the demonstrators, and soldiers ran over others with riot-control vehicles. Of the 27 people killed, at least 23 were Christians. Witnesses claimed that the shooters and the military were seen working closely together on the evening of the protest.

The army denied any responsibility for the killings, but eventually charged three soldiers with what amounts to accidental vehicular manslaughter. No one was been charged in connection with any of the shootings.

By comparison, the government has charged two priests with inciting sectarian strife, illegal possession of firearms, illegal possession of a bladed weapon, and destroying public property - charges that are much more serious than anything the soldiers face.

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## **Islamists signal bigger religion role**

Reuters (22.02.12) - After months of reassuring secularist critics, Islamist politicians in Tunisia and Egypt have begun to lay down markers about how Muslim their states should be -- and first signs show they want more religion than previously admitted.

Islamist parties swept the first free elections in both countries in recent months after campaigns that stressed their readiness to work with the secularists they struggled with in the Arab Spring revolts against decades-long dictatorships.

With political deadlines looming, the Tunisian coalition led by the reformist Islamist Ennahda party and the head of Egypt's influential Muslim Brotherhood both made statements this week revealing a stronger emphasis on Islam in government.

Popular List, an Ennahda coalition member tasked with writing Tunisia's new constitution, announced on Monday its draft called Islam "the principle source of legislation" -- a phrase denoting laws based on the sharia moral and legal code.

On Tuesday, Egyptian Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie said his group wanted a president with "an Islamic background." That term is vague, but not as vague as the conciliatory "consensus candidate" talk heard from most parties until now.

Secularists in both countries warned voters against trusting the Islamists and these subtle changes could have come straight from a secularist playbook on how Islamists would gradually insert more religion into the political and legal systems.

### ***Will Ghannouchi keep his promises?***

Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, a leading reformist Muslim thinker during his years in London exile, reassured secularists last year by agreeing with them that the first article of Tunisia's constitution should remain unchanged.

The article, which said Tunisia's language was Arabic and religion Islam, was "just a description of reality ... without any legal implications, he told Reuters in November. "There will be no other references to religion in the constitution."

In the draft constitution, Islam is described as Tunisia's religion "and the principal source of its legislation."

"Using Islamic sharia as a principle source of legislation will guarantee freedom, justice, social equality, consultation, human rights and the dignity of all its people, men and women," it says.

Mentioning sharia means all laws must be consistent with Islam, a condition found in many constitutions in Muslim countries. This can be interpreted broadly, or strictly if those vetting the legislation impose a narrow reading of Islam.

Reaction in Tunis to the draft has been muted so far because Ghannouchi is planning a news conference on Thursday where he will probably have to declare Ennahda's position on it.

Hachmi Hamdi, who supported Ennahda before forming Popular List, said the draft was more Islamic than expected because "the public that voted for us is a conservative public that wants sharia as the principle source of the constitution."

### ***Egyptian presidential politics flare up***

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has decided not to present its own candidate for the presidential election due in June and argued until now that it wanted a candidate acceptable to all.

Even Emad Abdel Ghaffour, head of the leading Salafi Islamist Nour Party, told this to Reuters two weeks ago. He said the sharia mention in Egypt's constitution should be retained without being tightened, as more hardline Salafis have urged.

But Badie told the daily newspaper of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party on Tuesday that "the candidate must have an Islamic background."

"It's clear now the Brotherhood are willing to throw their weight into the ring ...to support someone who is in line with Islamic values and is sympathetic to Islamic law," said Shadi Hamid, an expert on Islamist groups based at the Brookings Doha Center. "That will have major implications for the race."

Badie's comments seemed to rule out Brotherhood support for Amr Moussa, a former Egyptian foreign minister and Arab League secretary general seen as one of the frontrunners.

Lying between the two countries, Libya is also transforming its political system after ousting Muammar Gaddafi but has not yet held elections or begun work on a new constitution.

The chairman of the ruling National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdul Jalal, has said Tripoli would take sharia as the source for its laws. Hundreds of Libyan Muslim Brothers and Salafists rallied last month to demand sharia law.

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## **Egyptian comedian sentenced to jail for offending Islam**

MSNBC (02.02.12) - One of the Arab world's best-known comedians was sentenced to three months in jail for offending Islam on Thursday, just weeks after Islamist parties won a majority in parliament.

A judge, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters, told The Associated Press that Adel Imam was convicted in absentia of "defaming Islam." His whereabouts were unknown, the AP reported.

A lawyer with ties to Islamist groups, Asran Mansour, brought the case, judicial sources told The Guardian.

"I think the lawyer who filed the case against Imam is taking advantage of the current circumstances with Islamists gaining power in Egypt," Nabil Abdel Fattah, an analyst and researcher at al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, told the newspaper.

The sentence, which he thought would probably be overturned on appeal, had likely been handed down because the actor had failed to go to court, according to the newspaper. He said the sentence had likely been handed down because Imam had failed to appear in court, the Guardian reported.

The state-run Ahram Online English website reported he was found guilty for a 2007 movie in which he plays a corrupt businessman and a 1998 play about an Arab dictator. Other reports said the court objected to his use of Islamic symbols.

In the 1980's, Imam was sentenced to three months in jail for defaming lawyers in a film. That ruling was later overturned.

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## **Over 3000 Muslims attack Christian homes and shops in Egypt, 3 injured**

AINA (28.01.12) - A mob of over 3000 Muslims attacked Copts in the village of Kobry-el-Sharbat (el-Ameriya), Alexandria this afternoon. Coptic homes and shops were looted before being set ablaze. Two Copts and a Muslim were injured. The violence started after a rumor was spread that a Coptic man had an allegedly intimate photo of a Muslim woman on his mobile phone. The Coptic man, Mourad Samy Guirgis, surrendered to the police this morning morning for his protection.

According to eyewitnesses, the perpetrators were bearded men in white gowns. "They were Salafists, and some of were from the Muslim Brotherhood," according to one witness. It was reported that terrorized women and children who lost their homes were in the streets without any place to go.

According to Father Boktor Nashed from St. George's Church in el-Nahdah, a meeting between Muslim and Christian representatives was supposed to take place in the evening in Kobry-el-Sharbat. But, by 3 P.M. a Muslim mob looted and torched the home of Mourad Samy Guirgis, as well as the home of his family and three homes of Coptic neighbors. A number of Coptic-owned shops and businesses were also looted and torched. "We contacted security forces, but they arrived very, very late," Said Father Nashed. The fire brigade was prevented from going into the village by the Muslims and the fires were left to burn themselves out. "Those who lost their home, left the village," said Father Nashed.

Coptic activist Mariam Ragy, who was covering the violence in Kobry-el-Sharbat, said it took the army 1 hour to drive 2 kilometers to the village. "This happens every time. They wait outside the village until the Muslims have had enough violence, then they appear." She said that she spoke to many Copts from the village this evening who said that although their homes were not attacked, Muslims stood in the street asking them to come to their homes to hide. "They believed that this was a new trick to make them leave, so that Muslims would loot and torch their homes while they were away," said Ragy.

The Gov of Alexandria visited al-Nahda, near Kobry-el-Sharbat, this evening and told elYoum 7 newspaper that the two Copts and one Muslim who were injured were transported to hospital. He said that the family of the Muslim girl whose image was on the Copt's mobile phone wanted revenge from the Coptic man. They broke into his home and torched a furniture factory located in the same building.

Joseph Malak, a lawyer for the Coptic Church in Alexandria, said it is too early to count injuries to Copts or losses to their property.

Mr. Mina Girguis, of the Maspero Youth Union in Alexandria, said that "collective punishment of Copts for someone else's mistake, which is yet to be determined, is completely unacceptable." He believes that the reason for this violence is fabricated, and the military is behind it. "They are trying to divert the attention from the second revolution which is taking place now."

Father Nashed denied that Islamists were present, only ordinary village Muslims, and could not give an explanation as why people who have lived together amicably for years could commit such violence. "Maybe because of lack of security, they think that they can do as they please."

He said that the nearly 65 Coptic families were ordered to stay indoors and not to open their shops and businesses tomorrow. He added that security forces did not arrest any of the perpetrators, "on the contrary, they were begging the mob to go home."  
By midnight the violence had subsided.  
By Mary Abdelmassih

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## **Two Copts killed in Egypt for refusing to pay extortion money**

GMT (26.01.12) - Two Copts were killed this afternoon in the village of Bahgourah, a suburb of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, after a Muslim racketeer opened fire on them for refusing to pay him extortion money. Three days ago Ahmed Saber had asked from the Coptic building contractor Moawad Asaad for a considerable sum of money. This afternoon Saber drove to Moawad's home to collect the money, but Moawad refused to go to his car to speak to him for fear of being kidnapped. Four men came out of the car with machine guns and shot Moawad and his 26-year-old son Asaad Moawad, an engineer. Both were killed instantly.

Bishop Kyrillos of Nag Hammadi said that Ahmed Saber, who is known to the police, has been extorting money from the Coptic community and kidnapping their children for ransom since November last year. "Reports were filed with the police about all incidents. I don't know why the police have not arrested him," said the Bishop.

Presently over 4000 Copts are staging a sit-in in front of Nag Hammadi police headquarters until Ahmed Saber and his accomplices are caught. It was reported that the police have brought in four central security vehicles to manage the crowd of protesters.

Bishop Kyrillos said "I hold security forces and the Muslims of Bahgourah fully responsible for terrorizing the Copts living there." He called on the authorities in Cairo and the interior minister to provide protection for the Copts in the Nag Hammadi area, "who are continuously being subjected to terror and kidnapping."

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## **One year on, no answers to Egypt church bombing**

By Aya Batrawy

Associated Press (05.01.2012) - Just over a year ago, Amira Maurice was attending a New Year's Eve Mass in the Saints Church in Egypt's Mediterranean coastal city of Alexandria with her parents and fiancé, their marriage set for only a few months away. Then the bomb blast ripped through the church.

Now, the 28-year-old pharmacist is in Germany undergoing the latest in a string of surgeries to save her leg and deal with her burns. Her fiance is dead, one of the 21 people killed in the suicide bombing targeting the church.

Another New Year's has passed since, and there are still no answers in Egypt's most dramatic anti-Christian attack. The investigation was halted 11 months ago and never picked up again. The only suspects ever detained were released, and it's not clear they had any role in it. No new suspects have ever been named.

"Nothing. Nothing at all has happened with the investigation," said Maurice's father, Nabil Roman. "It is ridiculous."

Roman suspects that the Interior Ministry, which is in charge of the police, is dragging its feet in going after the case, but he doesn't know why.

"Something is not clear. All I can say is that God will deal with them," Roman said.

The attack was soon overshadowed by the massive popular uprising against Hosni Mubarak that began soon after and that eventually led to his Feb. 11 ouster. But the failure to answer who was behind the blast has fueled resentment among Egypt's Christian minority that the state does little to protect them. This sentiment has bred numerous conspiracy theories.

The failure highlights the deep problems that ailed Egypt's police forces during Mubarak's nearly 30-year rule and only worsened after his fall.

Police were notorious for doing little investigation of crimes — instead, their modus operandi was usually to detain possible suspects and torture them into confessions, rights groups and former police officials say. After the fall of Mubarak's regime, the police have been in disarray and resisting reform in their ranks.

An Interior Ministry official told The Associated Press that the delay in investigating the church bombing is because of the turmoil after Mubarak's ouster and the inability of police to arrest and interrogate people like before. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the case.

Egypt's feared security forces long had near unlimited power to arrest people under emergency laws. The laws are still in place, but police have become more hesitant to use them in some cases for fear of eventual retribution.

Joseph Malak, the chief lawyer for families who lost relatives in the attack, said he's been pressing the chief prosecutor's office for months to proceed with an investigation, but prosecutors are legally bound to wait for the Interior Ministry to hand over its initial findings, which it never has. This, he says, has left the case in limbo.

He said he does not know why the case is still with the police.

Prominent human rights activist Hossam Bahgat said the Interior Ministry "has been and remains broken."

"It is not just abuse and corruption, but also inefficiency," said Bahgat, head of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. Under Mubarak, police had more of a role in monitoring opponents and preserving the regime than investigating crime, and that "had a detrimental effect," he said.

He pointed out that no suspects were ever tried in two of Egypt's previous most prominent terror attacks — suicide bombings in two Sinai resorts, Sharm el-Sheikh in 2005 and Dahab in 2006. In the 2004 bombing of another resort, Taba, three men were sentenced to death, but Bahgat said it was "abundantly clear" they had confessed under torture.

The investigation into the church bombing appears to have been marred by the same methods. One man detained over the attack died in custody after witnesses said he was tortured. Police say his death is being investigated.

Police arrested around 40 men in the wake of the Saints Church bombing, all of whom had been previously detained in 2006 for alleged ties to militants in Iraq, though none were charged at the time and none were subsequently charged in the church bombing. Most belonged to the ultraconservative Islamic Salafi movement.

The men were all released in April when the military, which took power after Mubarak's fall, released political prisoners.

Several of those detained told AP they were tortured during detention, saying they were doused in gasoline, given electric shocks and beaten repeatedly, including on their genitals.

"We were arrested for being arrested before. We had done nothing wrong, but that never mattered under Mubarak," said one of the former suspects, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation has not been formally closed.

He said he was among those tortured, and he denied any of those detained was involved in the attack. "We want this case solved more than anyone because it's our right to know who did this and who tried to blame us for it," he said.

Ahmed Amin, a lawyer who was detained in connection with the attack, said the police told the detainees to fabricate scenarios of how the attack was planned. "The officers interrogating us told us we either accept this case nicely or they will force it on us," he told the AP.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Mubarak blamed foreign terrorists and Alexandria's governor accused al-Qaida, pointing to threats against Christians by the terror network's branch in Iraq. Officials then said a Palestinian militant group based in the Gaza Strip, the Army of Islam, was behind the attack, though they also said they were looking at possible involvement by Egyptian extremists inspired by al-Qaida.

Last weekend, several hundred protesters — most of them Coptic Christians — held a vigil outside Cairo's main courthouse to remember the victims of the attack. Some held posters demanding the resignation of the attorney general and others demanded Habib el-Adly, the interior minister at the time, be investigated as a suspect.

After Mubarak's fall, some speculated that el-Adly organized the bombing to bolster Mubarak's claims that he was needed to keep stability. No evidence has ever been put forward, and the rights activist Bahgat said the scenario was unlikely.

Roman is among those who suspects el-Adly had a role and he feels justice has been served, in its own way, with the ongoing trial of Mubarak and el-Adly on charges of complicity in the killing of over 800 protesters in last year's revolt.

"God got us our justice and more when the revolt happened on Jan. 25 and all these men went to jail," he said. "God stood with us."

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