

The Coptic Pursuit for Equality

Alexandra Solomon, Joshua Hostetter
School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies
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Introduction

The Egyptian Constitution guarantees its citizens freedom of religion stating that, "freedom of belief is absolute; the freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers revealed religions is a right organized by law" (Egyptian Const. Art. 64). However, Islam is the official religion in Egypt and, in practice, it allows for the religious minority to be relegated to second class citizens by the majority. Although freedom of religion is constitutionally protected, Sharia Law is the main source of legislation in Egypt and was implemented into the constitution in 1980 (Saad, 2014). Sharia Law, also known as Islamic law, discriminates against the Christian Church and other religious minorities in Egypt.

Further evidence to suggest there are systematic differences between treatments of Muslims and other religious groups in Egypt can be found by looking at government allocated resources to Islamic organizations, such as the 13 billion Egyptian pounds (\$726.66 million U.S.) given to Al-Azhar, the institution in charge of spreading Islam. Not only does this institution get government funding, but they have the power to review legislation ("Egypt: Christians"). These same luxuries are not afforded to Coptic Christians. Coptic Orthodoxy, the largest Christian community in the Middle East, was established in Egypt in the first century by Mark the Evangelist (Farag, 2014). When the Arabs invaded in 641, Egypt was under the Byzantine rule (Mikhail, 2014). In the beginning of the conquest, the Arab conquerors did not fully enforce new rules on the Egyptians, nor did they force Egyptians to convert to Islam. These new rulers even promised to protect Christian churches, though this would not last ("From the Islamic Conquest to 1250").

Shortly after the Arab invasion, Coptic Christians were systematically targeted by the government through de jure state-sponsored discrimination (Mikhail, 2014). Following the discriminatory policies, came the demolition of churches. The Arabs ruled that only pre-existing churches could remain. This meant any churches built during Arab rule had to be destroyed (Mikhail, 2014). Although the Copts were later allowed to rebuild these churches, this put a dent in records of Coptic history (Mikhail, 2014). This marked the start of social marginalization, economic discrimination, and institutionalized persecution that continues today.

Methods

Historical Research

By researching the history of Egypt, there has been a plethora of Coptic persecution and discrimination leading back to 284 CE.

Survey

A survey was found regarding the religious freedoms and beliefs of those living in Egypt, between Christians and Muslims.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Does Government Protect Religious Freedom in Egypt?

	Muslim	Christian
Strongly Disagree	1.33%	0.60%
Disagree	6.47%	3.59%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	7.76%	5.39%
Agree	43.57%	40.12%
Strongly Agree	40.88%	50.30%

Source: World Values Survey 2001, 2008, and 2013

This data suggests that although there have been countless attacks on Christians in Egypt, 50.30% still strongly believe that the government protects religious freedoms in Egypt. Due to the vagueness of the question, a possible explanation for this finding is that Christians believe that some religious freedoms are upheld by the law and not others. For example, many Christians could believe that Islamic beliefs are upheld by the law but their own Christian beliefs are not, which would suffice for the question answer. It is quite astounding that only 40.88% of Muslims strongly agree that religious freedoms are protected in Egypt, especially when every president is Muslim. How would a country that is so deeply rooted in Islam neglect their own religion? The question should have been separated into two saying: Does the government protect religious freedom for Christians in Egypt? Does the government protect religious freedom for Muslims in Egypt? However, since the question lacks specificity, Christians and Muslims had to answer how they see fit. Are religious freedoms in Egypt protected by the government? As seen from the abundance of evidence proving that Muslims have more opportunity than Christians, it would be inaccurate to say that their religious freedoms are not upheld by the law.



Figure 1: This is a commonly used quote in the Coptic Church. Depicted is a picture of 21 Copts beheaded by ISIS.

Table 2: Strong Religious Beliefs Should be Allowed in Publicly Held Offices?

	Muslim	Christian	Difference
Strongly Disagree	0.46%	1.79%	+1.33%
Disagree	3.35%	10.71%	+7.36%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	7.87%	21.43%	+13.56%
Agree	34.09%	28.57%	-5.52%
Strongly Agree	54.22%	37.50%	-16.72%

Source: World Values Survey 2001, 2008, and 2013

There is a much larger percentage difference in table 2 between Muslims and Christians strongly agreeing than in table 1. The 88.31% entirety of Muslims agreeing that strong beliefs should be allowed in publicly held offices does not come as a surprise. It is ironic since the constitution prohibits the political parties being formed by religion (Int. Religious Freedom Report, 2018), yet most of parliament is made up by Muslims and almost 90% of Muslims believe that religious beliefs should be allowed in publicly held offices.

The reason Christians may not have strongly agreed with this is because they see how Muslims dominate the entire country, socially and politically. Copts have been dominated by various groups and rulers. With this domination has come persecution and discrimination. An explanation as to why 66.07% of Christians said that they agree to this idea of having strong religious beliefs in publicly held offices could be to allow for Christians to keep their religion in politics as well. If Muslims have been enabled to practice their religion in every form of their lives in Egypt, there should be no reason for Copts not to have that same religious freedom. One step that can be taken to allow for Copts to have religious freedom matched begins with more Coptic representation in parliament. Another World Values Research survey found "that respondents in Muslim societies show preferences for religious leadership that are well above the mean, however some exceptions exist in this regard (Muller, 2009)." This could perhaps be because Muslims typically dominate much of the Middle East and in those countries, Muslims are the ones in power. There would be no reason for a Muslim to not want their own leaders to be religious especially when many Muslims are very pious. Their religion shows in every aspect of their lives. It would only make sense for their religion to be in politics as well. At the age of 16, Egyptians are required to carry a national identification card that states their religion (Stack, 2009). For those affiliated with a religion that is already discriminated against, it is more problematic that this ID card makes it even easier to be singled out. The ID cards are used for everything, from banking to the immunization of children (Stack, 2009). This reinforces the idea as to why Muslims would want religion and politics to be intertwined, especially when they already reap the benefits of being part of the majority religion.

Due to the lower religiosity of Protestants (Muller, 2009), they may favor religion and politics more so. Because "Catholic and Orthodox respondents are even more in disfavor of a stronger connection between religion and politics than Protestants" (Muller, 2009), those answering this survey could have been the small percentage of Protestants in Egypt. This survey is not entirely representative of Coptic Christians, due to the ambiguity of the term "Christians."

Conclusions

To conclude, there has been Coptic persecution for centuries. If this continues without intervention from the government in Egypt, then overtime Copts could be eradicated or completely run out of Egypt. There have been many instances of Coptic discrimination as well. There will be no peace until something is done. Only then will there be justice for Copts.

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