

PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE AND THE U.S. COPTIC DIASPORA:
CONFLICTING NARRATIVES OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY IN EGYPT

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Abstract

Although Christianity was first introduced to Egypt in 48 AD, acts of sectarian violence targeted towards Egypt's Copts have persisted for centuries. For decades, Egypt's leaders have employed similar discourses of unity and nationalism in response to the growing divide between the nation's minority Coptic Christian community and majority Muslim population. In response to a persistent lack of coexistence between religious and national identity, I argue that Egyptian presidential discourses of unity and nationalism are oftentimes linked to practices of silence in response to the sectarian violence that afflicts the nation. This paper analyzes the rhetoric of Egyptian presidential speeches from 2011-2018, and contextualizes historical discourses following the end of British colonialism in Egypt in 1952. I study the Egyptian Coptic diaspora in the United States as a counter discourse to presidential rhetoric, by focusing my analysis on the juxtaposition of two major events in Egyptian history that impacted minority-majority relations and identity politics: the Arab Spring and the inauguration of the newest and largest church in the Middle East, the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ in Cairo. I conclude that the lack of consensus between the Coptic diaspora and Egypt's regimes highlights the conflicting nature of identity and nationalism within Egyptian politics and society.

Key words: Sectarian violence, Copts, Egypt, nationalism, unity, diaspora

Introduction

On Friday, December 22, 2017, hundreds of demonstrators stormed the Church of al-Amir Tadros in the Kafr al-Waselin village in Giza, calling for its demolition and chanting hostile slogans (*Egypt Independent* 2017). The demonstrators shortly destroyed the church's contents

and assaulted Christian worshippers in a sectarian violence attack. According to conversations between judicial sources and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, the building was a house owned by 63-year old Eid Atteya who did not possess a license for his space to serve as a place of worship, which angered Muslim neighbors (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2017). Because the process of obtaining a permit to construct or to re-build churches is challenging, as Muslim conservatives carry out more protests and violent acts targeting the nation's minority Coptic population, it has become common for Coptic civilians to hold community prayer services in their own homes (Associated Press 2017). The exacerbation and persistence of sectarian violence in Egypt has become a norm that frames the nation's minority-majority politics. Several days after the attack transpired, the inauguration of the largest church in the Middle East took place in Cairo.

On January 6, 2018, President Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi participated in the historic inauguration ceremony of the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ. Positive energy and emotions of national pride disseminated throughout the church, as crowds in the audience cheered and clapped, waving Egyptian flags and festively whistling in response to President Sisi's messages conveying the necessity of promoting "love and peace" (*Egypt Today* 2018). Sisi's participation in the inauguration of the Nativity of Christ symbolized a moment of celebration, and was welcomed by many, including members of Coptic Orthodox churches in the U.S. diaspora. Father Anthony Messeh, priest of St. Timothy & St. Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Church (STSA), expressed how "Sisi fulfilled what the Christians were looking for and they gave him their support" (Messeh 2018). The inauguration of the church represented progress and invoked sentiments of trust from many within Egypt's minority Coptic population. Sisi's discourses of unity influenced perceptions of stability and religious tolerance in Egypt. However,

his rhetoric veiled persistent sectarian violence attacks occurring throughout the nation such as with the Church of al-Amir Tadros. Michael Meunier, president of the U.S. Copts Association, responded to Sisi's speech at Egypt's newest church by expressing how "unity is old talk. Christianity came before Islam in Egypt and Christians have fewer rights" (Meunier 2018). Although the practice of employing unifying rhetoric is a recurrent trend amongst Egyptian leaders, diaspora advocacy organizations like the U.S. Copts Association question the underlying motives linked with these particular discourses.

Divided discourses, opposing definitions, and contrasting meaning-making practices have influenced the U.S. Coptic diaspora to respond to the rhetoric of unity and nationalism employed by Egyptian presidents. Therefore, my research puzzle revolves around two of the most illuminating questions that are directive to my research: who consists of the U.S. Coptic diaspora, and why are activist members of this community oftentimes characterized as outsiders from the eyes of Copts in Egypt, the Egyptian government, and the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church? And, is there a dominant practice of silence in the form inaction that correlates with President Sisi's rhetoric of national unity? As a result, my research question asks: how do the discourses of unity and nationalism employed by Egypt's presidents from 2011-2018 contrast with those of the U.S. Coptic diaspora movement, in regards to framing Egyptian minority-majority politics?

In addition to my focus on Sisi's presidency and his relations with the Coptic Church, my interviews with Michael Meunier and Father Anthony make my research original. My findings encapsulate a variety of similar and opposing perspectives, as my research incorporates the personal viewpoints of both diaspora activists and religious leaders. My two interviews enhance

existing research, by bridging the gap between local and international levels of diaspora relations from both a U.S. standpoint and an Egyptian standpoint. While Father Anthony was born and raised in the United States to Egyptian immigrants, Meunier grew up in Egypt and started his life in the U.S. during his university years. Although each interviewee is part of nearby communities in the U.S. Coptic diaspora in Virginia, each has a different background that shaped his perspectives of Egyptian minority-majority relations.

My literature review is structured into three parts that consist of a historical analysis, a religious and political analysis, and a cultural analysis. The central historical and political contexts that primarily influenced my analysis of the application of discourses of nationalism and unity that I chose to explore were the Arab Spring during Mubarak's regime; the inauguration of the Nativity of Christ in Cairo; and the U.S. Coptic diaspora's reactions to these two events. Although each influential event is different in regards to time, regime, and motives, each has the ability to demonstrate how presidential speech employs similar terms that express unity and nationalism throughout contemporary history, when leaders engage with or respond to the Coptic community. As I explored the rhetorical comparisons and contrasts of Egyptian presidents and the U.S. Coptic Diaspora in response to the varying natures of these two occurrences, I found that Egyptian presidents utilized discourses of unity and nationalism to create an image of Egypt's advancement towards religious coexistence. On the contrary, outspoken members of the diaspora community in the United States expressed a counter discourse. The diaspora's discourse can be connected to the influence that American ideals such as freedom of expression and of religion have had on U.S. Coptic retaliation towards the Egyptian presidency, in regards to the framing of minority-majority politics.

President Gamal Abdel Nasser spoke to an audience at the Mary Guergis Church in Tanta on December 31, 1953, communicating how “we together are people of one homeland, we work for the benefit of the country and it’s dignity, and we are united to work for the pride of the country and the freedom of the country” (Nasser 1953). Nasser’s rhetoric reveals how the discourse of unity has the power to place Egyptian nationals as citizens first, while considering their religious backgrounds as second. Although both Nasser and Sisi recognize the diverse religious values of their people, their choices to address Egyptians as equals regardless of religion veils the reality of Egypt’s challenge of responding to the religious intolerance that continues to exist in the country today. The questions explored in my research are pertinent to consider, to comprehend the historical contextualization and the underlying roots as to why sectarian violence continues to exist in Egypt.

Literature Review

Historical Analysis: Nationalism in Egypt

This school of thought focuses on a historical analysis and creates a timeline of how national and religious identity pose challenges to minority-majority relations, coexistence, and societal integration. The scholars in this group allowed me to historically contextualize the rise of nationalism in Egypt, starting from a post-colonial time frame. I utilized the following scholarly discussions revolving around Egyptian regime change, to link the rise of nationalism to the increase of Coptic intolerance and its impact on the Coptic exodus to the United States. My focus on Sisi’s leadership complements existing research, because scholars have not extensively explored Egypt’s current presidency in regards to the Coptic diaspora.

Following his participation as a Free Officer aspiring to overthrow the constitutional monarchy during the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser named himself Egypt's prime minister in 1956 (St. John 2017). Coupled with anti-imperialist sentiments related to Britain's colonial influence, Nasser's 1956 presidency came with a rigid generation of Egyptian nationalism, associated with a pressure to choose between religion and devotion to country that hindered societal integration of religious minorities. In "Coptic Christian Practices: Formations of Sameness and Difference," Lise Paulsen Galal wrestles with religious and secular perspectives that juxtapose minority and majority narratives of Egyptian Copts. As Galal argues how Egyptian identity for Copts is constructed based on religion, priest and engineer Midhat 'Abd al-Malik Muhanni equates being an Egyptian to the secular notion of possessing a common language rather than an identical religion (Galal 2012, 52). However, contrasting from Muhanni's patriotic rhetoric, Galal claims that Coptic Christianity "constructs the membership of Copts in the Egyptian nation by virtue of their Christian identity" (Galal 2012, 52). As she gathers data from her ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt, Galal highlights the differing narratives of national belonging within public and private spheres in Egypt.

Similar to Galal's identity politics discourse, Vivian Ibrahim claims that national unity following the collapse of colonialism is a myth that has transformed Egypt's political trajectory. In "Beyond the Cross and the Crescent: Plural Identities and the Copts in Contemporary Egypt," Ibrahim acknowledges the framing of social public versus private spheres in relation to religious orientation, the "privatization of religious belief," and national affiliation (Ibrahim 2015, 2587). She argues that the Egyptian state's misleading image of national unity has led to the escalation of "'invisibility' of the Copts in the contemporary political landscape, with minority rights being

subjugated to national needs” (Ibrahim 2015, 2589). Following the increase of terrorist attacks targeted towards Copts in the 1980s, the marginalization of the minority community continued to grow while their political integration diminished. Egyptian Copts became increasingly dependent on the government’s empathy and cooperation in order to secure protection.

In *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State*, Rachel Scott explores the impacts of President Sadat’s 1971 ratification of a new Egyptian constitution influenced by Islam. She notes how Article 2 stated, “Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic is the official language, the principles of the Islamic *shari’a* are a main source of legislation” (Scott 2010, 46). Because the Islamization process merged Islam and politics, it resulted in an increased marginalization of the Copts, as it “undermined the development of secular citizenship that had occurred in the interwar period” (Scott 2010, 68). Furthermore, increased fear of Coptic legitimacy weakening Egypt’s Islamic identity led to an escalation of Sadat’s hostile relationship with Coptic Pope Shenouda III, particularly when the president accused the pope of planning to establish a separate Coptic state in Upper Egypt’s Assiut province (Scott 2010, 69). In regards to the uncooperative relationship between Sadat and Pope Shenouda III, Samuel Tadros claims, “Sadat’s greatest crime is that he, more than any ruler of Egypt, threatened to destroy the country’s sectarian social fabric with his attacks and accusations against the Coptic Church” (Tadros 2014, 135). As a result, intolerance and persecution of Copts reemerged during the time of Sadat’s regime, because the president’s rhetoric against the nation’s Coptic community fortified Islamist extremists and their missions to persecute Copts. The personal dynamic between pope and president highlights the impact that Church and state relations have on religious minority-majority politics in Egypt.

Religious/Political Analysis: The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt

The next school of thought included in my research is both religious and political. The purpose of this group's focus is to contextualize the lack of secularism in Egypt and to call attention to how the volatile nature and lack of balance in relations between popes and presidents impact Egypt's Coptic citizens and their identities throughout history. The following scholars highlight how religion and politics are intertwined, particularly in the hierarchical nature of the church and its occasional efforts to act as a voice for the Coptic people. This religious and political school of thought complements a later analysis of my conversation with Father Anthony about the challenges that inclusion of culture and politics within the church's religious space has generated. Discourses about the Coptic Orthodox Church offer insight into the lack of transparency and freedom of expression, regarding representations of Egypt's Coptic population, and this school of thought links conversations about Egypt's historic roots of nationalism with identity politics of the Coptic diaspora.

In "The Copts and the Egyptian Revolution: Various Attitudes and Dreams," Magdi Guirguis traces the history of Pope Shenouda III's transformation from his election as the 117th patriarch of the Coptic Church in 1971 until his death in 2012. During the first phase of Pope Shenouda III's tenure from 1971-1981, the new pope was popular and did not fear challenging the regime. However, in 1979 when President Sadat signed a peace agreement with Israel, Pope Shenouda III responded in 1980 with a radical decree preventing Egyptian Copts from visiting Jerusalem (Guirguis 2012, 518). As a result, Sadat removed Pope Shenouda III from his position and confined him in the St. Bishoi Monastery (Guirguis 2012, 518). After Pope Shenouda III was

removed from exile in 1985, he faithfully supported Mubarak's regime. For example, during the Arab Spring, Pope Shenouda III asked the Coptic population to boycott demonstrations (Guirguis 2012, 518). By advising Copts not to protest during the Arab Spring, he contributed to a split within the Coptic Orthodox Church. When he defined protest as an act of defiance against the church, the pope prioritized national identity and belonging for the Coptic minority. According to Guirguis, the pope's exile allowed him to recognize how "strengthening his relationship with figures within the regime was the only way to guarantee the security of his power" (Guirguis 2012, 523). Therefore, the shifting priorities and relations between Pope Shenouda III and Egypt's presidents reflect a manipulation of power by the Coptic Church that parallels with the motives of the Egyptian regime.

Similarities in the nature of relationships between popes and presidents remain evident throughout disparate regimes in Egypt's history. For example, in "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952-2007)," Mariz Tadros explains how personal connections between popes and regimes have had the power to strengthen or weaken connections with Egypt's minority populations. Unlike Pope Shenouda III's tense relationship with Sadat, Pope Kyrollos VI's amicable and informal alliance with Nasser generated a sustainable entente with the Coptic community. Tadros suggests that political support in exchange for protection aided the Coptic population while providing the regime with the power that it sought.

Cultural Analysis: Identity and the Coptic Diaspora

In “The Coptic Diaspora and the Status of the Coptic Minority in Egypt,” Bosmat Yefet reflects upon how “although the Coptic diaspora is part of the Egyptian diaspora, it is also the diaspora of a religious minority that experiences discrimination in a Muslim country” (Yefet 2016, 1207). The exodus of Christians from the Middle East is not a recent phenomenon, and Coptic Christians are not the only minority religious sect confronted with discrimination in the region. For example, according to “Forced Exodus: Christians in the Middle East,” Roland Flamini communicates how “almost half of Iraq’s Christians have left since the 2003 invasion... once a majority, Lebanon’s million and a half Christians- most of them Maronite Catholics- now account for thirty-five percent of the population... tens of thousands of Syrian Christians have fled from cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Qusayr in the face of Islamist rebels” (Flamini 2013, 67). However, similar to the flight of other Christian minority communities from the Middle East, Egyptian Copts of the diaspora continue to feel a connection to their homeland, as expressed through their discourse and advocacy efforts on behalf of their remaining Coptic brothers in Egypt.

In my research, I drew on literature reflecting upon identity and the contrasting narratives and values of Copts in Egypt and Egyptian Copts in the diaspora. The following cultural analysis served as part of my introduction to the scholarly conversations revolving around the counter discourses of the Egyptian Coptic diaspora, in relation to the rhetoric of nationalism and unity employed by Egyptian presidents. The following scholars consist of sociologists and anthropologists focusing on culture and identity. A main feature that unifies these scholars is the recognition of a disparity of thought between Copts in Egypt and Copts in the diaspora regarding

interpretations of Coptic relations with the Egyptian state, methods of activism, and definitions of minority-majority politics in Egypt.

In “Good Copt, Bad Copt: Competing Narratives on Coptic Identity in Egypt and the United States,” Yvonne Haddad and Joshua Donovan analyze the relationship between the Coptic community in Egypt and the Coptic diaspora community in the United States. They claim that “a growing fear of Muslims in America,” American “neo-conservatism,” and support for the right to intervene abroad explain the root causes of misunderstanding and disagreement between the Coptic diaspora and Copts in Egypt (Haddad et al. 2013, 211). The scholars explore how rather than supporting the Coptic Church’s efforts to promote unity amongst the nation’s Muslims and Christians, groups within the Coptic diaspora emphasize acts of persecution against Copts in Egypt in order to influence U.S. foreign policy. For example, the American Coptic Association lobbied for the passing of U.S. Congress’s International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. This bill contained a provision that defined and ranked countries based on their violations of religious freedom (Haddad et al. 2013, 219). In response to countries noted in the section of “Countries of Particular Concern,” the President of the United States would be required to apply at least one of the actions specified in the law, such as sanctions, to pressure reform within the target country (Haddad et al. 2013, 211). Haddad and Donovan communicate how Egypt’s Copts did not welcome the intervention of diaspora Copts because of a long-held skepticism of Western intervention in national affairs connected to Egypt’s colonial agreements (Haddad et al. 2013, 211).

“Digital Diasporas and Governance in Semi-Authoritarian States: The Case of the Egyptian Copts” informs Haddad and Donovan’s analysis of how the Coptic diaspora frames

their narratives. Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff investigates how the U.S. Copts Association's use of information technology facilitates an exchange of information aimed towards Copts in Egypt. When speaking with Brinkerhoff during an interview, Michael Meunier, president of the U.S. Copts Association, communicated how his nonprofit's website "is geared to educate the Copts in Egypt about their rights...things they would never hear about in Egypt, including the atrocities committed against Copts in Egypt and efforts to prosecute the alleged perpetrators" (Brinkerhoff 2005, 199). Meunier's discourse suggests an attempt to shape the meaning-making practices of Copts in Egypt through the promotion of transparency and the encouragement of responsiveness that accompanies the interactive components of his website's communication networks.

However, in "With Friends Like These: Coptic Activism in the Diaspora," Michael Wahid Hanna highlights challenges to diaspora activism, as he argues, "the Egyptian government has long sought to tarnish Coptic diaspora activism as foreign and an attack on national sovereignty, dignity, and unity" (Hanna 2013, 28-31). He explains how the portrayal of diaspora activists as "a handful of outsiders" has enhanced the Egyptian government's efforts to downplay the impact of minority persecution and politics in the nation (Hanna 2013, 28-31). Hanna's analysis connects to how the discourse of unity and nationalism employed by Egyptian presidents frames minority-majority politics by placing an emphasis on a common national identity before religious affiliation.

Methodology

Contexts and Mapping for Exposure

The birth of Christianity and Islam originated in the Middle East, and for centuries each religion's followers have inhabited the region. According to Alexandria's Takla Church, Saint Mark introduced Christianity to Egypt in 48 AD as he completed writing the world's oldest canonical gospel (St. Takla Haymanout Coptic Orthodox). Approximately half a century after Saint Mark's arrival to the region, Christianity rapidly spread, making Alexandria the center of Coptic Christianity in Egypt (St. Takla Haymanout Coptic Orthodox). However, during the Byzantine Empire and the turn of the 7th century, the rise of Islam in Egypt increased forms of economic, political, and social discrimination that the nation's Coptic Christian denomination encountered (Fitch 2015). The rise of Islam and its connection to Egypt's political framework continues to impact minority-majority tensions. Religious intolerance, the rise of Islam and its connection to Egyptian nationalism, and increases of sectarian violence targeting Copts have threatened the harmony and mutual understanding between Egypt's minority Coptic population and its Muslim majority neighbors. Influenced by a common trend of presidents employing discourses that emphasize unity and nationalism that continue to appear during the high points of sectarian violence towards Egypt's Coptic population, the history of religious discrimination of Egypt's Copts continues to prevail.

Throughout my research, I analyzed the specific discourses of nationalism and unity conveyed throughout Egyptian presidential speeches. I was particularly curious to explore how these discourses influenced the rhetoric and social advocacy practices of Egypt's Coptic diaspora, a counter discourse. The primary sources that I utilized to affirm the existence of these particular discourses were found in archives and videos of speeches made by Egypt's presidents. I accessed Sisi's speeches on the Egyptian government's official website, while I obtained

Nasser's speeches from the Gamal Abdel Nasser Digital Archive that was established in cooperation with Bibliotheca Alexandria. I obtained Sadat's speeches from the University of Maryland's Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, and transcripts of Mubarak's speeches were accessed from online news outlets.

The discourses of the Coptic diaspora were accessed from fieldwork included in my literature review, and from two interviews that I conducted. I held one interview with Michael Meunier, president of the U.S. Copts Association, and another with Father Anthony Messeh, priest of St. Timothy & St. Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Church in Virginia. By drawing from my interactions with both Meunier and Father Anthony, my findings convey that the Coptic diaspora in the U.S. is not homogenous. My research is unique because it includes two local diaspora perspectives, one from a nonprofit advocacy association and the other from a religious organization. Each conversation contributes to my overall analysis of how Coptic national and religious identity is framed in both Egypt and in the U.S. Both interviews touch upon how relationships between church and state, president and pope, and institutions associated with Egypt's Copts and the U.S. Coptic diaspora influence Egypt's minority-majority politics.

Organizations within the Coptic diaspora in the U.S. champion various priorities, encourage diverse methods of advocacy, and speak to different intended audiences. I first became aware of these discrepancies when consulting "The U.S. Coptic Diaspora and the Limit of Polarization," by Nadia Marzouki. In her research, Marzouki discusses the division and lack of coordination amongst Coptic diaspora organizations in the U.S. On one side of the spectrum, The Coptic Assembly of America dedicates its efforts to inform the American public about the challenges confronted by the Copts in Egypt. It does so by defining its messages and mission

through rhetoric related to human rights and equal citizenship (Marzouki 2016, 264). On the other hand, the National American Coptic Assembly has spread “a violently Islamophobic and bigoted message,” and its leader Morris Sadek took part in translating and promoting the Islamophobic short film, “The Innocence of Muslims” (Marzouki 2016, 264). In the middle stands the U.S. Copts Association, which Marzouki describes as a small organization that “combines a fierce critique of Islamism and the Muslim Brothers with calls for full citizenship for Copts” (Marzouki 2016, 264). I chose to interview Michael Meunier, president of the U.S. Copts Association, because the organization draws on elements and values from both extremes of the spectrum of diaspora organizations, as well as for its active lobbying efforts in Congress.

Michael Meunier’s personal experiences of facing discrimination as a Coptic Christian in Egypt during his youth inspired him to found the U.S. Copts Association. His passion for advocacy began when he traveled to the U.S. to begin his studies at Virginia Tech. In college, he created an organization for Coptic youth and started to write, in the hope of making the world more aware of the intolerance that Egypt’s Coptic population had been facing. Integrating in American society and welcoming ideals of democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion shaped Meunier’s discourses while strengthening his relationship with Egypt.

Father Anthony’s story is different from Meunier’s. Born in the United States to Egyptian immigrants, Anthony Messeh was chosen by his community to become a priest and was ordained in Egypt in 2011. Messeh’s church, St. Timothy & St. Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Church (STSA), is an Americanized place of worship that attracts a particular group of individuals, many of whom are not first-generation immigrants. With approximately 30% of non-Egyptian congregation members and with services conducted only in English, the church focuses on the

religion's orthodox roots and faith, rather than just on Egypt. Unlike other local Coptic churches in Virginia, STSA's focus is not to create a space that is both cultural and religious. Instead, Father Anthony strives to embrace diversity within the church by creating an environment where all feel welcome and can unite with a shared faith. In our conversation, Father Anthony expressed how even though the church is dynamic and always evolving, "what we believe in never changes" (Messeh 2018). This can be related to Father Anthony's perspective that in Egypt, culture and faith are oftentimes mixed together which can create tensions with identity, in regards to choosing Coptic heritage versus Egyptian nationalism (Messeh 2018).

As I acknowledged the power relationships amongst the actors and discourses that I researched, I found the discourses of Egyptian presidents to be dominant because they hold the utmost amount of power. Furthermore, although Father Anthony only traveled to Egypt approximately three times since being ordained as a priest in 2011, STSA still has a harmonious relationship with the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. Because there is no local diocese, Father Anthony occasionally travels to Egypt to meet with the pope to make sure that his church is in line with the pope's vision of the faith, and to gain approval and blessings to buy new land for his local church. On the contrary, because of their outspoken nature, members of the Coptic diaspora activist community are oftentimes perceived as outsiders by Copts in Egypt and by the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. It is common for the Copts in Egypt and the Egyptian Coptic Church not to support the diaspora's activism and discourses.

Evidence Generation and Data Analysis

The specific cases that I identified for my analysis were based on the primary source data that I generated. I organized my research into three parts: presidential discourses in 2011 during the Arab Spring; presidential discourses in 2018 during the inauguration of the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in Cairo; and the U.S. Coptic diaspora's responses towards both of these events. For the purpose of contextualization, I also generated data from a speech delivered by Mubarak to an intended audience of Egypt's youth on the night of February 10, 2011, in response to ongoing protests in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring threatened Mubarak's power and dictatorship, and in the hopes of calming the protests and the current situation, he employed similar patterns of unifying and nationalist discourses as Nasser had. To allow for multiplicity in meaning, I generated data from my interview with the U.S. Copts Association, based on the organization's responses to the Arab Spring and to this particular speech made by Mubarak.

In addition, I explored President Abdel-Fatah Al- Sisi's speech during his inauguration of the Nativity of Christ, in Cairo, on January 6, 2018. This particular speech allowed me to better comprehend my research problem from the perspective of Egypt's current president, and how he has responded to the violence and injustices that his nation's Coptic population has endured. Sisi's leadership has not been studied in depth in regards to the recent inauguration of the Nativity of Christ that took place last year, which allows me to contribute to existing scholarship. My evidence also incorporated the diaspora's perspective regarding the church's recent inauguration, as I drew from my ethnographic interview with Michael Meunier and Father Anthony. By including both interviews, my research recognizes that the Coptic diaspora community in the U.S. is not homogenous in regards to perceptions of politics and culture. I

found that personal background and experiences contributed to how these perspectives were formed.

Evaluative Standards

Before I conducted my research, I had not been exposed to the situation of Egypt's Copts in much detail apart from newspaper articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. I traveled to Egypt with my family in 2010 before the Arab Spring, but my exposure to religious minorities and to Egyptian culture was limited because of the short duration of my stay. As a result, my personal and academic identities did not impact the potential biases that I could have drawn from earlier on.

In addition, prior to my interview with Michael Meunier of the U.S. Copts Association, I recognized the organization's mission to serve as an educational resource targeted towards spreading awareness to the general American public, the U.S. Coptic diaspora, and the Copts in Egypt about sectarian violence. While the non-profit's website documents cases of human rights violations of Copts in Egypt, the organization's members actively lobby Congress and teach about the persistent violence targeted towards Egypt's Coptic population. I was aware of Meunier's openness and willingness to speak with me and to answer my questions. In addition, I recognized the relationship between the Coptic Orthodox Church and STSA of Virginia and made this transparent in my research. Because there is not a local diocese with a bishop that has decision-making power, Father Anthony's primary point of contact is Egypt's Pope Tawadros II.

My research reflects upon the leading discourses of both the Coptic diaspora community and Egyptian presidents regarding minority-majority politics, and recognizes disparities in

thought, definition, and interpretation of intolerance and persecution targeting Copts in Egypt. By analyzing the disparate relationships between each group, I acknowledged the diverse cultural contexts and values that differentiate each contesting discourse.

Analysis

Nationalism and Unity during the Arab Spring

I claim that the Arab Spring's unstable political climate contextualizes a repositioning of minority-majority politics in the nation during and following this contemporary turning point in Egyptian history. I base my claim on evidence connected to how the Arab Spring threatened the legitimacy and authority of the Egyptian government. The Arab Spring impacted Mubarak's power and dictatorship. Mubarak's use of assertive declarations of unity and nationalism prioritized nationalism before religious identity, in the hopes of calming the protests and the current situation.

In "'Christophobia' Reconsidered: The Copts One Year after Egypt's Uprising," Vivian Ibrahim recounts how during the Arab Spring the unity of Egyptians beyond religion was discernible, as "Copts stood guard over Muslims as they performed Friday prayers in the square, while Muslims in return stood guard over Coptic Sunday mass" (Ibrahim 2012). In contrast with the history of tense relations between Egypt's Muslim majority and its Coptic minorities, this particular act of solidarity during the Arab Spring acted as a turning point. Regardless of religion, members of both groups joined together and offered protection to one another as they participated demonstrations against a common target, the regime.

On February 10, 2011 in response to ongoing protests in Tahrir Square, Mubarak delivered a speech to an intended audience of Egypt's youth. In his speech, he communicated how Egypt is indestructible because "the spirit [of determination] is going to live in us as Egypt is going to long live...and it's going to be in the hearts of our youth... and the hearts of Copts and Muslims and all of those who are going to live on this soil" (CNN 2011). However, as expressed by Samuel Tadros, the discourse of unity and nationalism in Egypt contradicted itself, because it distinguished two groups from one another, the Copts and the Muslims. Tadros explains how the public recognition of Copts as a "collective body" associated with religion, conflated with the views of liberal nationalists who "rejected the Coptic claim to exclusivity" (Tadros 2014, 134). In response, "the liberal nationalists thus became anti-Coptic," because they perceived Coptic identity and their claims to exclusivity to be threats to Egyptian identity, which was based on claims of historic connection to the land (Tadros 2014, 134). As a result, Copts who shed parts of their religious identity could then seek national belonging in the public sphere.

When asked about his thoughts on the Arab Spring and the unity between Christians and Muslims in Tahrir Square, Michael Meunier of the U.S. Copts Association communicated how during that particular time, "I was working inside Egypt and founded the Hiya opposition party" (Meunier 2018). Meunier was present in Tahrir Square during the protests, which allowed him to have a personal connection to the uprisings and to directly interact with the Copts in Egypt. Although Meunier expressed how Mubarak's speech was emotional, he continued by stating how "the regime and the [Muslim] Brotherhood killed the unity" during the protests (Meunier 2018). The Tahrir Square protests can be interpreted as moments in which national

identity preceded religious identity, as Egyptian Muslims and Christians united to demonstrate against a common target, the regime.

In “Egypt Confronts Economic and Security Challenges as it Attempts to Regain its Position in the Arab World,” Seth J. Frantzman reflects upon how “Sisi’s ascension to the presidency is sometimes seen as returning Egypt to its pre-2011 political landscape” (Frantzman 2017, 1). In January 2016, the fifth anniversary of the Arab Spring, Sisi addressed the Egyptian people saying, “Egypt today is not the Egypt of yesterday. We are building together a modern, developed, and civilian state that upholds the values of democracy and freedom” (*Al Jazeera* 2016). In his speech, Sisi insists that the gradual process of democratization has the power to lead to political and social stability within Egypt. His rhetoric parallels with that of Mubarak who concluded his speech by stating, “we are going to prove that we the Egyptians...are not followers to anybody” and “with a sense of unity and solidarity of its people and by putting Egypt’s pride and dignity above all,” Egypt’s spirit will continue to grow strong (CNN 2011).

The chaos of the Arab Spring has created challenges for Egypt and the state’s priorities, as it struggles with confronting its history and foreign relations with the U.S. Frantzman’s “Egypt Confronts Economic and Security Challenges as it Attempts to Regain its Position in the Arab World” conveys how “there is a general view that the West and America in particular does not understand Egyptians” (Frantzman 2017, 6). This perspective informs the responses of Egypt’s Coptic community to the counter discourses embedded in Coptic diaspora activism initiated by individuals who live outside of Egypt’s borders.

When I spoke with Father Anthony about the Coptic diaspora’s responses to the Arab Spring protests, he communicated how “during the Mubarak years, tension was stronger in the

U.S. than in Egypt” because in the U.S. “the idea that you ‘fight for your rights’ exists” (Messeh 2018). The influence of American ideals on the U.S. Coptic diaspora led individuals like Meunier to embrace the freedom to protest during this particular time. In response to Mubarak’s discourse, Father Anthony expressed how “Mubarak always said the right things, but there was not necessarily action, and people wanted to protest” (Messeh 2018). The act of protest created a shift within the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. For example, Pope Shenouda III, who had a working relationship with Mubarak that was focused on diplomacy, advised Copts not to participate in the protests. Father Anthony explained how “if Shenouda said not to protest and advised against it, people wouldn’t protest. This was frustrating for some people, because it was like they were going against their faith” if they chose to protest (Messeh 2018). When he defined protest as an act of defiance against the church, Pope Shenouda III took a political stance from his religious standpoint. By following Mubarak’s public requests to deescalate protests, Pope Shenouda III emphasized national identity and belonging for the Coptic minority population, therefore connecting religion to Mubarak’s idea of nationalism.

The Inauguration of the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Nativity in Cairo

As a result of my analyses of primary and secondary source documents, Egyptian presidential speeches, and my interview with Michael Meunier, I claim that President Sisi utilizes his discourses of unity and nationalism to create an image of Egypt’s stability and religious tolerance within its borders. I base my claim on evidence of how Sisi’s unifying discourse can oftentimes veil issues of discrimination and violence targeted towards Copts in rural Egyptian territories, particularly in the case of his participation in the inauguration of the

Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity in Cairo in 2018. However, from my interview with Father Anthony, I also claim that because Sisi contributed to the construction of Egypt's largest cathedral, the president received an exchange of political support that he sought from the nation's minority population.

The process of building churches in Egypt is a contentious issue that is oftentimes linked to increases in sectarian clashes, and obtaining a permit for church construction is a complicated and extensive process. Article 235 of Egypt's 2014 constitution recognizes the parliament's power to reform regulations for church construction (Sharp 2018, 13). In 2015, the U.S. Department of State released its annual International Religious Freedom Report on Egypt, noting how Egypt's constitution recognizes Islamic sharia law as its primary source of legislation, and how the parliament decides whether or not churches will be constructed or renovated (U.S. Department of State 2015). In 2016 the Egyptian government amended the law without consulting civil society activists and the Coptic population, making the approval of church constructions and renovations the responsibility of local governors instead of the parliament (Sharp 2018, 13). Pope Tawadros II welcomed the amendment and expressed, "the passing of the new law bandaged long-lasting wounds of stability and citizenship" (The Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center 2016). On the contrary, human rights organization Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) communicated, "a special law to regulate the construction of churches already sends a discriminatory message that the state distinguishes Christian citizens from Muslim citizens" (El-Faizy 2016). Legal elements of Egypt's constitution regarding places of worship affect the framing of minority-majority politics, as they highlight conflicting narratives of identity and whether or not religion should precede nationality.

Sisi utilized the milestone of the inauguration of the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity in Cairo as the largest church in the Middle East, to signify advances towards the coexistence of Egypt's Coptic minority with its Muslim majority population. On January 6, 2018, Sisi addressed an audience of Egypt's Coptic population during the cathedral's inauguration ceremony, promoting messages of "love and peace," "unity," hope, and reassurance (*Egypt Today* 2018). Sisi phrased his rhetoric to encompass a positive and unifying tone, promoting the notion that national identity precedes religious belief. For example, at the end of his speech he raised one fist in the air and stated, "no one can harm Egypt as long as we are all one" and then repeated twice, "whoever wants to harm us divides us...that will not happen" (*Egypt Today* 2018). Sisi reiterated how "love and peace will come out from Egypt and spread to the whole world," because "we [Egyptians] offer an example of love and peace among us" (*Egypt Today* 2018). His statement revealed how the new church offered a unifying message to Egypt and to the world in response to ongoing acts of sectarian violence. This interpretation of Sisi's speech explains how Coptic diaspora organizations employ their discourses and methods of activism in response to this particular event.

When interviewing Michael Meunier I asked if he thought the creation of the church was a success to be celebrated. In response, Meunier stated how "Sisi is working on building a new Cairo. He can grant land for a big church, because there will be a lot of focus on this decision that will work in favor for him. But at the same time that Sisi did this, dozens of churches were closed in small rural villages" (Meunier 2018). Meunier told me how days before the church's inauguration, the destruction of rural churches took place, such as in the case of the Church of al-Amir Tadros. He expressed how he believed that "Sisi has double standards. He uses his tactics

to give the West and the world bigger things to look at instead,” referencing the inauguration of Egypt’s newest church in Cairo (Meunier 2018). When asked if the inauguration of the Coptic Church in Cairo would lead to more churches being built in Egypt, Meunier stated, “this inauguration will not make any difference in anything” (Meunier 2018). He communicated how the idea of unity is not a new phenomenon and how the government fails to implement the rule of law in rural Egypt where corruption, discrimination, and property theft frequently take place. The construction of the new church was met with resistance by part of the diaspora, because although the state funded the church’s construction, smaller churches throughout Egypt continued to be attacked or closed.

On the contrary, part of the diaspora welcomed the inauguration of the church. During my interview with Father Anthony, I also asked if he thought the inauguration of the church was a success. Father Anthony responded by communicating, “Sisi fulfilled what the Christians were looking for and they gave him their support. Sisi needs the support of the Christians, which he has after this church was built. But, he also needs the support of the Muslims in the country. He is looking for a balance” (Messeh 2018). The church is also perceived as a statement of progress for the Coptic community in Egypt, because legal barriers for church construction exists. This is one reason why the majority of churches in Egypt are large in size and congregation. Although Father Anthony expressed how he thinks “no new churches will probably be built in Egypt, even after the cathedral was inaugurated,” the process of building this church created responses of “trust and progress” from the Coptic community (Messeh 2018). According to Father Anthony, “Sisi is doing what is right and fair. He built Egypt as secular, and this is what people want to bring business and food to the table. The economic focus will help Christians” (Messeh 2018).

To Father Anthony, the lack of tourism and economic expansion in Egypt is a common complaint for both Christians and Muslims. The inauguration of the church has the potential to boost Egypt's image and economy.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the Coptic population in Egypt is a minority. Father Anthony expressed how one of the biggest challenges that the Coptic population in Egypt faces is safety, especially when going to church. He stated, "we in the U.S. are afraid for them, but going back to church every time there is an attack strengthens the Copts in Egypt" (Messeh 2018). From his perspective, "the Coptic Church has never been in power. Power corrupts and leads to problems and to faith problems. The Copts have always been a persecuted minority, yet their faith is strong. The persecution has led to the strength of the church" (Messeh 2018).

According to Father Anthony, unity within the church should be achieved by connecting people based on shared religion rather than culture. Even though Father Anthony is part of the Coptic diaspora, his church's mission focuses on creating unity within the church based on shared faith and religious identity.

I recognize that objections to my claims may express how the inauguration of the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Nativity is indeed a milestone for Egypt, because it is an effort made by the Egyptian government to move one step closer towards achieving tolerance. However, why do these efforts to create tolerance fail to halt the persistence of sectarian violence towards Copts in the region? The establishment of legal discourses by Egypt's government offers insight into the lack of alignment within identity politics in the nation. According to the newest amendment to Egypt's constitution regarding church construction, security provisions were implemented, warning that sectarian violence could impact the denial of issuing building permissions for

churches (Meunier 2018). There is a profound contrast between creating an image of unity and embracing unity in the reality of everyday life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the division and lack of coexistence between national and religious identities in Egypt further hinders efforts to generate tolerance between Egypt's minority-majority politics and relations. Recognizing religious identity before national identity has the power to exacerbate a lack of national coexistence when considering the deeper meanings and characterizations of what it means to be an Egyptian and what it means to be a Copt. Throughout history, Egypt's presidents have employed discourses of nationalism and unity to express that regardless of religion, Egyptian roots connect all citizens. From Nasser who drew on discourses of unity and nationalism after the fall of British colonialism in Egypt, to Mubarak who employed similar patterns of rhetoric during the rise of the Arab Spring, Egyptian leaders have employed these discourses to create images of Egypt's advancement towards a tolerant society.

However, dominant practices of silence correlate with the nationalism and unity rhetoric utilized. This practice of silence is characterized by the lack of action and response by Egyptian presidents. For example, days before president Sisi participated in inaugurating the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Nativity, smaller churches in Egypt's rural areas, such as the Church of al-Amir Tadros, continued to be attacked and closed. In addition, the lack of balance and flexibility in relations between popes and presidents has had the power to transform relations and representations of the Coptic population and Egypt, therefore impacting Egypt's Coptic citizens. Choosing to align with the regime and its political endeavors can be interpreted as an exchange

that has the power to protect the pope's authority and to offer protection to the nation's Christian minority population.

As I focused my analysis on the juxtaposition of two major events: the Arab Spring in Egypt and the turmoil and chaotic environment that it generated, and the inauguration of the Middle East's largest church, the Church of the Nativity in Cairo, I was provided with the opportunity to examine rhetorical comparisons and contrasts between Egyptian presidents and the U.S. Coptic diaspora in response to the varying natures of these two occurrences. I found the diaspora community was deeply influenced by American ideals such as freedom of expression and of religion that influenced its counter discourse and the advocacy community's retaliation towards the Egyptian presidency in regards to the framing of minority-majority politics. The diaspora draws attention to the sectarian violence and discrimination in Egypt by framing and defining the nation's Copts as a minority population. The lack of consensus between the Coptic diaspora and the Egyptian regime highlights the conflicting nature of identity and nationalism within the nation's political and social norms.

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