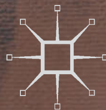
Christians in Egypt

Strategies and Survival

Andrea B. Rugh



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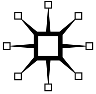

CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT
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To Mme Ansaf Aziz

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Preface

While waiting for permission to study middle-class urban women in an Egyptian bureaucracy in 1976, I volunteered a few days a week in a mother-child clinic in a popular quarter of Cairo. My thought was to learn about women of other social classes before I studied educated civil servants. The clinic was in a Episcopal-run welfare center in a popular quarter of Cairo called Bulaq Abu Alaa, and the poor women were a clear contrast to the women I planned to study. They were uneducated, mostly unemployed, and lacked access to many of the normal necessities of life. As the permission process dragged on, I became increasingly involved in the Bulaq Center and began to shift my research interest to the Bulaq community itself. One puzzle was the amount of time these desperately poor women spent attending religious services and activities in a center that seemed to give them so little in return. Other questions arose about the importance of religion among the lower classes, and especially how Christians managed their relations with the Muslim majority in the quarter. Eventually I dropped the "women in bureaucracy" idea and turned to Bulaq.

Thus began a five-year, almost daily immersion in the lives of local residents as I accompanied the social worker in the performance of her duties at the center and when she routinely visited families in the community. Over these years, I came to know the community exceedingly well. The main clients were Christians, but we also occasionally visited Muslims in their homes or stopped casually to chat with them on street corners. Muslims enrolled in the center's literacy classes and signed up for knitting and sewing instruction. Some embroidered items that the center sold to Cairene customers at charity bazaars in other parts of town.

The social worker, Mme Ansaf, was the most fortuitous part of finding the center. She became a close friend and an avid researcher herself, devoting considerable time during and after working hours to making sure I understood all there was to know about life in Bulaq. When it was remotely possible, she instinctively knew it was better to "show" rather than "tell" me the answers to my questions. Together we travelled to visit her relatives in parts of Upper Egypt

from which many of our Bulaq clients came, giving me a better perspective on the changes they experienced when arriving as migrants in a city like Cairo.

I did not publish the manuscript on Bulaq at the time because, at the last minute, I decided that the issue of Christian-Muslim relations was too sensitive in the Egypt of the 1980s, and it would have been particularly provocative for a foreigner to write on such a subject. Already I experienced offended officials' criticisms of my observations as "those of a foreigner who was incapable of understanding Egyptian society." Officials took the stance that government services for the poor were adequate and that there were no tensions between the religious communities. Officials, for the most part, looked the other way when conflicts erupted in Upper Egyptian villages or in lower-class urban areas unless they escalated to a point where they threatened a major conflagration. Although the proximate causes tended to be disagreements over land or water or disputes over money and honor, the overlay of religious sensitivity in those days could magnify quarrels into major conflicts. If local residents didn't contain the problem quickly, the government eventually imposed an uneasy peace on the combatants while still claiming no problems existed. In this atmosphere of denial, the time was not ripe for a book describing what Muslims and Christians privately thought of one another or of the mechanisms they employed to keep a deceptive calm between their communities.

The second and more important reason for not publishing was the harm it might cause key characters in the study if their private views were exposed. There were few enough of them to be easily identifiable, and it was inconceivable to let those who opened their hearts and lives to me suffer the consequences of a virtually unregulated state security apparatus under Sadat and later Mubarak. In the 1970s, security forces were constantly suspicious of foreigners and Egyptians who associated with them. I explained the study carefully to Ansaf, but research being little understood at the time, the security forces probably saw me as a "charity worker" and mostly left me alone. As a result, my excursions into Bulaq were less scrutinized than those of independent researchers with a less obvious reason for being where they were. At least once I know of, Ansaf was called in for questioning about me, but whatever she said, they left me alone. I did, however, keep my tacit agreement with church officials to accompany Ansaf and not walk alone in an area that Egyptians considered dangerous because of drug traffickers and other illicit commerce that provided income for some Bulaq families.

The upshot was that I was reluctant to publish a book that would hurt Ansaf, others at the Bulaq Center, or members of the community. As a foreigner, I could perhaps get away with such a book, but Egyptians would have been highly critical of my exposing to international scrutiny the seamy side of Egyptian poverty or the tensions between Christians and Muslims. By the time

I finished the study, I was aware of how much such revelations might hurt those concerned.

After the 2011 Uprising in Egypt, the atmosphere changed. Christians had become an important part of the story, and their relations with Muslims were a portent of what many hoped the new Egypt might bring. By that time, 40 years later, many of the people connected to the Bulaq Center, both staff and clients, were gone or retired and people spoke more easily of Christian-Muslim relations and the importance of providing a better life for poor Egyptians. With the exception of Ansaf and the board members, however, I abbreviated or altered the names to make sure they remained anonymous.

One might ask if events that happened in the 1970s are still relevant—and I would answer very much so. In revising the manuscript, I added considerably more context material about the history of Coptic leaders' relations with Egyptian presidents up to and after the Uprising of 2011. The 1970s under President Sadat, when the study of Bulaq took place, proved to be one of the most difficult periods for Christians. The disastrous defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War caused many Egyptians to turn to formal religion as an answer to why God had deserted them in this devastating war. When Nasser died in 1970 and Sadat became president, he supported this religious revival by encouraging Islamists as a counterweight to his main threat, the Tagammu', a leftist party dominated by a leadership of articulate Egyptians mainly from the upper classes. Sadat's turn to Islam caused heightened anxiety for Christians generally and, in Bulaq, an increasing awareness of the potential for conflicts with Muslims with little hope the government would offer them protection.

This in-depth study of a poor community describes how growing unease affected a vulnerable group of Christians living in a mainly Muslim quarter of Cairo. It shows how they established a sense of religious community in the late 1970s and sought to regulate relations with their Muslim neighbors. The core of this community was a welfare center that worked both explicitly and implicitly to delineate sectarian boundaries and ensure relations between the communities remained cordial. In addition, the study shows the informal institutions in the quarter that helped defuse potentially disruptive behaviors of a few individuals, even while operating consistently within the frameworks of the communities' separate theologies and family issues. In surveying the literature on Egyptian Christians, I do not find any other studies that describe so comprehensively how poor, urban Christians organized and maintained a religious community nor how they managed their minority status in comparison to the strategies used by church authorities at the national level.

Another value in looking back is to observe the way interpersonal relations were conducted in the quarter at the time, with outsiders, with family members, and especially between the sexes. Just as sectarian tensions intensified after the

Uprising of 2011, so did gender tensions in both eras. The role of religion in a place like Bulaq, with the complicating factor of poverty, affected relationships in the 1970s and served as a backdrop for what came later in the Uprising of 2011.

I want to acknowledge the many people who talked through these ideas with me. Most of all, I want to thank my social-worker friend and her family who welcomed me so warmly. Ansaf became a sister to me in the best of all ways. For 30 years, I returned every year to Egypt to see her until she passed away in 2013, just days before I arrived for our annual visit. I owe her a debt of gratitude for taking such an active interest in teaching me during those years in Egypt.

I also want to acknowledge the insights provided by Reda Shafik Athanasios, who I met briefly when he was a young man in the 1970s in charge of youth activities in Bulaq. We met again 30 years later after he immigrated to the United States and became a successful businessman with a wife and two daughters. He enjoyed telling me how much Ansaf took advantage of me in promoting her agenda for the poor. My retort was always that she didn't use me any more than I used her in pursuing my research agenda, although I would rather characterize our collaboration as a happy "victimhood." I think we both knew what we were doing and each became committed to the other's goals.

Others who helped by providing information were Amal Morsy at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, and Dr. Nicholas Hopkins, emeritus professor of the American University of Cairo, who sent me census data gathered by Sayyid Uwais (1959) for his study comparing Bulaq and a Boston suburb. I had obtained basic census data in the 1970s, but my efforts to gather more details were frustrated by the Egyptian bureaucracy. Others also helped, including Dr. Emad Shahin, a professor at the American University in Cairo who read drafts of sections dealing with history and current events. Thanks go to my husband, Bill, who took the photos in the book, and to Vickie Baily for making them usable. I also owe my son Doug Rugh a debt of gratitude for providing the beautiful cover painting.

In the end, of course, I take responsibility for any errors that appear in the text.

Andrea B. Rugh, Garrett Park, Maryland

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Study Questions and the History of Christianity in Egypt

From the start of anthropology, the discipline was interested in religion. But taking their cues from archaeologists, anthropologists' first efforts were to catalogue religious artifacts so they could be used to compare and contrast societies and perhaps discover connections between them. At the time, religious artifacts were not thought to have much power in explaining how people coped with everyday living. Rather, they weakly reflected human ways of explaining the unexplainable while economic and political systems were far more determinative in shaping societies.

Later studies considered religion in more instrumental ways. Turner (1967) examined how people manipulated rituals and symbols in folk medicine and witchcraft to validate social structures. Geertz (1968) was fascinated by how historical and cultural influences in two widely separated settings—Indonesia and Morocco—drastically modified the practice of Islam. Spiro (1965) pointed out how "priesthoods" provided acceptable channels for deviant behaviors in some societies. Marxist-leaning social scientists saw religion as validating the structures of the status quo—the "opiate of the masses"—and constituting just another tool in the arsenal of the ruling classes to suppress the lower classes. As with other generalizations about the poor, these views minimize their capacity to use religion as a tool in advancing their own interests.

The main questions of this book ask how Christians deal with their status in a country of mainly Muslims: What strategies do they use and what are the implications of their choices. It addresses these questions at two levels: the first is the national political level, and the second is of a group of poor Christians living among a majority of Muslims in a lower-class quarter of Cairo, Bulaq Abu Alaa. The aim, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, was "to find in the

little what eludes [us] in the large, by stumbling upon general truths while sorting through special cases."[1] The period in the late 1970s when the Bulaq part of the study was conducted was one of increasing pressure on Egyptian Christians, with Bulaq Christians being no exception. The study shows how vulnerable Christians turned to a welfare center where, supported by more affluent Christians, they managed to maintain largely peaceful albeit uneasy relations with their Muslim neighbors.

The book asks a number of questions with bearing on the way minorities cope with their vulnerabilities: At the national level, what strategies do church authorities use to advance Christian interests? How does the church hierarchy interact with the Egyptian government? Which national policies affect Christians for better or worse? In Bulaq, the questions are somewhat different: What caused Christians to become members of a religious community? What kinds of boundaries did they draw between themselves and their Muslim neighbors, and in what realms of life were they especially eager to maintain a separation? Where did they cross those boundaries? How did they contain potential conflicts within and between their communities? Was there any difference in the way Christians and Muslims coped with conditions in Bulaq? What was the emotional content of Muslim-Christian personal relations? How did religion impact their state of poverty and vice versa? Was it true that "religion was the opiate of the masses"—that it kept the poor mostly acquiescing to their social conditions and unlikely to make any effort to change them? What did Christian ways of coping on both levels tell us about minority strategies in general and about changes in the public posture of Christians during and after the Egyptian Uprising[2] of 2011?

The historical parts rely mainly on secondary sources and, more recently, newspaper accounts. The ethnographic study of Bulaq uses the standard anthropological techniques of holism and participant observation. Holism assumes that any aspect that touches on a subject may be important—its history, its organization, its personnel, its institutions—and virtually any entry point into the topic can lead to a better understanding of it. Participant observation assumes that the best way to know a subject is for a researcher to immerse himself or herself as much as possible into the subject-matter itself. Over five years, between 1976 and 1981, with the exception of holidays, I spent most days of the week in Bulaq shadowing a social worker, Mme Ansaf, as she supervised the affairs of the Bulaq Social Welfare Center and made her rounds of roughly 250 families. For the most part, I remained a quiet observer watching what took place and leaving the initiative to Mme Ansaf. My Arabic at the time was good enough to understand most of the conversations around me, but when I missed something, Ansaf, whose English was limited, summarized what I could not understand and often explained the implicit messages she felt I might have

missed. After five years, people's responses became so familiar to me that I could pretty much predict how they would respond in most situations or at least know when their behaviors deviated enough from the norm to warrant further investigation—in other words, I had absorbed their ways of behaving into a deeper level of my own understanding. When I asked about people or behaviors, Ansaf would usually say, "We will go and ask," and consequently, despite the important role Ansaf played in the research, I felt enough occurred in our daily excursions to corroborate any information I learned from her. To back up our observations, we collected basic information from the Christians that frequented the Bulaq Center, including among other pieces of information, the relationships of those who lived together, their marriages, their education levels, and where possible, their income levels.

In addition to trailing Ansaf in Bulaq, I spent considerable time with her visiting other institutions and organizations that provided services for the poor, including orphanages, homes for the elderly, medical clinics, hospitals, informal practitioners dispensing cures for physical and mental problems, and government offices that dealt with pensions, official IDs, and other documents. The government provided few services to the poor, and it was only with dread that people approached public offices, fearing the disrespect they would encounter there and the likelihood that their requests would be denied.

Does this book about Christians and Muslims unduly present the perspective of Christians who at best only constitute roughly 10 percent of the Egyptian population? Yes, without a doubt. A method like participant observation demands trust as a prerequisite for acquiring candid information. My presumed Christian faith made it easier for Christians to open up to me, just as it was easier for me as a woman to spend time with women who were the main participants in the Christian-supported center. I never felt I lost my "foreign-ness," but its raw edges were smoothed somewhat by my "passports": as a woman among women, as a presumed Christian among Christians, and as a vouchsafed companion of Mme Ansaf. These traits, after a time, secured me a place as a "partial insider" who people felt would not betray their trust. I could not have matched this level of trust in the Muslim community where I was not a presumed Muslim and where men dominated most institutions of organized religion.

Egyptian Christians have faced challenges over the years from the state and from non-Christians. Despite denominational differences within their group (Copts, Catholics, Protestants, Episcopalians, and others), Egyptian Christians share a collective memory of their history, especially the difficult times. This book briefly surveys this history and then zooms in on one group of Christians during the troublesome period in the 1970s, suggesting why they might have

a residual wariness today as they contemplate modern political upheavals and their continuing future within a Muslim-majority country.

The following section sets the scene by looking at the history of Christianity in Egypt and describing the proliferation of Christian denominations that resulted in large part from the penetration of foreign missionaries. The chapter ends with a review of the Coptic Orthodox Church's relations with various governments since independence in 1952 and up to the 1970s. The emphasis on the Coptic Orthodox Church here is because Copts represent 95 percent of Christians in Egypt, and what happens to them on the national level basically sets the stage for Egyptian Christians of all denominations. The Bulaq Center's clientele was almost exclusively Coptic; the main material support came from the Egyptian Episcopal Church, and center staff included Episcopalians, Evangelical Protestants, and Copts.

Christianity in Egypt

Tradition claims that Christianity came to Egypt in earnest when St. Mark settled in Alexandria in the first century of the Common Era.[3] From Alexandria, the Christian doctrine spread through the Delta and along the Nile until, by the fourth century, it was entrenched throughout the area of Egypt today. Eventually it came to be seen as the religion of the indigenous people as opposed to the imported religions of the Greek and Roman conquerors. The word "Copt," by which the Egyptians Christians were known, derives from the Greek word "Aigiptos," meaning Egyptian. The Coptic alphabet uses several Pharaonic characters that Copts claim as evidence of their continuity with the ancient Egyptians. Modern Copts do not like to be referred to as Christians, since they believe the word "Copt" encompasses the meaning Christian and Egyptian.[4] In the text, when the reference is to Copts or the Coptic Church, it is Orthodox Copts that are meant.

Coptic history was constantly being affected by relations with other groups. During its spread up the Nile, Christianity was met with Greek and Roman persecution, a fact that shaped some of its most important features even now. Monasticism and withdrawal into the desert became a means of escaping persecution and a heavy taxation imposed by outside rulers. Martyrdom and monkhood formed the ultimate expression of faith and an uncompromising adherence to principle.[5] The cross on which Jesus suffered became the Coptic symbol of solidarity.

By the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the accepted religion of the entire Roman Empire—in Egypt reaching its peak in missionary zeal and centers of learning. There was a brief period of consolidation before the Egyptian Church broke with international Christianity in 451 CE at the Council of

Chalcedon. The dispute was over the nature of Christ. Orthodox Copts took the position that although Christ had two natures, the divine and the human, these became united in the mystery of the Incarnation[6] rather than remaining separate. Egyptian Christians who took the latter view remained part of the Byzantine-dominated Catholic Church. This difference continues to distinguish the Coptic Orthodox Church from other Christian denominations.

Ultimately, the worst blow to Coptic interests came with the Arab[7] Islamic conquest of Egypt. When Amr ibn al-'As, acting for the Caliph Umar, invaded Egypt in 639 CE, he found a country almost entirely populated by Christians. Some of these Christians at first welcomed the invaders whom they hoped would relieve them of their Byzantines rulers. Although the Byzantines were also Christian, they viewed local Christians as heretics after their split from the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Muslim invaders introduced a new religion into Egypt that they considered an improvement on the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity.

Although 90 percent of Egyptians were Christians at the time of the Islamic invasion,[8] three centuries later the majority were Muslim, and by the fourteenth century, Christians constituted only a tenth of the Egyptian population.[9] Arabic replaced Coptic as the language of public affairs in the eighth century and, although Copts continued to speak the Coptic language for a time, by the twelfth century it was largely unknown outside of church liturgy. As a spoken language, it ceased altogether by the seventeenth century.

During the sixteenth century, the Ottomans conquered Egypt and established a system of government that essentially allowed protected non-Muslims (*dhimmis*) to govern themselves.[10] The system delineated communities by ethnic/religious affiliation and appointed local authorities to administer their own communities under the supervision of the rulers. Boundaries between the communities were established through separate legal and social structures that made the development of a single homogeneous civil state virtually impossible. As non-Muslims, Christians paid a tax (*jizya*) that was supposed to entitle them to the services of the state and to guarantee them the right to follow their own religion. The comparable tax for Muslims was *zakat* or the proportional amount of their income that Muslims paid annually for the poor. Although popes at the time acted as religious and communal leaders, they relied on *archons* or Christian elites to collect the *jizya* and the wealthy of the community to make up any shortfalls owed the state. These tax collectors eventually became more powerful than the pope himself, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century and the reigns of Popes Cyril VI and Shenouda III that the balance of power shifted from the laity to the church.[11] By that time, the church had been severely weakened.

Christians and Jews, however, continued to feel like second-class citizens under the Ottoman system. But the system set a pattern that, in some essentials, remains today. Ethnic residential units still exist by choice in some villages and neighborhoods, although no longer as distinctly as before, and separate legal structures still require people to identify a religious affiliation in matters of personal-status law.[12]

The increased foreign influence in Egypt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries intensified Christian differences with the Muslim community as well as creating fissures in the Coptic community. During French occupation (1798–1801), Roman Catholic missionaries promoted the Roman Catholic branch of the Coptic Church that had existed for several centuries. They found, as did later waves of foreign missionaries, that it was easier to make converts from among local Christians than from the Muslim community. The resistance of Muslims was buttressed by several practices—in particular the severe penalties for apostasy (converting away from Islam) and the prohibitions against Muslim women (but not Muslim men) marrying into other faiths. Under Egyptian legal codes, children followed the faith of their fathers and wives inherited only if they were of the same faith as their husbands. These prohibitions prevented members from leaving the Muslim community while encouraging the intake of members from other communities. As a result, missionaries in Egypt found it nearly impossible to convert members of the Muslim faith to Christianity.

After the French departure, under the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805–49) and members of his dynasty, Christians enjoyed a relative prosperity. In asserting his independence from Ottoman control, Muhammad Ali abolished the system of separate administrative units and the *jizya* tax. Muhammad Ali also permitted and, in some cases, encouraged Western missionaries to work in the country. The Westerners' contacts with local Copts produced new divisions and conversions. The Church Missionary Society of England (Anglican) started schools for Copts in 1825 but discontinued their work in 1862 under a successor of Muhammad Ali who was suspicious of foreign influence. They resumed work in Egypt in 1882 with the advent of British occupation and set up four parishes (three in Cairo) for their local converts and foreign congregations, about 750 members in all.

During the British occupation (1882–1945), conditions improved for Christians—at the expense of Muslims. Muslim Ottoman rule was replaced with what was essentially Western Christian rule, even when at the end of this period, local figureheads gave the appearance of local Egyptian governance. Although Western missionaries were already well established, the British administrators encouraged them to expand their efforts to "uplift" the poor rural and lower-class urban communities. In 1925 in an effort to reduce tensions with local Muslims, the Charter of the Episcopal Church in Egypt, as

the local Anglican Church was called, announced that it was not interested in gaining converts.[13]

Meanwhile, American missionaries began work in Egypt in 1854, intent on reforming the Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1899, the United Presbyterian Church of America began work in Egypt, successfully winning over a number of Copts to its denomination.[14] This group, known first as The Synod of the Nile, later became the independent Egyptian Evangelical Church and eventually the Coptic Evangelical Church. The Americans put much of their effort into establishing schools in Upper Egypt.[15] These schools became increasingly popular up until independence, when they lost some of their importance after Nasser required that all private schools conform to government curriculum and standards. Eventually, the compulsory free public school system reduced demand for these schools.

In 1950 shortly before independence, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) was established with headquarters in Cairo. CEOSS started with literacy courses, leadership training, and income-generating programs serving both Muslims and Christians. In the mid-1970s, they developed a strong presence in Upper Egypt with their new headquarters in Minya. Throughout the next several decades, they added programs very similar to those being promoted by the international community: community development and poverty alleviation (1980s), gender equity (1993), strengthening community-based organizations (2000), changing from needs- to rights-based programs (2005), children at risk (2007), and farmers' cooperatives (2010). Observers have noted that these Evangelical programs often served as the inspiration for reform programs in the Coptic Orthodox Church, especially in the 1980s.

Also after independence with the revival of nationalism, some of the Christian elites who joined "foreign" denominations returned to the Coptic Orthodox Church because of its more indigenous roots and because the reforms of Pope Cyril were making that Church more attractive.[16] British missionaries mostly left at independence, while many American missionary groups continued their education and welfare activities until the 1967 War when they also left.

Muslims were usually free to attend the health and education services established by missionaries, but Christian parents naturally felt more comfortable sending their children to missionary schools where they came in close contact with Christians of other persuasions. When the British expanded Egypt's civil service,[17] Christians were often more qualified than Muslims as a result of studying in these church schools. Once Christians got a foothold in "educated" posts, they tended to recommend relatives and friends for vacancies that opened up. Long after the British were gone, this bias continued in many of the international organizations that survived the period. From this experience, the Muslim

community understandably became wary of foreign proselytizing and resented Christians' advantages under the British.

By midcentury, at the time of independence, Muslims had become deeply suspicious of the motives of missionaries, and the government began imposing restrictions on their proselytizing activities. Egyptian Christians from faiths originated by foreign groups suddenly found it advantageous to link themselves in name to the indigenous Coptic Orthodox Church by, for example, calling themselves Coptic Evangelicals or Coptic Episcopalians. After the 1967 War with Israel, most of the remaining foreign missionaries left Egypt.

As history shows, from the time preceding the Islamic invasion when virtually the entire population was Coptic, the church suffered conversions and schisms until it was a shadow of its original size.[18] Most of the original conversions were to Islam but later many were to other Christian denominations. Numbers are disputed, but the usual estimate for Egyptian Christians is 10 percent of a total population of more than 85 million, fewer than church claims of 16 percent.

By the end of the twentieth century, the rough breakdown of Christian denominations was the following: Orthodox Copts, 95 percent or roughly 7 million members; Coptic Catholics, 3 percent or 161,000; Greek Orthodox, 0.5 percent or 40,000; and the rest of the denominations much smaller fractions. Evangelicals (Protestants) comprised only an estimated 27,000 members of which only about 1,000–5,000 were Episcopalians. The overwhelming size of the Coptic Orthodox Church in relation to other Christian denominations has given it the lead role in negotiating with the government and speaking out on Christian issues.

The Changing Fortunes of Christians since Independence[19]

To understand the significance of current events for Egyptian Christians, we must look briefly at their changing fortunes from the time of Egypt's independence in 1952 up to the time of Sadat, when the Bulaq study was conducted. This story continues in a later chapter when we look at the years from the 1980s up to the Uprising of 2011 and beyond. These experiences shed light on changes that occurred in the public stance of Christians after the Uprising of 2011.

In the decades after Egyptian independence in 1952, Christians experienced roller coaster changes in their relations with the government. With the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Coptic Orthodox Church through its Pope Cyril VI (1959–71) established warm relations with the president and in return was rewarded with such benefits as receiving government support for building churches and being allowed to vet Christian appointments to official positions.

The church prospered under Cyril's initiatives of promoting social work, helping the poor, establishing village ministries, and developing Bible studies and a Sunday school curriculum.

One consequence of the close relationship between Cyril and the president was that the church became the main representative of the Christian community, pushing aside other lay and civil society groups[20] that had been influential prior to independence. President Nasser helped this process along by issuing a presidential decree in 1957 stating age and other requirements that essentially eliminated younger reform-minded members of the clergy from being elected pope. Tadros notes that by strengthening the church against its civil society groups "religious affiliation became the Copts' main marker, not their citizenship." No lay institutions remained after this with enough power to press "the church for greater accountability, transparency and reform."[21]

Several other changes affected Christians during the Nasser period: First, an attempt on Nasser's life in 1954 by elements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood led Nasser to crack down on that organization—an action that Christians saw as benefitting their community. Second, in 1953, Nasser began implementing the land reforms he had promised when coming to power.[22] The reforms, which broke up many large plantations, were particularly devastating to Christian landowning families in Upper Egypt and to the Christian peasants they employed. Many of the latter migrated for work and ended up in crowded popular quarters of major Egyptian cities. Also in the name of reform, in the early 1960s, Nasser nationalized much of the industrial, financial, and economic sectors including properties, hospitals, and other assets[23] of nongovernmental organizations, many of which belonged to Christian groups.

Another of Nasser's promises was to expand education for all children, regardless of their class or residence in urban and rural areas. His government, however, neglected the necessary investment to meet the vastly increasing enrollments, ultimately leading to overcrowded classrooms, inadequately prepared teachers, and eventually to inferior public education programs. Demand for education was accelerated by Nasser's promise of government jobs to graduates of the public universities,[24] making education the one secure route to higher class status. Previously, Egypt had had what was essentially a two-class system consisting of an affluent class of rich landowners and businessmen and a lower class of laborers on farms and in factories or as underemployed manual laborers engaged in pick-up work. With the expansion of education, a middle class emerged comprising the educated children of lower-class families who preferred respectable, albeit poorly paid, government office jobs rather than manual labor. Eventually the government bureaucracy was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of these poorly prepared graduates. By virtue of their numbers, the jobs went mostly to Muslims who, after the British were gone, disproportionately

occupied supervisory jobs and key positions in Nasser's government. Christians no longer held the advantage of their often higher educational status and what many felt was preferential treatment under the British.

Perhaps the most important impact of the Nasser era on Christians came from Egypt's devastating defeat by the Israelis in the Six Day War of June 1967. Many credit that defeat with accelerating an Islamic revival in Egypt. Egyptians were abandoned by God, it was said, because they deviated so drastically from Islam, and if they wanted to regain His favor, they must return to proper Islamic practice. It was no secret that many affluent Egyptians in the 1950s and 1960s took to emulating Western dress, drinking alcohol, and promiscuity, and espousing "atheistic" socialist and Marxist ideals. A return to Islam meant reviving a more indigenous way of life, marked by conservative dress and behavior and regular observance of religious obligations: daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage. Universities became the breeding ground for this more conservative and often more radical Islam, especially among poor rural students living away from home for the first time. On holidays, they brought their views back to already conservative villages. Feeling theirs was the correct religion, these students put a religious spin on even the most insignificant of sectarian conflicts. Christians suddenly became more visible because of their "non-Islamic" dress and because they did not observe Muslim holidays and practices.

Under duress, Egyptian Christians, particularly those in Protestant and Episcopalian denominations, tended to stress their Western connections. However, when relations soured[25] between Nasser and the United States, leading Nasser to cut relations in 1967, Christians found it better to downplay their Western connections and stress their links to the indigenous Coptic faith by calling themselves Coptic Evangelicals or Coptic Catholics. Orthodox Copts who claimed origins dating to before the Islamic invasion continued to emphasize their Egyptian origins.

When Nasser died in 1970 and Pope Cyril died a year later, the close relationship between church and state was broken. The new president, Anwar Sadat, attempted to develop a similarly close relationship with the new Pope Shenouda III and at first gave him the same opportunity to vet Christian candidates for the People's Assembly and approved a larger number of church constructions—always a contentious issue for Christians.[26] Tadros says there were three reasons relations broke down: the rise of Islamist groups, increased sectarian clashes, and the growing role of Coptic American emigrants in criticizing Sadat's policies from abroad.[27] What led President Sadat to support Islamists, often at the expense of Christians? At the start of his presidency, Sadat inherited the Soviet/Russian presence that Nasser had encouraged in his later years when he broke with the West. But with the economy at a low point, Sadat decided to reverse