

Egypt's Christians Fear Violence as Changes Embolden Islamists

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Coptic Christians, many of whom have felt less secure since Egypt's dictator stepped down, held a sit-in May 19 in Cairo

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

CAIRO — The headline screamed from a venerable liberal newspaper: Coptic Christians had abducted a young Muslim and tattooed her with a cross. "Copts kidnap Raghada!"

"They tied me up with ropes, beat me with shoes, shaved my hair," Raghada Salem Abdel Fattah, 19, declared, "and forced me to read Christian psalms!"

Like many similar stories proliferating here since the revolution, Ms. Abdel Fattah's kidnapping could not be confirmed. But for members of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, the sensational headline — from a respected publisher, no less — served to validate their fear that the Egyptian revolution had made their country less tolerant and more dangerous for religious minorities. The Arab Spring initially appeared to open a welcoming door to the dwindling number of Christian Arabs who, after years of feeling marginalized, eagerly joined the call for democracy and rule of law. But now many Christians here say they fear that the fall of the police state has allowed long-simmering tensions to explode, potentially threatening the character of Egypt, and the region.

"Will Christians have equal rights and full citizenship or not?" asked Sarkis Naoum, a Christian commentator in Beirut, Lebanon. A surge of sectarian violence in Cairo — 24 dead, more than 200 wounded and three churches in flames since President Hosni Mubarak's downfall — has turned Christian-Muslim tensions into one of the gravest threats to the revolution's stability. But it is also a pivotal test of Egypt's tolerance, pluralism and the rule of law. The revolution has empowered the majority but also opened new questions about the protection of minority rights like freedom of religion or expression as Islamist groups step forward to lay out their agendas and test their political might.

Around the region, Christians are also closely watching events in Syria, where as in Egypt Christians and other minorities received the protection of a secular dictator, Bashar al-Assad, now facing his own

popular uprising.

“The Copts are the crucial test case,” said Heba Morayef, a researcher with Human Rights Watch here, adding that facing off against “societal pressures” may in some ways be even harder than criticizing a dictator. “It is the next big battle.”

But so far, there is little encouragement in the debate over how to address the sectarian strife. Instead of searching for common ground, all sides are pointing fingers of blame while almost no one is addressing the underlying reasons for the strife, including a legal framework that treats Muslims and Christians differently.

Christians, who make up about 10 percent of the 80 million Egyptians, say the revolution has plunged them into uncharted territory. Suppressed or marginalized for six decades here, Islamists entering politics have rushed to defend an article of the Egyptian Constitution that declares Egypt a Muslim country that derives its laws from Islam. Christians and liberals say privately they abhor the provision, which was first added as a populist gesture by President Anwar el-Sadat. But the article is so popular among Muslims — and the meaning so vague — that even many liberals and Christians entering politics are reluctant to speak out against it, asking at most for slight modifications.

“Our position is that it should stay, but a clause should be added so that in personal issues non-Muslims are subject to the rules of their own religion,” said Naguib Sawiris, a secular-minded Christian tycoon who has started his own liberal party.

He would prefer to remove religion from the laws entirely the way Western separation of church and state does, he said, but that idea could not prevail in Egypt. “Islam doesn’t separate them,” he said.

The most common sparks for sectarian violence, however, come from Egyptian laws dating from the end of the colonial era. One imposes stricter regulations on building churches than on mosques. Christians often look to get around the restrictions by constructing “community centers” with altars and steeples — sometimes provoking Muslim accusations of deceit and Christian charges of discrimination.

The other statute is one the church supports, although not all its parishioners agree: it enforces the Coptic Church’s near-total ban on divorce, even while Egyptian laws on Muslim divorce have grown increasingly liberal.

Often, Christians who want to divorce convert to Islam — and try, after the divorce, to convert back. The law has spawned many rumors of sectarian “kidnappings” to abet or prevent such a conversion for some Coptic women. The rumors ignite most outbreaks of Muslim-Christian violence, including at least three riots since the revolution, and many other controversies. In Ms. Abdel Fattah’s case, the Cairo police said the account was fabricated, while Ms. Abdel Fattah’s mother said her daughter was too traumatized to speak to reporters.

But despite widespread recognition of the law’s role as a catalyst of sectarian violence, the idea that civic law should enforce religious morals is so deeply embedded here that almost no one is proposing to alter the rule.

“It is explosive,” said Hossam Bahgat, founder of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, one of the few groups that advocate changing the law to at least allow the choice of a civil, nonreligious marriage.

When Copts held a weeklong sit-in to demand equal legal treatment, many who attended nonetheless insisted on the preservation of separate, binding laws on Christian marriages. “So no one will be able to get around the religion,” said Yusef George, a 30-year-old businessman. A spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s largest Islamist group, said it, too, supported the rule.

Some blame their own church for depending too much on Mr. Mubarak. In a pattern common to Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, Coptic leaders cultivated the patronage of Egypt’s secular dictator, with Coptic Pope Shenouda III trading political support for favors and protection. As in Iraq, with the leader deposed, the Christians felt exposed.

“Coptic rights were reserved to be discussed between Mubarak and the pope,” said Mona Makram Ebeid, a Coptic scholar and former lawmaker who suspended her membership in the liberal Wafd party because its newspaper published the headline about Ms. Abdel Fattah, “and the Copts were left out of it completely.”

Church leaders, in turn, blame Islamic fundamentalists they say the revolution has emboldened. “They don’t want any Copts present in Egypt,” said Father Armia Adly, a spokesman for the church.

The Muslim Brotherhood, meanwhile, has named a Christian as deputy leader of its new political party. "We are calling for a civil state," said Essam el-Erian, a prominent leader of the Brotherhood, adding that the group hoped to promote laws derived from the elements of Islamic law common to other great religions, like "freedom of worship and faith, equality between people, and human rights and human dignity."

Still, many liberals argue the sectarian conflicts prove Egypt should establish a permanent "bill of rights" to protect religious and personal freedoms before holding elections that could give power to an Islamist majority. It would "remove the sense of angst that exists today in Egypt," said a spokeswoman for Mohamed ElBaradei, a liberal presidential contender.