

Dialogue and Politics in Egypt

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If we survey the history of Egyptian society and politics from the regime of President Sadat in the 1970s to the recent revolution of 2011, we note that Egypt's citizens have tended to entrust their personal security to societal groups, rather than expecting the state to guarantee their wellbeing. This has led sociologists and political scientists to describe Egyptian society as based on corporatism, clientelism, paternalism, and other concepts emphasizing informal networks. Such networks include both horizontal relationships, for example, among families, work communities, and local neighbourhoods, while others vertically link the elite of the country to the less fortunate through chains of dependency. This has influenced the way interfaith dialogue is addressed in Egypt.

During the 20th century, the Coptic Orthodox Church went through a revival and institutional strengthening. At first, the Church directed its energies against foreign missionaries who were trying to win over the Copts to their newly established Egyptian branches. But when the failed secularist experiments of the 1920s and 1950s left Egyptians disillusioned, many turned to their religious communities. This tendency continued and eventually Christians turned to their Church not only for their spiritual needs but also for help with education, job opportunities, housing, and medical treatment. And as tensions flared with Muslims, Copts turned to the tightly knit, nationally controlled institution as a safe haven.

This development paralleled similar tendencies among Muslims, who felt that the regime threatened rather than protected them. Instead of the state, they turned to local mosques and NGOs for vital services such as job opportunities, fair trials by customary judges, and loans – services that many felt a legitimate regime should have provided. In turn, religion became a hallmark of trustworthiness in politics, business, and general society; alongside Islamic hospitals and NGOs, one might also find Islamic nail polish, washing machines, and elevators playing verses of the Qur'an.

This meant that Egyptian society increasingly divided along religious

lines, especially among the poorer parts of society that desperately needed the opportunities provided by the local networks and the sense of dignity which the regime had denied them.

But it also meant that the regime tried to build its legitimacy in two particular ways. First, by co-opting these various local networks, and secondly by building relationships with individuals who could function as patrons for larger groups of people, thereby increasing the number of people loyal to the regime. A noteworthy variation on this pattern was the relationship of the former president Hosni Mubarak with the late Pope Shenouda III. Mubarak allowed the Copts to build and repair churches, and he provided bishops with direct access to governors during times of conflict between Muslims and Christians; in return, the Pope actively encouraged the Copts to support Mubarak. Such an arrangement was obvious during the 2005 elections.

As I interviewed Muslims and Christians engaged in dialogue efforts in Egypt, it became obvious to me how the above-described features of society had crystallised into a form of dialogue called 'official dialogue'. Various dignitaries including state officials, Azharite sheikhs, and Coptic clergy met together during religious celebrations and after sectarian incidents to discuss not religious matters but rather maintaining national unity with the purpose of upholding their 'social contract'. These meetings took place not only among the high officials, but also among local notables in the villages and suburbs. This form of dialogue publicly manifested unity between Muslims and Christians through the representative effect of the leaders. The positive effect on the people was obvious when people who never attended these meetings told me: 'Muslims and Christians go and visit each other in their churches and mosques. There are no problems'.

But by 2010, many people were disillusioned with the official dialogue, as they felt that it did little to help ameliorate the growing tension between Muslims and Christians. One of the Muslims I interviewed ironically called these dialogue meetings 'official nonsense'. Christians also grew discontented with the ties between

the Church leadership and the state officials, and many felt that the Pope was not critical enough towards the regime's neglect of social justice and its refusal to prosecute Muslims who attacked Christians.

Also, official dialogue not only tied some groups of society closer together, but also defined others as outside the politically 'legitimate' circle. This was the case with the Muslim Brotherhood, the only real political opposition to the Mubarak regime, who built their popularity with the people by focussing on social justice and religious piety. Many of the groups not co-opted by the regime turned to the local networks often centred on the mosques. People from these networks with political aspirations often turned to the Muslim Brotherhood to realise their ambitions.

After the revolution in 2011, the pre-revolutionary influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian society paid dividends as they won the elections. During the revolution, the aim of the demonstrators was to topple President Mubarak, and after that had been accomplished, to diminish the influence of the military. But they gave very little focus to the clientelist structures that make democracy difficult to achieve, and there are already indications that the Muslim Brotherhood will replicate Mubarak's clientelist approach. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and representatives of the armed forces accepted the invitation of the late Coptic pope to participate in the Christmas celebrations in 2012, and that same year, a supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood visited the Coptic Cathedral for the first time. Both the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Coptic Orthodox Church appear to be continuing the pre-revolutionary approach to official dialogue. Official dialogue does have some positive effect, as noted above, but it is also obvious that it is supporting the clientelist approach to Egyptian politics, as well as the groups in power in government and in the church.

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