

Egyptian Christians Back to Square One Ahead of Election

After a year of new forms of political engagement, why do Copts still face the same 'bitter choice' of old regime vs. Islamists?

Jayson Casper, *Christianity Today*, 29 May 2012



Despite the best efforts of Christian and Muslim revolutionaries, the first free presidential election in Egypt's history has resulted in an all-too-familiar choice: old regime vs. Islamists. The nation's Supreme Presidential Electoral Commission confirmed on Monday that the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsy advanced to the run-off election against Ahmed Shafik, former president Hosni Mubarak's last-ditch appointee as prime minister during the revolution's early days. Both candidates gathered nearly 25 percent of the vote. Only a few percentage points behind was Hamdeen Sabbahi, whose late surge as the revolutionary choice was not enough to displace Egypt's traditional combatants.

The majority of Copts voted for Shafik, according to Mina el-Badry, an evangelical pastor in Upper Egypt. "Not from love, but to oppose the Islamists," he said, "because [Shafik] is from the army and will know how to run the transition, and because he is clear and firm in his word and decision."

Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of Coptic newspaper *Watani*, also sees the necessity of Christians supporting Shafik. "The revolution is now in the hands of political Islam," he said, "and Copts must make a bitter choice to support the civil state."

Yet many Copts wonder why this bitter choice has returned.

Since the revolution began in January 2011, Egyptian Christians have attempted many new forms of political engagement. Many supported the campaign of Abdel Munim Abul Futuh, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood whose centrist campaign sought to bridge the gap between Islamists and liberals. His final share of the tally, however, came up short at 17 percent.

Another effort was led by Bassem Victor, a Coptic activist dedicated to reconciling Christians and Salafis, those ultra-conservative Muslims intent on applying Shari'ah law. He questions, however, the overall scale of new political engagement by Copts.

"Copts do not participate in society-building activities. Even their presence in Tahrir was weak," he said. "They stay in their homes and in their churches until something touches their community, then they go separate from others to Maspero."

The critique of Coptic isolation is the same charge made against Copts prior to the revolution. Yet by mentioning Maspero, Victor highlights a significant Coptic effort at engagement. Responding to attacks against Copts and the burning of several churches, young activists formed the Maspero Youth Union. In one of the bloodiest days of the political transition, more than 20 Copts were killed by the military during a peaceful demonstration last October. Victor criticizes Copts for going to Maspero rather than Tahrir, which represented the unity of the revolution across all religious lines. Yet for Sidhom, Coptic withdrawal was understandable.

"The Copts left Tahrir first because they believed the revolution succeeded by toppling Mubarak. Then they increasingly went to Maspero because they did not feel welcome any longer as political Islam came to dominate," he said. "My colleagues were there every Friday, both professionally and in spirit. They were hurt and horrified by the speeches the Muslim Brotherhood issued from their separate stage."

Fearing an Islamist triumph, murmurs from the Coptic street anticipate immigration to the West. Yet this must be rejected, says Ramez Atallah, director of the Bible Society of Egypt. "The books of the Bible were written under circumstances much worse than what we can expect from the coming years," he said. "If people are thinking about leaving Egypt, it suggests they are less committed to their faith—as well as to Egypt."

Regardless, Rami Kamel, a founding member of the Maspero Youth Union, remains hopeful despite the polarizing presidential election.

"Yes, the choices are the same," he said. "But the changes that have affected the equation are considerable. These will carry through to the next election."

Indeed, three-quarters of the electorate rejected the old regime, and three-quarters rejected the Muslim Brotherhood. Copts—like all Egyptians—are back at square one for the moment, but their future has never been more revolutionary.

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