

Egyptian Christians urged to work for equal rights in post-Mubarak government

By Alan Holdren, BBC News Middle East

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12407793>



Protestors celebrate in Tahrir Square. Credit: Maggie Osama

Rome, Italy, Feb 14, 2011 / 02:16 pm (CNA/EWTN News).- Christians need to cooperate in creating Egypt's new government to ensure that all of the nation's citizens are treated as equals, according to Jesuit Fr. Samir Khalil Samir

Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's president for nearly 30 years, stepped down on Feb. 11 due to pressure from demonstrators that had occupied Cairo's central Tahrir Square for 18 days.

Fr. Samir, an Egyptian expert in Islam and adviser to the Church on Muslim-Christian relations, noted the resignation of the president was the will of the people but said that it is the next step that really counts.

Mubarak's government catered to the wealthy classes for three decades, "what we need now is something to help people to live a little more humanly," Fr. Samir told CNA over the phone after the announcement.

"Maybe after this, after having passed through an authoritarian regime, people will really try to do something more democratic," he said.

He was encouraged by the fact that the protests sprang from the people. He marveled that they were "moderate" and included all ranks and religions in society.

"Christians and Muslims were together. We didn't have any extreme appeal to Islam. Also, we didn't have any aggression against Israel or the U.S., any flag burned," he said with apparent surprise.

The result is "a new hope for Egypt," he said.

What is most important now, he explained, is that the reformed constitution brings with it equality for all people, Christians and Muslims.

He pointed to recent signs of hope that show that winds of change were already in place for this in society. A local magazine released a new 22-point project written up by moderate Islamic intellectuals on Jan. 24. It includes a provision that calls for a distinction to be made between state and religion.

In his New Year's Day address, ex-President Mubarak referred twice to development towards a "civil society" –the Egyptian pseudonym for a separation of church and state.

That's not to say that people don't expect an "Islamic trend" in the new government, said Fr. Samir. It would be a "normal" occurrence in Egypt, where 90 percent of the population is Muslim.

A "secular" government like that in Lebanon is preferable to one that is completely "one-sided," he said. He is not expecting religion to be absent from the debate in a country where all people, Muslims and Christians, are very religious.

He expects the Muslim Brotherhood to attempt to exert its influence on society as they often have, but he said that their influence has been widely overestimated.

"Usually they 'Islamize' more external aspects, like the veil and what you can see," said Fr. Samir. "It could happen, we are used to it."

They will work to convince people that men and women should not work together, should dress in a certain style and that some jobs are not appropriate for women. "But, they cannot put a law (in place) for that," he said.

Egyptian society, he said, "has made an evolution to distinguish between morality and law."

And, he mentioned, the moderation of the group in recent years in Egypt shows signs "that the Muslim Brotherhood is also going this way."

The Brotherhood represents a similar threat to Egypt as "aggressive atheists" do to the West, he said.

The key, he added, is not to fear Muslims. Christians have to work together to convince them that "the true religion is something in your heart and not in your appearance - in your clothes and in your dress," he said. "You can be a very good Muslim and not have the appearance of a Muslim, and you can be a very good Muslim having a Western culture."

"All of us Christians, but also open-minded Muslims, have to spread this approach to religion," he said.

Nevertheless, the "threat of Islamization ... exists always" in the Egypt where there is such a large-percentage Muslim population, said Fr. Samir.

The major concern for Christians at this point is ensuring equality, especially in three major areas, according to the Jesuit priest. The first is equality in the job market, "that there will not be a preference for a Muslim over a Christian."

In addition, Christians should be allowed to obtain building permits for churches as easily as their fellow citizens do for mosques. A law from the late 1800s has made it very difficult for Christians to build until now.

The third point was that of the liberty of conscience. Egyptians should be free to convert from Christianity to Islam and vice versa with no threat of harm against the person who converted, he said.

Those may be mostly "symbolic" points in nature - as there are not many people who seek to convert -but "at least it means we recognize the rights of conscience which is over the tradition or over the religion.

"The main point is this: that we are all under the same rule," he said.

Egyptians had made the "small step" of being able to speak more freely about equality in recent years, he said, "and if, on the occasion of this small revolution, we obtain something more, it's good."

Christians, he said, must be "careful" to act in the process of cultural development and politics, to make themselves present in society rather than holding themselves up in "ghettos."

"Christians must be very much involved in the society, in the political and social and economic world of the nation," said Fr. Samir.

They have a role in society and sometimes they do not take it up because of fear of Islam, he explained.

It is essential to respond with honesty and truth, said Fr. Samir. "I have to say what I have to say, and if something, someone is saying something wrong against Christianity, I have to correct it. And if I'm saying something wrong I have to agree that the other side corrects me."

In the previous government, Christian officials were appointed by the president because in popular elections they did not stand a chance.

The key, he said, is that all are given the same chance and that the best people are placed in the positions they deserve.