

Challenges for Pope Tawadros II

By Cornelis Hulsman, Arab-West Report, 4 November 2012.

Article summary:

The choice today of Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II is of major importance for church-state relations in the coming years.

Article full text:

With the remaining five last candidates for the papacy it was already clear that the Church would not have a highly politicized pope as had been the case with Pope Shenouda III, who early in his reign had clashed with President Anwar al-Sadāt. In later years, Pope Shenouda also clashed with President Husnī Mubārak on issues of conversion with such cases as Wafā' Costantine and over church building.

Pope Shenouda was highly charismatic, but also authoritarian and assertive, which at times has led to tensions, both inside and outside the Coptic Orthodox Church. On March 17, the day Pope Shenouda passed away, I wrote a background about him.

Of course, no pope can avoid politics but if tensions occur how are they addressed? Many years ago Father Matta al-Meskeen wrote a book on the separation of church and state. Hopefully Pope Tawadros will work on lifting the Church up spiritually while leaving politics to Coptic laymen.

The challenges for the new pope are substantial:

Egyptian politics is dominated by Islamists and it is not in the interest of a church representing perhaps six percent of the population to engage in confrontations with Islamists. At the same time, the Church must protect its believers through teaching, addressing poverty and social needs.

It is obvious in talks with bishops that many do not have contact with Islamist leaders. That is, to a large extent, the result of the divide and rule policy of the old regime that discouraged such contact from taking place. Now that Islamists are in power it would be wrong not to engage in dialogue with Islamist leaders, both on a national level and for each bishop on the level of his diocese.

The Constitutional Assembly is working on forming a new constitution. Christians have played a role in these discussions. The new constitution is expected to be ready very soon, but this is only the start of further legal discussions in which it is important that Christians and Muslims cooperate.

Of course conversions of Christians, mainly girls, to Islam remains a problem for the Church. The response is not in claiming forced conversions (which the Church has never done, but

individual Christians have), but understanding the reasons for conversions and addressing those issues. At the same time it is of course justified to ask Egyptian authorities to provide transparency in any conversion procedure. That could reduce much of the tension.

Church building will remain important. This necessitates clear and fair church-building regulations, but also a strong sense of realism on the side of Christians. Very often exaggerated claims have been made about the number of Christians in Egypt, which was often used in arguments to obtain more permits for church building. On the other hand, the state also needs to be transparent in showing Christian leaders how their figures have been obtained.

Many youth have become disillusioned about church leadership, some wanting more involvement and influence. It is certainly not correct to blame Coptic leadership only. The Egyptian Revolution has also had an impact on Coptic youth; they have become more assertive and the Church will need to address this.

Many hundreds of thousands of Copts have emigrated during the reign of Pope Shenouda to countries primarily in the West. They are, in turn, often not well-informed about tensions taking place in Egypt, learning of them through media and political activists of all kind. This has resulted in responses from Coptic migrants that have had negative effects on Christians in Egypt.

Egypt is going through a period of great economic difficulties. This affects both Christians and Muslims. It is important that Muslims and Christians cooperate in addressing the needs of Egypt.

The new pope will need the prayer of all of the faithful. He will need the support of the Holy Synod and Coptic laymen. He will also need full cooperation with the state and all people of good will.

May God bless Pope Tawadros II!