



## Copts' uncertain future By William Dalrymple

Monday's violence in Cairo marks an ominous development in the story of Egypt's unfinished revolution. It is very bad news for several reasons. First, it demonstrates more starkly than ever the dubious role being played by the army.

Eyewitness reports are clear that it was firing by the army, followed by the repeated crushing of unarmed demonstrators by an armoured car that turned a peaceful demonstration for justice into a violent altercation that left 24 people dead. Twitter and Face book networks are alive with conspiracy theorists speculating whether this is the army looking for excuses to delay the elections, or just clumsy crowd control by heavy-handed officers, but it marks a more direct face-off between army and demonstrators than we have seen for several months.

More specifically, the violence is very bad news for Egypt's beleaguered Coptic minority — the ancient Christian community that makes up between 10 and 15 per cent of a population of 82 million, and is by far the largest Christian community in the region. The Copts stand to lose more than any other group in Egypt's current drift, and now face an uncertain future with a wide spectrum of possible outcomes, from a liberal democracy to an Islamic republic, or most likely of all, a continuation of army rule with different window-dressing.

That sectarian violence was likely to follow the end of Mubarak's regime was something the Copts have been fearing for decades. Three years ago I attended workshops run by the Coptic newspaper editor Youssef Sidhom, intended to prepare his people for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sidhom, editor of *Watani*, Egypt's leading Coptic newspaper, believed that dialogue between the two faiths was a pressing necessity and that the Copts would have to learn to live with the Islamists and reach an accommodation with a political grouping they have long feared.

The Copts have long suffered petty discrimination. But the revival of the Islamists over the last few years made the Copts' position more uneasy, and their prospects more uncertain, than they had been for centuries. Throughout the 1990s the Copts, especially in upper Egypt, were targeted by the Islamist guerillas of the *Gama'a Islamiyya*. Since then, the *Gama'a* have renounced violence, and the Islamists concentrated on reaching power through the ballot box, something the Mubarak regime's passive policy towards Salafism encouraged. The Copts reacted by retreating ever deeper into a sectarian laager, further polarizing the country. A generation ago, most Egyptians chose names for their children which could be either Christian or Muslim, such as Karim or Adel. Now they tend to give their children names such Mohammed or Girgis (George) that define their sectarian affiliation.

Likewise, the adoption of the hijab by Muslim women has left Coptic women exposed and sometimes subject to threats and abuse. In the face of growing polarization and discrimination, the Copts have tended to form their own schools and social clubs, keeping their distance from the Muslim majority. This is something the Coptic clergy — every bit as conservative as their Muslim counterparts — have often encouraged.

At the same time, the Copts have seen their political influence slowly diminish: under Mubarak's last government there was still one Coptic provincial governor and two Coptic ministers. But in contrast to the situation at the time of Nasser and Sadat, no senior policemen are Copts, nor judges, nor university vice chancellors, nor military generals. — *The Guardian*, London.

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