

AT LARGE

What Kind of Revolution?

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Ugly reality has dashed the high hopes of the "Arab Spring." Although the dream of democratic reform lives on, only Tunisia appears on course. In Egypt, the fall of Hosni Mubarak has encouraged religious intolerance and persecution, especially against the Coptic Christian community.

Once a great civilization, Egypt long ago turned into an impoverished backwater. Only a large population and strategic location today deliver geopolitical importance. Hosni Mubarak ruled for three decades, but under him the Egyptian people enjoyed neither prosperity nor liberty. In fact, Mubarak was exhibit A for America's foreign policy conundrum: stability or democracy? He held the Muslim Brotherhood in check, maintained a cold peace with Israel, and kept the Suez Canal open. For that he was richly rewarded with tens of billions in "foreign aid," which he used to build an authoritarian kleptocracy -- one that treated the needs of most Egyptians as an afterthought. Washington occasionally pushed for reform, but never too hard, lest stability be sacrificed.

Mubarak counted among his victims the Coptic Christians, who make up around ten percent of the population. They predate Islam, but today are a disadvantaged and increasingly threatened minority. Rather like Saddam Hussein and the Assad family, Mubarak seemingly cared little for religion. However, he left more room for Islamic extremists to act and compete for political support by victimizing religious minorities.

While the "government does not actively persecute or repress Christians, a prejudicial legal framework has created a permissive environment that allows Egyptian officials and private individuals to discriminate against Christians freely and with impunity," noted Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The U.S. State Department called the status of religious liberty in Egypt "poor." State added that Christians and Baha'is faced "personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and their ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship."

Moreover, the regime "sometimes arrested, detained, and harassed" those "whose beliefs and/or practices it deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities it alleged to jeopardize communal harmony." Government-controlled media and government-funded mosques encourage violence. The authorities do little to stop the kidnapping of young Coptic girls, who then are forced to marry Muslims.

Converts are at particular risk. Despite some recent progress, the government traditionally refused to provide new identity documents to converts as well as Baha'is. Worse, noted William Inboden of the Strauss Center for International Security and Law, "Egyptian converts from Islam to Christianity, though very few in number, suffered particularly heinous treatment -- including imprisonment and sadistic torture."

Equally disturbing, noted the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians remained high." But the Mubarak government rarely punished the attackers. Indeed, International Christian Concern noted that it was common for the government to arrest "Coptic victims alongside the perpetrators of the violence."

Even when the Copts did not end up behind bars, they did not receive justice. State explained that the Mubarak government sponsored "informal reconciliation sessions" which "generally prevented the criminal prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts, precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution, and contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults."

No surprise, failing to exact a penalty for murder and mayhem has led to more murder and mayhem -- or what the Hudson Institute's Nina Shea called "pogroms and acts of terror." The failure to punish the perpetrators, complained the Commission, "continued to foster a climate of impunity, making further violence likely." Even more emphatic was Dina Guiguis of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who told a recent congressional hearing that "the Egyptian regime is fully responsible for creating the fertile ground on which pernicious and egregious sectarian violence has become routine."

Unfortunately, those who hoped the Egyptian revolution would better protect Christians and other religious minorities have been disappointed. To the contrary, violent attacks on Copts have been increasing.

As of last month 24 Christians had been killed, more than 200 had been injured, and three churches had been destroyed. Muslim mobs have beset Coptic churches, businesses, and homes. Well-armed thugs also attacked Christians who were protesting against the forgoing attacks.

No surprise, then, that few perpetrators have been arrested, let alone imprisoned. Noted Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute: "as under Mubarak, the authorities' refusal to punish attacks on Christians has led to more attacks." The army even assaulted two Coptic monasteries, supposedly to enforce discriminatory zoning laws (which prohibited walls erected for protection from attacks).

Overall, the transition regime's record is dismal. Noted the Commission: "Since February 11, military and security forces reportedly have used excessive force and live ammunition targeting Christian places of worship and Christian demonstrators. Implementation of previous court rulings -- related to granting official identity documents to Baha'is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for Christian converts -- continues to lag. In addition, the government has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media."

Islamic extremists are responsible for what increasingly looks to be a campaign of intimidation. The World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission explained that the attacks were

"mostly incited by conservative Salafi Muslims," who are using violence to mobilize Islamist support. Salafis also led opposition to the choice of a Christian to be governor of the Qena Governorate, leading to a suspension of the appointment, even though his predecessor was a Christian. Traditionally, the Salafis had remained aloof from politics, but no longer. Alas, they make the Muslim Brotherhood appear moderate.

Nina Shea fears "what we're seeing in Egypt today -- namely, a reinvigorated effort by some of the country's more radical Islamists to establish Egypt's identity as a thoroughly Islamicized and Arabicized state." The Copts "are the most visible bloc standing in the way of impatient jihadists and violent Salafis," who therefore are accelerating their attacks.

The future looks increasingly bleak. Although there has been some pushback -- Muslims rallied to help rebuild one of the destroyed churches -- the vast majority of Egyptians express intolerance towards minority faiths. And Copts, as well as other Christians, are feeling the pressure.

The Wall Street Journal entitled one article: "As Islamists Flex Muscle, Egypt's Christians Despair." It quoted Ayman Anwar Mitri, who was attacked by Islamists who cut off an ear and burned his apartment: "they kept saying: 'We won't leave any Christians in this country'." No one was punished for the assault. One Salafi leader warned ominously: "Only those Christians who did something wrong should be fearful." Mitri said simply: "Here, there is a war against the Copts."

Shea worries about "a mass exodus" of Copts from Egypt if existing trends continue. In fact, the Egyptian media has reported an upsurge in Copts seeking to emigrate. Coptic human rights lawyer Naguib Gabriel said: "They are insisting on leaving Egypt because the risks of staying here are too great." Iraq offers an ugly precedent, with the practical destruction of the large historic Christian community, which also precedes Islam. Syria has become the refuge for many Iraqi exiles, who fear that the overthrow of Bashar Assad could unleash similar violence there. The status of Christians and other religious minorities is growing ever more precarious throughout the Arab and broader Islamic world.

For the first time the USCIRF recommended that Egypt be designated a Country of Particular Concern, which, if adopted by State, could lead to a variety of penalties. Still, Washington's influence inevitably is limited. The Obama administration had no idea how to respond to Egypt's upheaval, haphazardly offering support for Mubarak before exhibiting enthusiasm for the revolution -- and its ever-changing stance had no effect on events on the street in any case.

Nevertheless, religious liberty should be part of the U.S. government's official dialogue with existing regimes and revolutionary forces alike. Religious freedom is a bedrock form of human rights. This basic freedom of conscience acts as the proverbial canary in the mine. If peoples and governments are not willing to respect religious minorities, they are unlikely to tolerate political opponents. Religious extremism also acts as an efficient incubator for violence, including terrorism, as is increasingly evident in Pakistan. "There is no political vision to deal with these types of sectarian clashes," admitted Emad Gad of the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

While Washington cannot impose tolerance on the new Egypt, American officials can point to the danger posed by virulent Islamists to that nation's future. If the radicals grow in influence, they

are likely to sweep away more than the vulnerable Coptic population. They might take down the new political system, with dangerous consequences for Egypt and beyond. As Georgetown's Thomas Farr testified before Congress last month: "There will be no real freedom in Egypt -- period -- and there will be no real stability in Egypt -- period -- unless there is full religious freedom in Egypt, not only for its Coptic minority but also for moderate and reformist Muslim voices."

The Arab Spring risks turning into the Islamist Winter. The willingness to safeguard religious liberty has become a proxy for measuring the impact of the ongoing revolution. As go the Copts may ultimately go the rest of the Middle East.

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