Christians Navigating through Middle East Turbulences: the Case of the Copts in Egypt

Alessia Melcangi and Paolo Maggiolini

The aim of the chapter is to offer a dynamic account of the Christian presence within the Middle East, of its contribution to and position in the contemporary history of the region. In this regard, the historical vicissitudes of the Coptic community will be helpful to focus on the challenges, issues and ambitions that have influenced Christians' history in the region from the beginning of the contemporary state- and nation-building process in the contemporary Middle East until today.

In the first part, the chapter will focus on the multi-vocal dimension of the Christian presence in the Middle East, a feature that needs to be taken into account to fully understand its position and condition within the different States in the region. In the second part, the chapter will analyze the dynamics of sectarian violence against and persecution of Christians in the Middle East. In particular, it will focus on contemporary Egypt from the 1950s until the 2011 uprisings, taking the specific case of the Egyptian Christian Copts as a case study. In recent years, communalism has inflamed Egypt, weakening national cohesiveness and unity.

1 The Multi-vocal Christian Presence in Today's Middle East

The history of Christians in the contemporary Middle East is an account that speaks with multiple languages and many vocabularies, sketching a number of multifarious images of their present and future condition in the region. These representations can be either rich and many-branched or monolithic and axiomatic.

If one looks at the perspectives and orientations through which Christians in the region have been considered and narrated, most of the representations can be enclosed within a continuum defined by two only apparently contradictory but, in reality, often complementary discourses. These poles can be briefly summarized according to the following formulations and discourses.

A first discourse tends to approach Christians as a homogenous subject, without showing specific interest in exploring local, regional or denominational distinctions (Makari, 2014). Accordingly, such an outlook often points out that the common features of their presence in today's Middle East are the fragility of their condition and their almost inevitable emigration. At the heart of such an understanding one can find the implicit idea that, because of their faith, Christians cannot fully integrate into a socio-political fabric inspired by Islam, unless by accepting to be a sort of second-class citizen. This image is a product of a more general description of the Middle East as an anarchic and radical space (Malak, Salem, 2015; Korany, 2015). This perception had matured already in the 19th century, but has consolidated since the 1970s with the Islamization of Middle Eastern politics and public discourse (Robson, 2011). Although such a perspective can be substantiated by concrete evidence, it can pose the risk of essentializing and stereotyping their condition through their sufferings and challenges. And so the demise of most of the Arab uprisings' promises and the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have increased such an understanding. In reality, the decline of Christians' presence is not a phenomenon of today. It began at the turn of the 20th century, when Christians represented 14% of the region's population (7 million) (Johnson, Zurlo, 2015). Since then, emigration and a declining birth-rate progressively eroded their numbers, but it was by the mid-1970s that the pace of this dynamic considerably accelerated. In the 1970s, Christians had already decreased to 7% (12 million in 1975) and today they are 5% (25 million in 2015). In 2050, they will be likely 25 million, namely 3% of the population (Johnson, Zurlo, 2015). While Egypt continues to have the largest Christian population in the region (8 million), countries such as Iraq have witnessed a dramatic decline in their number. First the 2006 civil war and then the emergence of the Islamic State tragically accelerated the pace of their decline. At the end of 2013, from a population of more than a million, Christians in Iraq were estimated to be no more than 300,000 to 500,000, with approximately 80% of their religious establishments destroyed or damaged and abandoned (Salloum, 2013). Their decline is almost turning into annihilation. Such an outlook is only partially mitigated by the fact that the Christian population is increasing in countries such as Saudi Arabia (4%), Kuwait (10%) or the United Arab Emirates (14%). In fact, this trend is fostered by the arrival of a significant number of Christian migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia (Johnson, Zurlo, 2015). Therefore, it does not directly affect the scope of the historic Churches of the Middle East.

Nevertheless, numbers alone cannot explain the various points of tensions that affect the situation of Christians in today's Middle East. They are not able to fully communicate their diverse issues and approaches to the ongoing

regional instability. In fact, by making their sufferings and demographic decreases the main if not the sole parameter for understanding their condition and presence, this discourse risks overlooking the complexity of the challenges and positions at stake. While Christian leaderships loudly exhort the international community to recognize their plight, which is real and evident, they also resist being simply portrayed as a detached or passive minority distinct from the rest of the social fabric of the countries where they live, condemned to surrender by remaining at the margins or heading abroad (Rowe, 2014). Such a position is particularly clear with the case of Christians in Iraq or Egypt.

Without underestimating Christians' present challenges and fragility, a second discourse tends to look at Christians in the region according to their functional potential (McGahern, 2012). Accordingly, since they have played a central role in the history of the modern Middle East as intellectual vanguards of Arabism and cultural and spiritual bridges between the West and the East, today Christians can perform a new positive role in the region. Because they are subjects or victims and not a direct part of present struggles, they can serve today's Middle East by aiding in the mediation of a resolution to the ongoing conflicts. While such an understanding tries to project a creative role for Christians in the Middle East, it encages them within a sort of "identity and role syndrome" (Kattan, 2012: 51). Although it recognizes an agency to them, such an ideal type of discourse tends to evaluate their presence according to their capacity to perform a role. In essence, they become compelled to perform a sort of recurring duty of persuading their Muslim neighbors of the benefits and usefulness of their presence in the region. Such an understanding risks essentializing Christians in the Middle East by removing them from the heart of the ongoing conflicts or considering only what they can offer to both the West and the East. This approach is frequently employed in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and was proposed again in Iraq after 2003. In this framework, Christians' passive role is only apparently redeemed, while their identity and suffering risk being implicitly denied, becoming secondary to the roles of mediator and/or of a bridge between cultures and civilizations. It is not surprising that local Christian communities have frequently resisted this functionalist discourse, advocating for full recognition of their right to live in the region and to be recognized as full citizens in the different Middle Eastern States without being compelled to prove their values and the "profitability" of their presence. As said above regarding the first discourse, this is not to negate that Christians have such potential and role to play, but their presence should be explored, recognizing them as an integral part of the ongoing conflicts and crises with full rights to have a voice beyond what they can offer. This holds particularly true today when the present turbulences in the region are fostered

by disagreements and conflicts between Muslims that do not *per se*, or always, result in attacks against Christians because of their faiths or that configure for them a specific role to play. They are integrally part of the ongoing conflicts and crises not simply because they have been targeted and have suffered from the conflict, but because the issues at stake concern the nature of the State, the notion of rights and duties, the concept of public space and that of welfare from which the Christians should not be excluded.

In essence, while both discourses clearly point out critical factors and elements for understating the present challenges to Christians' presence in today's Middle East, they need to be cautiously endorsed to avoid the risk of misreading Christians' attitudes, overlooking their behaviors and strategies. On the one hand, the sole focus on their sufferings denies Christians agency. On the other, the sole acknowledgment to Christians of a role as mediators in conflicts and crises deprives them of the right to be recognized as a full part of and voice in the ongoing dynamics beyond the function that they can perform.

Now looking at the multiple landscapes which describe and distinguish the diverse configurations of Christians' presence in the Middle East, it is important to recognize that Christians' multi-vocal character implies that each voice possesses a distinctive ecclesiastical identity, biography and local history to tell.

In this framework, Christian multi-vocality can be variously described and appreciated. On the one hand, it can be approached by focusing on the diverse stances adopted by Christians in the Middle East both in local and regional politics and in their relationship with the West. It can be explored by considering two distinct "orientations", "outlooks" or "discourses" developed by Christians in the Middle East since the turn of the 20th century. Labelled by Sabra as "Arab Christian" and "Eastern Christian" outlooks (Sabra, 2006: 44), these two perspectives define a sort of wide continuum of shifting and evolving positions portraying the different Christians' understandings of their role and position within the region. Arab Christian orientation tends to attach great value to Arab culture and identity, including Islamic civilization. This position has been openly supported by intellectuals such as Michel 'Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'ath party, but also by various Christian personalities in Iraq and the Palestinian territories. In this framework, although is not the rule, the relationship with the West can sometimes be uneasy and critical with the specific aim of countering the image of Middle Eastern Christians as the natural allies of the West or, worse, as one of its fifth columns in the region because of their faith. Eastern Christian orientation extends their sight beyond the limits of the Arab dimension with the aim of embracing the multiple expressions of Christianity in the Middle East, thus including all non-Arab Christian communities, such as

the Armenians or Assyrians. In doing so, the word “Eastern” posits a distance from Islam and Islamic culture and civilization as well as from the Arab cultural milieu (Sabra, 2006). Such a distance can vary in its lengths, but this orientation expresses a general agreement on the need to prioritize Christian identity and establish a solid relationship with the West for the sake of protecting local Christian communities.

Therefore, Arab Christian orientations evidently support the idea that their distinct religious affiliation does not contradict their solid roots in Arab culture (for instance, the Christians in Palestine and Jordan). Eastern Christian perspectives can take on different forms. Coalescing religious and ethno-linguistic features to stand out from the majoritarian Arab milieu, it can manifest a local patriotic or national sense of belonging (such as the Copts in Egypt) or an autonomous ethno-nationalist pride (such as the Assyrians in Iraq and the Maronites with the Phoenician ideal in Lebanon). Although such orientations should be considered ideal types, they are useful in exploring the different Christians positions towards local politics and/or understanding their choice to emigrate, going beyond the simple category of fragile minority and persecuted subjects and appreciating their dynamism.

On the other hand, Christians’ multi-vocality can be described by considering how it locally changes, intertwining the ecclesiastical, community and ethno-linguistic dimensions. It can also be understood on the basis of how Christian demography is unevenly distributed within the different Middle Eastern States, with some communities and Churches strongly concentrated within specific countries while others are distinctive for being essentially disseminated or “trans-boundary”. The socio-economic factor is of equal importance in understanding their position within a specific country.

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian contexts, the manifold implication of Christians’ trans-boundary presence speaks out *per se*. While being 2% of the population both in Israel and under the Palestinian National Authority, Christians are divided between the jurisdictions of three Patriarchates (Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Latin), five archbishops (the Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian) and two Reformed bishoprics (Anglican and Lutheran). In the case of the Latin and Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, these two ecclesiastical institutions exert their authority over most of the Christians in Jordan. Although the vast majority of Christians in Israel-Palestine are Arab natives – with the exception of foreigners and Hebrew-speaking Christians (both Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox) in Israel – this plurality exists in a very fragmented landscape with each ecclesiastical institution having distinct orientations and identities (O’Mahony, 1999). Christians in the Israeli-Palestinian context clearly show how multi-vocality can also mean

ecclesial fragmentation (O'Mahony, 2005); a condition that Christian religious leaderships seek to confront by fostering ecumenical dialogue. This is a challenge for both Christians in the Middle East and to one's searching for a univocal explanation of their position in daily politics and society. Furthermore, Christians in Israeli-Palestinian territories are part of two different political fields in conflict. While they are a minority in both contexts, their contextual socio-political positions significantly change. Conflict and contextual minority conditions increase the complexity of their positioning, presenting considerable divergences in their outlooks and orientations. For those living in Israel, Christians as well as Muslims are faced with all the challenges of being part of the Arab speaking minority in a non-Arab country, especially after the recent developments in promoting the Jewish character of Israel, epitomized by the removal of Arabic as an official language of the country. This pressure is amplified by ongoing conflict and the tension between different designations (Arab-speaking minority, non-Muslim and non-Jewish religious minority) and in their relationship with their Palestinian brethren living under the Palestinian National Authority. Moreover, their position is challenged by the increasing role that religion plays in local politics, which tends to single out Christians as irrelevant if not for their international networks, marginalizing or removing their presence in a confrontation that predominantly involves Jews and Muslims. Regarding the case of the Palestinian territory, Christians have been directly part of the Palestinian national movement since the beginning, supporting the idea of an independent secular Palestinian State to achieve the status of full citizens as Arab and Palestinian. They have both participated in secular political platforms and developed new understandings of their presence and role as a non-Muslim religious community integrally part of the Palestinian nation. At the same time, the growing influence of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad has posed a challenge to such a commitment (Andezian, 2008). The Islamization of local politics and of the national resistance keeps on posing the risk of marginalizing their role, engaging them within the sole dimension of religious minority.

On the other hand, the case of Iraq offers useful insight to appreciate the different outlooks that Christians can promote in a situation of relative concentration within a single country. The Christian landscape in Iraq (1% of the population) (Johnson, Zurlo, 2015) appears fragmented and multi-vocal as it is within the other Middle Eastern countries. Christians are divided between the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Chaldean Catholics, the Church of the East (ecclesiastically also known as the Assyrian Church of the East), and finally Latin (Roman Catholic) and Reformed communities (O'Mahony, 2004). In this framework, Assyrians and Chaldeans differ in their positions towards the idea

of Iraq and thus in regard to how they conceive of their presence in the country (Zubaida, 2002). Their outlooks are deeply grounded in the history of the modern Middle East since the turn of the 20th century; orientations and positions that have been accentuated even more after the 2006 civil war and the emergence of the Islamic State. The Chaldean Church have always been devoted to developing Christian minority status as a resource for protecting the community and, at the same time, positioning it as an integral part of the wider Iraqi social fabric. Accordingly, they concentrate on avoiding that their minority status could be turned into political marginalization. On the other hand, the Assyrians have always sought to reunite local Christians to demonstrate an ethnic-linguistic identity distinct from that of an Arab Iraqi. In this framework, the recognition of ethnic-linguistic minority status or achievement of the right to autonomy in a localized province within the country was considered necessary to confirm their own political dignity and rights as a distinct nation. Such divergences between Chaldeans and Assyrians have thus directly influenced their stances towards Baghdad, dividing local Christians between integrational and separatist or autonomist orientations (Maggiolini, 2018). In the case of the Assyrians, this attitude has come at a tragic cost. Persecution and open confrontation by the central authorities have pushed them out of the country, consolidating in their diaspora a strong sense of uniqueness.

Finally, similarity in the trajectories of the Assyrians, Maronites and Copts offers another two important examples of the complexity of being both Christians and part of the Middle East. Their concentration in territories that are homelands of their community and original seats of their Churches has developed a solid relationship with these contexts so that they perceive their presence and existence as the most vivid and authentic expression of the history, tradition and thus identity of their countries (McCallum, 2010). In these cases, concentration has favored a process of full identification with and projection of a specific idea of State and nation, where they consider themselves not only a part of the project but also an essential if not core component. It is somehow possible to say that in these cases the Church is lived as an institution that was already manifesting the existence of a “nation” before the launch of the nation- and state-building process at the turn of the 20th century. Focusing on the case of the Copts, such a position has constantly developed two different, albeit intertwined, dialectic approaches (Mahmood, 2016). One component of the community has focused on reconfiguring the distinctive Coptic religious character into an autonomous ethnic category, as a national minority. On the other hand, the vast majority of the community has refused such a discourse, emphasizing that the Copts are the original voice of historic Egypt and therefore never a minority by definition.

Nevertheless, Christian multi-vocality also appears through the intertwining of socio-economic and geographic conditions. Copts in Egypt show how these factors are more determinant in explaining the marginality of a part of the community than the mere religious factors. This also explains how Muslims and Christians defined a common ground, expressing the same frustration during the uprisings. Similarly, Christians' concentrations in specific towns and villages and their predominant presence in professional sectors are important for understanding how the community divided between supporters and opposers of Al Assad's regime during the protests in 2011 (Farha, Mousa, 2015; Fahmi, 2018).

To conclude this section, multi-vocality is an intrinsic feature of Christian communities in the region and it appears under different configurations cutting across multiple dimensions and discourses. It also represents a challenge that Christians have tried to face by both participating in secular platforms and by developing new theological and ecclesiastical thinking through ecumenism and interfaith dialogues. But multi-vocality is not simply important for understanding Christians living within the Middle East – it is also a critical factor to be taken into account in exploring the manifold and diverse motivations that induce Christians to emigrate or seek refuge abroad.

2 Christians in Middle Eastern Politics

Christians' multi-vocality is not only the most vivid expression of the rich ecclesiastical and theological patrimony of Eastern Christianity and its millennial history, but it is also the product of the different contextual configurations that Christians have experienced in the region.

Histories of Christians in the contemporary Middle East traditionally begun focusing on the last century of the Ottoman Empire's rule in the region. Given the scope of such a chapter, it is not the case here to explore this period in their history in detail. What it is useful to take into consideration is that precisely during this century were laid the bases on which later the orientations described before developed, first during the Mandate period (from the 1920s to the 1940s) and then in the course of the first two decades of the Middle Eastern States' independence (in the 1950s and 1960s). The 19th century is the period of the colonial encounter between the West and the East (Makdisi, 2000).

With the image of the colonial encounter can be portrayed the development of an intricate relationship of influence, conditioning, cooperation and reaction that directly influenced the history of what would become the contemporary Middle East (Mitri, 2012). It was exactly from this period that

Christian multi-vocality began to acquire a political scope. Religious spheres arose as one of the first fields through which to participate in the life of the Empire or challenge Ottoman authority (Makdisi, 2000). Christians in the Empire began to be described in the West as a fragile minority doomed to be persecuted by an intolerant Islam. At the same time, local Christian communities began to distinguish between different orientations, namely the “Arab” and “Eastern”. One component became the vanguard of Arabism, with the aim of promoting a secularist interpretation of the concept of the Arab “nation”, stressing the need for Muslims and Christians to reunite in a single nation because they shared a common language and culture (Cragg, 1991). In this framework, the triumph of Arabism would make it possible to overcome religious divides and politicization, emancipating from Ottoman rule and resisting European interference. Other communities started to claim their right to live according to their cultural and religious heritage in a homogeneous autonomous space. Therefore, in the course of the 19th century Christians emerged as dynamic actors in the life of the Empire, contributing to the reinvention of the political significance of the different regional localities belonging to the Ottoman State, as citizens of Istanbul’s polity, supporters of Arabism or distinct ethno-linguistic communities searching for their full recognition (Roussos, 2014).

With these premises, the period between the two World Wars was a phase both of disillusion and hope. Christians dedicated themselves to pursuing different political programs aimed at fulfilling the promises of independence and emancipation previously elaborated. The establishment of modern Middle Eastern States under the Mandates projected the Christians presence towards three different, albeit frequently intertwined, political paths. First, the Mandate powers kept on with their strategies of cultivating relationships with minority communities. Depending on the specific socio-political balances of each territory and the different French and British colonial strategies, Christians in the post-Ottoman Middle East were integrated into the new States under the double guise of citizens and protected minority. The protection of minorities became one of the facets of the colonial strategy of divide and rule and a source of legitimization for the Mandate system (White, 2007). Christians were invited to develop their community institutions as distinctive social units on the basis of their minority status. On the one hand, such an accommodation of Middle Eastern non-Muslim diversity consolidated a specific, homogeneous image of “Christians in the Middle East”, overlooking their contextual ethnic and denominational differences as well as their political aspirations. On the other, Christian constituencies fragmented. Christians either concentrated on consolidating their community borders and spheres, as a religious minority, or

on overcoming the post-Ottoman configurations promoted by Paris and London. It was exactly in this framework that the Assyrians focused their efforts in the struggle to be recognized as an autonomous nation, ethnically and religiously distinct. However, their project dramatically failed. Left alone by London, the Iraqi State showed no tolerance for what was perceived as a threat to the ideal of the Arab nation (Zubaida, 2002). The Assyrians were first repressed and then forced to accept their minority status as a part of the non-Muslim minorities living in the country, with no recognition of their ethnic-linguistic demands. Similarly, in Egypt the Copts refused minority discourses and the quota system proposed by London in the early 1920s. Their specific religious affiliation was considered the most authentic proof of their belonging to the Egyptian nation (Mahmood, 2016). In essence, during these decades the process of diversification of Christians' orientations developed, along with that of their Muslim brethren, dividing between different notions of the scope and role of community, nation and State. While Christians generally promoted the ideal of a secular State and nation on the bases of a shared language, history and culture, these positions oscillated between pan-nationalist movements (e.g. the 1932 Syrian Social Nationalist Party of the Greek-Orthodox Antoun Saadeh and the 1947 Ba'ath Party of Michel Aflaq) and nationalist ideals (e.g. the Lebanese nationalist movement inspired by the Maronite intellectuals of the *Revue Phénicienne*; the Egyptian Wafd party with Wassef Boutros Ghali) (Robson, 2011).

With the end of the Second World War and the independence of the Middle Eastern States, Arabism and pan-Arabism increased their momentum, becoming the leading ideologies for developing nation- and state-building processes in the region. Ideals and aspirations theorized during the inter-war period became thus not only viable, but imposed as the core ideologies for achieving full independence from the past colonial influence. In reality, most of the Mandate systematization of majority-minority relationships and the condition of Christians in politics remained almost untouched. Arabism and pan-Arabism did not take the form of liberal regimes, but of muscular political projects authoritarian in their stance. Nonetheless, Christians fully participated in these projects, because essentially secular.

However, the ideal of a national unity to be defended against any kind of divisive pressure, both external and internal, imposed a precise code of conduct on Christians. By embracing such orientations, Christians and their religious institutions were granted the right to access public space. But they were also "invited" to privatize their identities as Christians for the sake of nations and states designed in the spirit of Muslim majorities (Mahmood, 2016). In

essence, assimilation was the most practiced strategy for managing diversity in the region.

The pan-Arabist movement lasted for almost two decades, progressively encountering crises after the Six-Day War and the defeat of the Arab front by Israel in 1967 and again in 1973. In this framework, the 1970s represented a disorienting awakening, setting the condition of a new systematization of regional politics that today, after the 2011 uprisings, is still looking for new positive directions. The liturgies and rhetoric of the previous decades were somehow kept alive by almost all regimes in the region, but the Arab States entered into what afterwards became a prolonged period of internal crises only partially allayed by the temporary rise in oil prices between the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In essence, while nationalist programs were being progressively dismissed, their place was taken by strong regimes imposed on their societies. In particular, an event and a dynamic proved that previous Christians' orientations were going to be confined to the margins of regional politics.

First, the Lebanon civil war (1975–1990) led to a drastic discontinuity in the traditional balances of power of this country, the sole non-authoritarian regime with a political system dominated by non-Muslims in the region (MacCallum, 2010). The civil war diminished and fragmented Christian leverage, in particular that of the Maronites. It dissolved their primacy within the new power-sharing system and polarized Maronite political elites between the Sunni and Shiite fronts. At the same time, while Maronite nationalists were encountering a severe defeat on the ground, Church religious leaders, and especially the Maronite Patriarch, re-emerged as leading authorities for the local community. The Maronite Patriarch increased his political role by devoting himself to the mission of representing the interests of the entire Christian community within the framework of multi-faith Lebanon.

Secondly, while the Lebanese civil war was breaking out, Islam's institutional and political appeal began to rise in the region, pushing Christian communities to reconfigure their role and presence. The progressive Islamization of Middle Eastern politics, well epitomized by the course of the revolution in Iran (1979), represented a real turning point. It came about through growing Islamist activism in political and radical militant groups. At the same time, it occurred through the development of "formal" or "institutionalized" Islam, even in countries such as Egypt or Syria that until then had defined their regimes and political systems as essentially secular. As the chapter will point out, this development worsened the conditions of Christians in Egypt between the 1970s and early 1980s. It also formed the basis for reconfiguring the political balances of power in what would become the Syria of Hafiz al-Assad and his son

Bashar, again making religious and ethnic discourses instrumental to legitimizing rulers or contesting the regime in power (Rabo, 2012).

In essence, from the late 1970s and increasingly during the 1980s Christians experienced a double dynamic, only apparently contradictory. On the one hand, they witnessed a lessening of their manoeuvre room in regional and national politics, in some circles fostering adoption of an introverted attitude and a clustering around Church institutions and leaderships (Roussos, 2014). Such a stance developed further at the end of the 1980s while Arab States entered into what would become a prolonged period of economic difficulty and legitimacy crisis, concealed only by the presence of strong regimes in most of the countries of the region. It is not surprising that an increasing number of Christians begun to emigrate, seeking career opportunities abroad. On the other, such a conditioned retreat pushed them to reconnect with their religious dimension, fostering a new exploration of the significance of being Christian in the Middle Eastern institutional, political, social and national dimensions. The Islamization of regional politics led Christian Churches to revive and re-launch their activities for the sake of a new, active and creative role in the region (McCallum, 2010). While the idea of their inevitable decline in an increasingly Islamized Middle East was developing at the international level, Christian ecclesiastical institutions dedicated themselves to internal reforms with the aim of rejecting such a predicament (Robson, 2011). By the mid-1980s, Christians thus focused on elaborating new theological thinking and understanding about their minority condition, and conflict and crisis in the region, describing such challenges as essentially fostered by a lack of social justice and an ongoing political struggle. In essence, they refused the religious hypothesis as the main driver of Middle Eastern instability.

The intertwining between this double dynamic found the most vivid representation in what has been called the “authoritarian dilemma”. This dilemma has compressed the Christian presence between two extremes: appealing to the strong or fierce regime in power for the sake of defending their community, prioritizing stability and security, or mobilizing for change and reform of both political systems and regimes, accepting the risk of being involved in a difficult transition with no guarantees of improvements for Christian conditions (McCallum, 2012).

This dilemma describes the complex continuum within which Christians continuously oscillated until and during the Arab uprisings in 2011. It should be recognized that security was more frequently prioritized by Church and community leaderships. Accommodating the regimes in power gave Christian establishments the benefit of the support of state administration, acting as representatives for their communities and minimizing the impact of sectarian

tensions within their own countries (Rowe, 2014). This *modus vivendi* was the case with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Mubarak in Egypt, as the chapter will show, and Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in Syria. With the case of Syria, this configuration has taken a very controversial outlook that the ongoing civil war is contributing to reinforce. In a country where ethnic and linguistic features can transcend and cut across absolute religious classifications (see Chapter 5), sectarian politics has been always a resource in the hands of the regimes in power. With Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, the idea of a Syrian “safe haven” for all minorities in the country, and especially for Christians, has been systematically cultivated, imposing a tacit agreement based on an exchange between accepting constraints on political liberties and undoubted loyalty to the regime in power, with the right to practice one’s own religion and defend professional interests in the economy (Farha, Mousa, 2015).

Nevertheless, the propensity to prioritize security should not be overstated or considered the sole dimension describing all Christian forms of participation. Christians have also concentrated on their renewal and social activism, advocating for their rights as full citizens of their countries and for those of their Muslim brethren. In this framework, the Christian diaspora has increasingly played an important role in echoing and internationalizing what was and is going on in their country of origins (Longva, Roald, 2012).

The 2011 uprisings, the so-called Arab Spring, drastically denounced the limits of such political pacts on which most regimes have based their legitimacy and power in the region. The protests openly called for the ousting of authoritarian rulers and the development of inclusive and pluralist systems at the political, social and economic levels. Christians looked at protests and demonstrations with a great degree of trepidation. While some Christian leaders initially hesitated to support the demonstrations, most of their faithful actively participated in what seemed to be the winning battle for pluralism (Muasher, 2014). However, it soon became clear that the end of traditional regimes was also producing the severe destabilization of entire state systems. Herein lies the “awakening” paradox. While successful in dismantling old regimes, until today protests have failed to develop new concepts of State and civic relations. At the same time, the instability has politically reactivated primordial ties such as ethnicity, tribalism and religious factionalism. Against this background, religious affiliations proved to be useful mechanisms at the service of international, regional and local elites’ interests in pursuing different political agendas. In this regard, the case of Syria is emblematic. In this country, protests soon transformed into a civil war, also becoming the final hotbed, along with Iraq, of the Islamic State. The successful popular revolts calling for pluralism and inclusion quickly gave way to the present regional geopolitical struggle for power and the

“global minority crisis in the Arab World or in the Muslim World” (Picard, 2012) produced by growing sectarian rivalries. This situation has fragmented Christian communities in these countries, dividing Church leaders, the local clergy and laity between different positions towards the regime (Fahmi, 2018).

Today, Christians find themselves again confronted with all traditional dilemmas of the past. While it is undeniable that the uprisings seem to have definitively deprived Christians of political influence, marginalizing their position and making them even more subjected to the authoritarian paradox, conflicts have again pushed them to prove their resilience, increasing their activism. Today's Middle Eastern Christians are thus committed to remaining a factor and a voice in the region, resisting the general conviction that they can be solely the victims of Middle Eastern politics, doomed to seek refuge abroad or to accept marginalization and protection from the “new” political regimes. Accordingly, the analysis of the Copts' strategy and position during those events will be illustrative.

3 Sectarianism, Religious Strife and the “Unbreakable Marriage” between the State and the Church under Mubarak (1981–2011)

When Mubarak resigned from president of Egypt, after thirty years of continuous power and as a consequence of the famous “Tahrir's days of wrath”, the Copts finally believed, with their Muslim counterpart, that most of the past discrimination would have ceased. This represented part of the hopes that the Egyptian revolt of 2011 tried to make possible, only to see them wane in the post-revolutionary stage.

For the Copts, the following transition phase and the current presidency of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi represent the replay of the same dynamics: nowadays as in the past, the Egyptian Orthodox Christian community, the biggest Christian community of Middle East, remains the target of violence and discrimination that neither the revolt nor the establishment of a new post-revolutionary government were able to stop. As in the past, religious freedom and equality, depending on state institutions that can guarantee all citizens' constitutional rights, are far from putting down roots.

After the collaboration established between Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser and the Patriarch Kirillos VI during the Sixties, the regime-Coptic community relations deteriorated in the 1970s under President Anwar al-Sadat, who embraced Islam and Islamists as a tool to carry out the so called “corrective revolution”: the aim was to change the ideological and economic theories which supported the Nasserian regime, the secularism and the Egyptian socialism over all, that

had failed under the blows of the 1967 defeat. A consequence of this “correction” was the return of Islam in the political sphere and the following conclusion of the golden age for interfaith relations in Egypt which put again the Copts under siege, as a separated and discriminated community. But while attacks by Muslims on Copts have a sectarian element, confessional differences are not the primary source of tension. Egypt’s outdated laws and authoritarian institutions have made Copts a target of social conflict.

Every analysis and research on the Coptic community in Egypt needs to devote a part to analyze which is its real numerical size. From an historical perspective, this represents a complex dispute: it is difficult to obtain reliable data from government statistics and from those of the community. The government’s will to reduce the relevance of the Coptic community and the fear of the Christians to declare their faith in public has made the official census inaccurate.

The Egyptian census, conducted in 1976 during the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat, reported a total of 2.3 million Copts, or 6.7% of the total population of almost 39 million (McDermott, 1988; Chitham, 1986). This figure met the incredulity of the Copts who threatened to launch their door to door count. This impracticable method was not put into practice and the Copts continue to speak of a much higher figure: Coptic groups in the US talk of 8 million, a figure which has gained wide currency outside Egypt (Pennington, 1982).

The Egyptian official statistics available pointed out that in 1996 the number of Christians reached 3.5 million, 5.7% of the population of 63 million (Courbage, Fargues, 1998; Denis, 2000; Bayoumi, Moriconi-Ebrard, 2005). According to the 2006 census figures, released by the official statistical agency of Egypt, the Central Agency for Mobilization and Statistics, the population, including those living abroad, is estimated to have reached 76.5 million.

A study published in 2011 by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life states that the Christian population represents the 5.3 % of the Egyptian’s one (Pew Research Center, 2011), as opposed to the widely used media figure of 10%. Researchers arrived at the number from Egypt’s 2006 census data underlining that “for decades the Christian population in Egypt has been less than 10% of the population”. Though there may be some converts in Egypt from Islam to Christianity, “it’s unlikely that that number is very large” (Harrington, 2011). According to this research “the highest share reported in the past century was in 1927, when the census found that 8.3% of Egyptians were Christian; in each of the eight subsequent censuses, the Christian share of the population gradually shrank” (Harrington, 2011). In spite of these new data, some others estimate that the number of Copts oscillates between 5 and 6 million, or 8% to 9% of the entire population. The number of Christians in Egypt remains

a hotly-debated issue in the country but, looking at the recent figures, the Copts continue to represent by far the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

Intercommunal conflict during Sadat's presidency prefigured the problems Copts would face under Mubarak (1981–2011), the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power upon Mubarak's ouster in 2011), and the presidency of the Muslim Brother Muhammad Morsi (2012–2013). Since religion has replaced nationalism, matters that should have been governed by the law became to be managed as identity politics.

Religious strife emerged during all of the Mubarak regime, although particularly it started to increase from the end of the 1980s. The "Autumn of fury" that overwhelmed Sadat and his presidency, culminated with the assassination of Sadat the 6th October 1981 by an Islamist militant and the house arrested of the Patriarch Shenuda, after a dramatic period marked by social violence between the Muslims and Christians (Farah, 1986; Murphy, 2002).

One of the first goals carried out by Mubarak after he took power was to fight against the radical Islamic movement in order to isolate and crush the violent extremists: Mubarak's regime remained under severe Islamist pressure for all the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. During the 1990s, Mubarak's intelligence and police forces fought an internal war against *al-jama'a al-islamiyya* which become very powerful and had stepped up its violent activities: they started to target regime officials, foreign tourists and Copts.

Radical Islamists were more widespread through the rural immigrants of *Sa'id* although the Cairo suburbs of Ayn Shams and Imbaba also witnessed outbreaks of violent clashes from 1990–1992, typically instigated by routine disputes between Muslim and Christian neighbors that escalated into large-scale riots with numerous injuries and casualties on both sides. The wave of radical Islamist terrorist attacks targeting tourists and foreign businesses beginning in mid-1992 was also a threat to Coptic security. In 1992 alone, thirty-seven anti-Coptic attacks were reported, although national attention was more focused on the threat that Islamist radicals posed to state security rather than addressing the Coptic issue in particular (Ayalon, 1999).

This specific type of answer to the religious issue in Egypt, and the problems linked with it, are rooted in the tarnish nature of the Egyptian authoritarian regime and in the sectarianism concept. Since the beginning of the Republic, Egyptian leaders have defended a rigid hierarchy instead of instituting political equality and the country's military rulers governed granted rights and opportunities as a concession to the population. Under such an authoritarian system, religious identity mattered less than wealth and personal connections

to the army and religion has served to fragment a society that is already sharply split between rulers and ruled (Melcangi, 2018).

The capacity and will of the Egyptian authoritarian political system to manage sectarianism as a tool for maintaining their power and for exploiting the religious or communal identity in order to enable the political organization, the gaining of political legitimacy, and the promotion of political change was fundamental (Aras, Bardakcı, 2014). The ideal of *dividi et impera* with a top-down sectarianism strategy was finalized to keep consensus and maintain support for the regime. Although sectarianism was denied and repudiated, informally the Egyptian regimes engaged in a systematic attempt to politicize differences as tools for controlling masses and maintaining power (Ryan, 2001).

As always, the government position moved toward two main paths: denial and repression. The denial, expressed in an insensitive way, became rejection of the existence of tensions. The president tried to cement the President's image as a protector of Muslims and Christians with the "national unity" campaign of the early 1990s, but the claims of the Christians went unheeded.

A perpetual guarantee remained in the form of a shared Egyptian identity and the social intermingling of Copts and Muslims in a single social context, a "unique Egyptian fabric... whether in the cities or in the country" (al-Gawhary, 1996: 21). The use of terms like "national dialogue" and "national unity", trying apparently to break down barriers, did not consider the differences and the real problems of the Christian group. This claim to national unity was for example used by Nasser and Kyrillos VI during all the Nasserian period. National unity is not a new concept, but it started to have an increased political significance: at that time it was used in order to consolidate the government rhetoric and bring together the different groups in support of the regime which depict itself as the only defender of the national unity (Fawzi, 2010; Elsässer, 2014).

This is especially true in particular conditions depending on economic, social and political changes: in the late 1980s, Egypt's economy suffered markedly from falling oil prices and was further weakened by a drop in the number of remittances from its three million workers abroad. In spite of a rising debt burden, the government continued to rely heavily on foreign economic aid, leading to growing interference by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Egypt's economic policies; in 1991 the Egyptian government signed the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program with the IMF and the World Bank. The country's currency, the Egyptian pound, had to be devalued several times, interest rates were raised, and subsidies were lowered on food and fuel (Roccu, 2013). These policies especially harmed the poorest Egyptians, who often looked to Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood for assistance.

On the other side, the Islamic Group, continued to resort to terrorism against political leaders, secularist writers, Copts, and even foreign tourists, the last-named being a major source of Egypt's foreign exchange. So, as for the previous presidents, the official rhetoric and the use of the call to national unity became a mechanism for avoiding a discussion of the challenges inherent to the social, political and economic dramatic situation.

In fact, although the government of Mubarak issued several laws in favor of the Copts such as the "relative" flexibility in the legal procedure for building churches, the establishment of Christmas as an official state holiday, the leadership's intervention to sponsor the development and revival of study centers and of cultural artefacts, especially on the occasion of millennium celebrations, the community emphasized that the government's attempts to fight the fundamentalist current led to its side-lining of Coptic issues and concerns (Melcangi, 2015). When attacks against Copts intensified, Mubarak exploited Coptic insecurity to his own political benefit and the government remained passive and refrained from intervention or action. For decades he and his coterie propagated the narrative that without Mubarak's protection the Copts would fall into the shadow of a zealously Islamist and anti-Christian regime (Ibrahim, 2000).

During the last three decades, polarization between Muslims and Christians has grown. Both groups have become religiously more conservative. Mubarak allowed interreligious tensions to escalate; by the year 2000, random acts of violence against the Copts had become normative. Many state officials, security officers and legislators denied the existence of sectarian violence in Egypt or minimized the extent of the problem. The most dangerous way to deal with the problem of interreligious clashes was based on the conviction that it was a security problem that required the application of the ongoing state of emergency (Mubarak conducted his entire presidency under "emergency law" No. 162 of 1958) which legitimized all types of intervention of the State (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 2010). Of course, the worsening of the economy, infrastructure and security climate of Egypt dragged Copts down along with all other Egyptians who suffered for a civil society which was marked by permanent government interference and repression (Brownlee, 2013). "This inconsistency has led people to lose faith in the law and to take the law into their own hands, which has caused horrendous crimes" (Al-Aswani, 2011: 131). Under Sadat and his successor, State security agents have been active participants in the violence rather than inept bystanders, a practice that with difficulty has changed during the decades, as the facts of Kosheh¹ in 2000 confirmed. It was

1 The al-Kosheh incidents refer to a series of intercommunal riots and strife in an Upper Egyptian small village arising from a murder investigation in the autumn of 1998 in which Copts

clear that the State neglected to protect them, as in the bombing of the Alexandria Church in 2011.

4 Reformation and Resilience: Strategies of the Church vis-à-vis Mubarak's Regime

The only way to survive for Church was to reshape the self-image in which it took an important lead, resulting in continuing the reformation of the communal identity towards a religious identity and in the social restructuring of a traditional community. In doing so, the Church, stifling the divergent opinions inside the community, imposed itself as the only voice which had the right to define what it means to be Coptic, underlining the differences and the sameness compared with the other community and defining their way to be Egyptian. Having overcome the polarization born inside the community during the exile of the Patriarch Shenuda, the Church was able again to re-establish its strength enlarging consensus around the notion of Coptic identity and the foundation of philanthropic societies and a reinvigorated patriarchate.

The Patriarchate expanded its services compared with the past three decades through a centralization of church administration and a revival of Coptic culture. In doing so the Church saved Copticness blending it with the Egyptianness by working at the level of religious traditions and everyday activities. The common national sense of belonging was strictly connected with a specific symbolism: e.g. the continuous reference to the Nile river as the common cradle of both Muslims and Christians considered as naturally Egyptians. "Inscribing the Nile in the Christian mythology of sanctity consequently constitutes an effective claim of belonging to the national entity" (Galal, 2012: 51). This reference created a connection to the time when Egypt was Christian, Egyptians were Copts and the Egyptian territory was consequently genuinely Christian. "The pilgrimage to the sites where, according to tradition, the Holy Family lived during its stay in Egypt, can trace an ideal direct line between the nation and the Copts' authentic sense of belonging and the coherence between being Christian and being Egyptian" (Melcangi, 2018: 135). At the same time, Coptic sacred sites where saints and martyrs lived, together with the stories and traditions about their martyrdom, became a fundamental point of reference for Copts in order to show their way of being Egyptian through Christianity. They were used not only to build Christian identity but also to negotiate

were disproportionately targeted with severe methods of interrogation and torture by the local police.

the minority status. Obviously, the stories about the saints and martyrs showed the importance of the asceticism and the sacrifice. Suffering became an aspect of the life of Egyptian Copts, the only possible destiny which relegate the Christian to this marginal and passive minority status.

Regarding the ecclesiastic structure, Shenuda tried to enforce parity and uniformity on the dioceses replacing the local privileges and clan loyalties with the loyalty to his person, by placing people close to him in the key positions in the administration throughout the country (Hasan, 2003). The aim was not only to introduce a new morality into the Church, but, more importantly, to control the economic and cultural development of the community. Moreover, a new spread of the Patriarch's monographs regarding all sorts of topics from Christian life was implemented: the Church's newsletter and the illustrated news magazine *al-Kiraza* were published regularly by the office of the patriarchate and projected the image of an active Church and a tool for responding to social concerns and criticisms of the Church leadership (Rowe, 2009). On the other side, we can see how the spread of publications among the Christian group, critical editorials of the community newspaper *Watani*, and Christian television programs contributed in the same way to consolidating the community support for the Church policy. Part of this flowed into the wider project of creating a network of supporting foreign Christian organizations with the final aim of promoting the "internationalization" of the Coptic question. In spite of his advanced age, the Pope continued to visit the Coptic community abroad in order to demonstrate his global leadership at home as it was reported in the patriarchal publications, with the consequent effect of provoking a division inside the community between who consider this as an external interference.

An evident "vibrant and resilient civil society apparatus" (Rowe, 2009: 124) emerged during the last ten years of the Mubarak regime which was boosted by the neo-millet forms of Coptic engagement. As Paul Rowe states, "Christians are unlikely even to pose a security threat to the regime and instead form a convenient pet concern that justifies a strong security State" (Rowe, 2009: 124). This form of social participation which is based on civil society activity strictly connected with the Church became the expression of a "high-impact political participation" which denied electoral challenge and at the same time the absence of participation of the Copts in the political arena, highlighting a change in the way it was expressed. Or, as Samer Soliman states, it cannot be explained just as a reaction to the Islamization of the State and the public space, but as a product of modernity itself (Soliman, 2006) or, as Dina al-Khawaga underlines "elle est une action de moralisation religieuse de la vie publique dépourvue de valeurs et corrompues, (...) la réponse à une crise de valeur

et le moyen direct de défendre une minorité dans une société qui perdrait ses références communes et qui tendrait à exclure les coptes de ses repères culturels" (Al-Khawaga, 1992: 347).

"As a result, there are effectively no challenges to the authority of the Church in the spiritual realm" (Rowe 2005: 90) which directly led it to play a more active and defensive role but, above all, to exercise a high power such a mission to minister to all Egyptian Christians, inside and outside the community. And this role had to be played with the support of the President, according the tradition personal collaboration established between Nasser and the patriarch Kyrillos VI, elected in 1959. From the years of Nasser and Kyrillos, these characteristics of the relationship between the Copts and the Egyptian government have remained until today.

In fact, regime-Church relations benefited from a fresh start when Shenuda was released from house arrest in 1985: the Patriarch supported Mubarak politically while the president privileged the Coptic Orthodox Church as the principal channel for handling Copts' concerns. This arrangement, a kind of religious corporatism or a "tactical agreement", amplified Shenuda's authority and let Mubarak address millions of Egyptian Christians through a single proxy (Asher-Schapiro, 2012).

The former started to adopt a low profile, to cooperate with the regime, to avoid confrontation and embrace the rhetoric of national unity publicly supporting Mubarak and consolidate his power within the Church. The President needed the support of the Copts more than ever in order to base its antiterrorism policy and create a magnificent image of interreligious harmony, allowing Coptic independence in community affairs and recognizing Shenuda as the voice of the Church in political matters. This entente fostered the kind of minoritarian discourse. It was in the Church's interest to limit the expression of Copts as individuals.

"The regime was good at window dressing, and public meetings with the Coptic Patriarch Shenuda III cemented the president's image as protector of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Although it remained difficult for Copts to obtain permits to build or repair churches, he (the president Mubarak) allowed several grand projects, and declared January 7th, Coptic Christmas, a national holiday" (Van Doorn-Harder, 2011). So, the national public sphere started to be based on the relationship between Patriarch Shenuda III and president Mubarak, like what Rowe called a "millet partnership": the historic pattern of the late Ottoman period, known as the millet system, thus gave way to a neo-millet system in which the Church operated as the main filter and representative for the interest of individual Christians under republican system (Rowe, 2009).

As Fahmi states, “the regime also protected the Church’s financial independence, and permitted the Church to ignore court rulings concerning Copts’ personal affairs that were not supported by the Church leadership” (Fahmi, 2014). In the wake of this new phase cooperation, the Pope supported Mubarak’s policies, discouraging Coptic activists from putting pressure on the regime.

Shenuda and the bishops alone were allowed to petition the regime on a whole range of sensitive issues including sectarian violence, church construction and family disputes. He was also consulted in appointing Coptic government officials and bureaucrats (Asher-Schapiro, 2012). The only chance for average Copts to improve their lives would have been to take a high-profile position in the government-backed National Democratic Party of Mubarak, not only because religious political parties are not legal, so that even the Muslim Brotherhood have had to stand as independents, but also because “it was in the Church’s interest to limit the expression of Copts as individuals rejecting the idea of founding a Coptic political party” (Melcangi 2013: 236). The presidential and parliamentary elections have highlighted how the government tries to exploit the Coptic votes by making all kinds of promises to the Church and the people, but not offering anything in return after victory. Moreover, the government, supported by the Pope, manipulated the community as a sectarian bloc, instead of participating in the political process as individuals: “Individual political stances based on democratic convictions are the only way to solve ongoing political problems. That is certainly more preferable than declaring loyalty, *en masse*, to the ruling party only to be met with unfulfilled promises. (...) Maintaining this position Coptic votes have remained a bargaining chip between the NDP and political authorities on the one hand, and the Church on the other” (Kamal, 2010).

This provoked the severe reaction of the Coptic elite and young Copts who had repeatedly asked the Patriarch to operate according to his role, accusing him of penalizing the culture and practice of full Egyptian citizenship (Nikolov, 2008). It was in the Church’s intention to make the Copts – once again – into a *millet*, a sectarian community that is largely autonomous, while at the same time, the Church itself was pressing the State to implement the rights of modern citizenship.

By recognizing the Patriarch as the official representative and voice of the Coptic community, the State endorsed this emerging ethno-religious identity, by which Copts are characterized by religion rather than by citizenship. More broadly, the result of the partnership between Patriarch and President is that there exists no secular leadership of the Coptic community untainted by complicity with the government – no independent voice willing and able to voice Copts’ grievances. Finally, the Mubarak-Shenuda pact hid rather than solved the institutional disadvantages suffered by Coptic communities.

The political, social and economic condition of Christians in Egypt, in fact, remained one of the main reasons for concerns. Whatever their percentages and the State statements according to which the Copts enjoy the same rights of citizenship as the Muslims, the practices governing their public life have not always been equitable. They are politically underrepresented and Coptic political participation remained limited to a number of appointed members of the Parliament and ministers with second-rate portfolios. In the election of 2005, Copts were disappointed when the NDP, despite its pretensions to being the party of national unity, announced that only few Copts would be on its list of candidates (Melcangi, 2013) explaining that Coptic candidates were “less electable” and an obstacle for the aims of the party. Moreover, in 2007, the regime broke a promise reportedly made to the Church that it would allocate a specific number of seats to Copts in the Shura Council elections.

Coptic representation in the last cabinet before the recent Egyptian Revolution consisted of two ministers, Youssef Boutros Ghali in the Ministry of Finance and Maged George in the Ministry of the Environment; in the Shafiq interim cabinet (January 2011) only the Minister of Environment kept his post (Chaillot, 2011). The official regime limits Coptic citizens to a symbolic participation in the political system, which is made most evident by the President’s appointment of Coptic representatives in the People’s Assembly. In the 2010 elections, prior to the Alexandria Church bombing, former President Mubarak chose to appoint only seven Coptic members of Parliament out of ten that he is constitutionally allowed to select (Ibrahim, 2008).

If we look at the social context, they are drastically underrepresented in a number of fields. There are hardly any high-ranking Copts in the military, police force, judiciary or diplomatic corps. Copts are also marginalized in university presidencies and governorships as well as positions deemed sensitive to national security, from the upper echelons of the security apparatus to the pedagogical front lines where Copts are prevented from teaching Arabic. And furthermore, the issue of the renovation or construction of new churches remained a reason of concern for Copts that the Egyptian governments have failed to address. Copts seeking to build or renovate churches still had to work through a bureaucratic and political morass to obtain permits.

Important state offices are still closed to Egyptian citizens with a Coptic background, and their representation in the judiciary, the official media, diplomatic missions, the army and the police does not exceed 2% of the total. For instance, there are 17 public universities in Egypt, each having one director and three or four deputy directors with a total of 71 positions; not a single Copt occupies one of these seats. In addition, there are 274 deans in Egyptian faculties, none of which includes a single Copt (Guindy, 2010).

However, Copts do obtain leading posts in Egyptian society and have a large presence in civil society associations. The presence of Egyptian Copts is not limited to a specific profession or a cluster of professions; they practice all professions and are active in all economic fields like their Muslim counterparts. Just like Muslims, Copts are represented in all social strata.

A significant number of Copts are concentrated in private and skilled professions; even so a large gap exists between the economic dynamism of Egyptian Christians and their political and legal stature. Such a fact tends not to console the productive and economically successful Coptic man, but increases his frustration instead, for he would expect –with additional vigor– a legal and political treatment that makes him equal to other citizens.

Only at the end of the 2000s, some Coptic youth, believing that the Mubarak regime was the cause of their problems, started to participate to new political movements which called for workers' rights, full judicial independence, and political reform (the April 6 Youth Movement, youth for Justice and Freedom). One of them was the Egyptian Movement for Change, and also known by its slogan *Kifaya* (Enough). This group, born in 2004, led some Copts who opposed Mubarak's policies to act politically and challenge the President's partnership with Shenuda. It was the rising of a new activism among the youth within the community: this group put a distance between themselves and the Church's support for the regime and started to get involved in politics on their own. "Some young Copts, rather than appealing to the respect of human rights, concluded that Christians would only get equal rights within a democratic regime based on the principle of citizenship for all Egyptians" (Fahmi, 2014). These movements from below represented the beginning of a protest march which was able to break the chains of the national ideal, now too narrow and unbearable, questioning the power of Mubarak, his solid alliance with the Church and bringing out all the contradictions of the Egyptian system that would lead to the revolt of 25th January, 2011.

5 Revolution and Beyond: the Long Road for Coptic Rights' Recognition in the Post 2011 Egypt

The revolution of 2011 put a strain on the political role played by the Patriarch within the Coptic community: some tragical attacks on Christians in 2010 led a younger cohort of Copts to distance themselves from the Church's support for the regime. The decisive event happened in 2011, when a massive explosion tore through the midnight mass at the Coptic Church of Saint Mark and Pope Peter (also known as the Church of the Two Saints) in Alexandria. The car

bomb killed 23 parishioners, injured dozens, and shattered the regime's pretense of keeping Christians safe. The New Year's attack exposed Copts' continuing vulnerability, despite living in a security State with a powerful chief executive. Egyptians were horrified and outraged while during the investigation some Coptic lawyer accused the Minister of Interior orchestrated the bombing to scare Copts into backing Mubarak out of fear of further sectarian strife (Fadl, 2011; Tadros, 2013).

As a consequence, many young Christians decided to take part in the 25 January uprising, challenged the position of Shenuda, revealing a new political and social rebirth inside the community which emerged from a long political apathy (Casper, 2013). They fought by rallying behind a liberal and civil cause or demonstrated for particular Coptic issues, showing that they claimed an idea of Egyptian nationality while not refusing their religious identity (Guirguis, 2012).

The Church discouraged the Copts to participate in the uprisings, considering the linkage with the Mubarak regime, but despite this, the revolutionary days soon became a moment of unity in Egypt between Muslims and Christians where they agreed and cooperated on the need for democratic reform.

By contrast, after the 2011 revolt, the camaraderie that joined Copts and Muslims lasted only a few weeks and new sectarian strife seemed to start again. Only to quote some examples, on the 4th of March 2011 two men were killed during clashes in Helwan Governorate between Muslims and Christians, which also saw Muslims set fire to a church in the village of Sol, in the south of Cairo; thousands of Christians, joined by many Muslims, have been staging a sit-in in front of the Egyptian TV building on the Nile Corniche in Cairo protesting against the attack on the St. Mina and St. George churches (Habib, 2011). On the 7th of May, 2011 there was a series of attacks that took place against Coptic churches in the poor working-class neighborhood of Imbaba in Cairo; many protesters staged a sit-in in front of the Egyptian Television and Radio Union, known as Maspero (Habib, 2011; Osman, 2011).

The Copts became increasingly fearful as the political and social identities of Islamist groups began to crystallize in the aftermath of Egypt's 25th January revolution (El-Ghobashy, 2011). The first months after Mubarak was deposed revealed that Copts were isolated if not overwhelmed by the rise of Islamist forces which took control of Tahrir Square. During this period of general insecurity for all Egyptians, public security had collapsed across the country and a wave of violent episodes involving Copts showed their acute vulnerability.

Christians in Qena and the nearby governorates of Sohag, Minya, and Asyut, which are home to the country's largest concentration of Copts, became the target for many kidnappings: beginning in 2011, Copts in these regions of Upper

Egypt were frequently abducted and held until their families paid a ransom (Tadros, 2011). Indeed, kidnappings in Minya, where Christians are estimated to make up more than a third of the population, have been a weekly occurrence since Mubarak's ouster (Brownlee, 2013). SCAF's position on sectarian matters suggested the adoption of a policy of tolerance toward sectarian assaults on non-Muslims.

The most tragic attack on Copts occurred the 9th October, when, after the arson of a church in Aswan, a large group of Copts and their Muslim supporters congregated once again in front of Maspero to denounce the SCAF's complicity in anti-Christian violence. Before the protesters could reach the building, army vehicles plowed through the crowd. The day ended with clashes with the army, where in the end, 25 Copts were killed and more than 300 were injured. The Maspero massacre created a real trauma in the memories of the Christians and the Muslims who participated to the sit-in which is still extremely difficult to forget: it represented a critical moment in the history of Egypt's political transition from authoritarian rule because it reflected the single worst assault by an Egyptian ruling authority against a non-Muslim minority in modern Egyptian history. And, moreover, it demonstrated that Copts were as vulnerable as they had been before the revolution and that the SCAF soon showed its violent face (Toma, 2016; Tadros, 2011; Carr, 2013; Eskander, 2016).

The Maspero Youth Union,² a political group whom quest for recognition of religious justice has found a receptive audience among Copts across classes, geographic locations, and political orientations, asked immediately for a fair trial to find out what happened in Maspero, why it happened and who ordered the killings of peaceful protesters (Fahmi, 2015). But finally, the court verdict read that three soldiers were found guilty but that nobody had been charged with any crime (Gokpinar, 2012).

The presidential election of 2012 summer gave the final blow to all the Christian's chances for the establishment of a democratic and human rights respectful Egyptian political system; in fact, during the presidential election of 2012, Mohamed Morsi, the official candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, edged out Shafiq, 51.7% to 48.3%.

The election victory of Morsi plunged Copts into mourning as they started to feel in danger, more than in Mubarak period. According to Mariz Tadros, and as the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) highlighted in its report on

2 The main ideal of this group was the prevention of conflict and in case of conflict, to compel government authorities to implement the rule of the law rather than hold the more traditional meetings of reconciliation.

the second round of elections, Copts were prevented from going to the voting stations and that assaults were instigated against them: “the use of intimidation against Copts went largely unreported in the media as the focus was on what was happening inside the polling stations” (Tadros, 2013: 232).

In fact, although the Constitution issued at the end of 2012 stated that Christians enjoy full citizenship, they remained marginalized and with Islamist voices dominating the government they were becoming more socially isolated. “While President Morsi’s rhetoric indicated a desire to be more inclusive, his actions fail to protect the Christian communities by, for example, curtailing hateful speech and unfounded allegations about them” (Van Doorn-Harder, 2013: 17). Mohammed Morsi and his government have not found an appropriate response to the problems of religious diversity, rights and minorities, and the relations between the religions and the State.

When in June 2014, one year after the new president’s election, an anti-Morsi movement gained steam, Copts were among the millions calling for his early removal from office and new elections. The military answered by deposing the President the 3rd of July: they were led by the Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

He was flanked by notables from the country’s major religious communities, including the new Patriarch Tawadros II elected in November 2012: the Pope, who has declared his will to return to a spiritual role within the community, soon returned to his political role as a consequence of a more polarized Egypt. Al-Sisi spoke in reconciliatory tones of moving the country forward according to a political route map and a new collaborative feeling between communities: in fact, the new cabinet included three Coptic ministers, one of them assigned to handle the influential trade portfolio. “But displays of national unity at the upper echelons of Egyptians politics did not establish interfaith comity among the population. Further violence followed the coup. Initial reports indicate the attacks were fueled in equal measure by Islamist grievances and State indifference” (Brownlee, 2013: 19). On the 3rd of July, arsonists burned a church in Minya in the south while vandals struck at a church in Marsa Matruh on the northwestern coast. The sectarian clashes arose again and in a violent form. In the middle of August arsonists damaged or destroyed more than 40 churches in Upper Egypt, Beni Suef, and Fayum. In this chaotic context, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi run for the presidential election in May 2014 winning it with 23.78 million votes, 96.91% a turnout of 47.5%. This marked the beginning of the “al-Sisi’s reign” and a sort of go back to the past for the Coptic community.

The current Egyptian President al-Sisi wants to renew the covenant of collaboration established with the Church years ago: following in the footsteps of his predecessor Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser, today the new *ra’is* is trying to overcome

the criticism of those who accuse the State of not doing enough to protect the rights of Christians in Egypt. On January 6, 2018, on the occasion of the Coptic Christmas, al-Sisi inaugurated with Patriarch Tawadros II the new cathedral that, according to the President's intentions, should become the largest Christian Church in the Middle East.

Built 40 kilometers east of Cairo, on the site that will see the rise of the "New Cairo" (the future administrative and financial capital of Egypt according to a government plan of urban expansion), the cathedral was erected in record time so that the Egyptian authorities could show this goal on a solemn occasion where al-Sisi held a speech restating the call for national unity between Christians and Muslims without divisions or differences. But the churches in Cairo look like fortresses nowadays, because of the enormous security measures stepped up by the government in every place of worship around the country: a consequence of the violence that in recent years has seen the Copts become the new target of ISIS terrorist attacks (Melcangi, 2019).

From the killing and forced evacuation of several dozens of Christians in 2017 in al-Arish, the capital city of the North Sinai governorate –where a vast anti-terrorist operation of the armed forces is now taking place– to the brutal attack of December 11th 2016 at the Coptic cathedral in Cairo, and the double attack on Palm Sunday, April 9th, 2017, in Tanta, in the Nile Delta region, and in Alexandria: these attacks against the Copts suggest that terrorist violence is no longer confined to the Sinai peninsula but is instead moving towards the main urban centers, putting a strain on the validity of al-Sisi's vows to preserve Egypt's security, a pivot of his propaganda especially during the 2018's presidential election.

The security question therefore continues to represent a dangerous *vulnus* in the Egypt of al-Sisi. Despite the terrorist attacks seems to be progressively diminishing, as a sign that the military repression carried out by the Egyptian president mainly on the Sinai produces encouraging results, the country fails to guarantee security, indispensable for the rebirth of international tourism, and to eradicate sectarian attacks against the religious minorities, which always have great echo in international public opinion.

Al-Sisi, re-elected in march 2018 with 97% of the votes for the second term, put security as the fundamental point of his electoral campaign. However, even if diminished, the terrorist attacks continue to threaten two important pillars of the president's stabilization strategy: first of all foreign tourism linked with the economic condition of the country which now is going through a period of economic growth.

The other priority objective is to tackle the jihadist terrorism which targets especially the Coptic Christians: the attacks on churches and Christian

institutions are increasing. These actions move in the dual direction of accentuating sectarianism within Egyptian society and undermining the external image of al-Sisi, sanctioning its inadequacy in controlling the jihadist threat present in Egypt.

Acts of violence have a strong emotional and political impact, because they can tear the “Egyptian national fabric” to which the *raʿīs* constantly appeals. On the other side the government has thus played the card of terrorism to legitimize the continuation of the state of emergency, to justify the brutality of national security personnel and to silence political opposition.

Al-Sisi’s government still represents for the Copts of Egypt a barrier of protection and the guarantee of political stability. And the last presidential elections confirmed the positioning of the Christian community led by the Patriarch faithfully at the side of the al-Sisi, despite the voices of many young Copts and intellectuals resonate with criticism towards the President’s authoritarianism.

6 Conclusion

The transitional period, following the Egyptian uprising of January 2011, showed how much the country has a fragile and polarizing political system and an economical sector in deep crisis. In this situation it was very simple for the minorities to look at the regime as the only guarantee for their survival. Especially when the support is proportional to the regime opportunistic claims for democratic or secular values. Or if the risk of being persecuted and considered a target for violent attack is real, as in the case of the last attacks committed by jihadist groups against several Coptic churches, using the minorities support to authoritarian regimes as a justification for their violent attacks against religious minorities. In addition to acts of violence and intimidation, the conditions of political, economic and social discrimination still weigh on the most numerous Christian communities in the Arab world. This condition makes Copts’ strategy and position clearly illustrative of the wider challenge that today’s Christians are experiencing in the region.

Since the uprising, the complex political situation of Egypt led to an evolution on the activism and political participation of the Coptic community, which confirm these aspects. Beside the claim of some Copts who stand alongside the President, with the Patriarch, afraid of becoming the new martyrs of the “religious war” conducted by jihadists, there is a dissident movement within the community that has long claimed a return of the Church to its original spiritual task. These are the voices of a large group of young Copts who

participated in the 2011 uprising and who became the bearer of demands for democracy, freedom and full political participation, freed from identity and sectarian dynamics.

But Al-Sisi's government still represents a barrier of protection and the guarantee of political stability for the Copts of Egypt. And the latest elections confirmed the positioning of the Christian community led by the Patriarch faithfully at the side of the *ra'is*, despite the voices of many young Copts and intellectuals have resonated with criticism towards the President's authoritarianism.