

Muslims and Copts together: Egypt's interfaith revolution

by [Paul-Gordon Chandler](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue



SIGN OF THE TIMES: A protester in Tahrir Square in Cairo carries a sign that affirms the multireligious character of Egypt. The protests brought down the 30-year regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Photo by Jeanette Rizk.

Unlike the other Middle Eastern countries experiencing popular uprisings, Egypt has a significant indigenous historic Christian presence, and Christians make up about 10 percent of the population. Perhaps one of the chief ramifications of the protests that overthrew Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was the way religious divisions were set aside in the process.

The groundwork for the interfaith element of the protests was laid after a bomb exploded on New Year's Eve outside a prominent Coptic church in Alexandria. Twenty-three people were killed instantly and more than 90 were seriously wounded. While this act of terrorism was meant to spark increased sectarian tension, it instead led to a movement throughout Egypt in which Muslims expressed their sorrow to Christians. Six days later, when Coptic Christians across the country celebrated Christmas, thousands of Muslims attended the services with them to show their solidarity. At church after church, Muslims formed human chains of protection around the buildings so their Christian brothers and sisters could observe

their Christmas Eve mass in safety.

As a direct result of the bombing, millions of Egyptians replaced their Facebook profile photos with the image of a cross within a crescent. In the streets, posters and bumper stickers were passed out all over Cairo and Alexandria showing the cross and crescent next to each other—often with the crescent embracing the cross—along with the phrase, "We are all Egyptians." Three weeks later, when young Muslims and Christians took to the streets in antigovernment protests, this interfaith solidarity was still evident.

One of the most moving of images in the media coverage was of a Coptic church service that Muslims helped arrange and which was held in Tahrir Square to honor those killed in the uprising. Even members of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood assisted as they protected the entrances to the square.

The service was conducted in a way to be sensitive to both faiths. For example, Jesus was addressed as both Yesua al-Masih ("Jesus the Messiah") and Isa ibn Maryam ("Isa, the son of Mary," the preferred Islamic title). The Christian leaders conducting the service called on all to pray together and love each other. These proclamations led the Muslim protesters present to chant "Eid Wahida, Eid Wahida," meaning "One Hand, One Hand!" (emphasizing the unity between Muslims and Christians), and "Allahu Akbar" (the distinctive Muslim confession, "God is great!"). Even Christians joined in chanting "Allahu Akbar"—something not frequently done by Egypt's Christian minority, even though the phrase at its core doesn't belong to a particular creed.

During the protests, Christian and Muslim neighbors throughout Egypt spontaneously came together to protect their neighborhoods. On the night of January 29, my own apartment building was assaulted nine times by mobs of armed looters, and each time we were protected by Muslim neighbors.

During the uncertain days of the protest, not a single church or synagogue (which are normally protected by machine-gun-bearing police) in the country was targeted. Christians were in no way threatened. In contrast, remarkable accounts emerged of Muslims protecting churches from the possibility of looting. A Muslim friend of mine takes great pride in saying he helped guard the historic fifth-century Hanging Church in Old Cairo, a site sacred to Coptic Christians.

One of the most encouraging images of what could be a "new Egypt" has been the spontaneous massive clean-up campaign taking place around the country in which Christians and Muslims from every segment of society are participating on a volunteer basis, working together to clean up and rebuild their cities.

Western Christians can help Egyptians walk the long hard road to a peaceful democracy that respects human rights by making their own effort to counter widespread Islamophobia. Western media have begun to demonize the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a group that not only renounced violence many years ago but has advocated publicly for the rights of Egypt's Christian minority.

The Cairo church I serve, St. John's, has used the arts as a medium to build bridges between Christians and Muslims. The church's [Caravan Festival of the Arts](#) was originally scheduled for the first week of February, and it was expected to bring together 45 premier Muslim and Christian artists. This arts festival—with the theme "My Neighbor"—had to be postponed due to the uprising, but many of the artists joined the protests in Tahrir Square. That number included Mohamed Abla, the country's premier contemporary artist, and the actor Khalid Abdalla, star of the film *The Kite Runner*, who courageously remained on the square for 18 days. Other scheduled artists, such as the Iranian-American writer Reza Aslan, sought out U.S. media to make their witness for interfaith harmony.

Many Egyptian Christians were disappointed by the cautious and guarded response to the protests expressed by Christian leaders. The Coptic pope, Shenouda III, issued an endorsement of President Mubarak and publicly forbade Coptic Christians from participating in the protests. "The things that are happening now are against God's will," he said on national television. Some official Coptic Orthodox representatives were visible in the pro-Mubarak rallies organized on behalf of the government. Some Coptic bishops publicly condemned the "spirit of insurgency" within their church's youth.

This was a profound miscalculation. Thousands of young Copts disregarded their pope's comments and joined the protests with their Muslim brothers and sisters.

Some Egyptian church authorities have expressed concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood and its possible increasing influence in shaping the new Egypt. Many of the country's Christians fear that they will be marginalized in the end and that the objectives of the revolution, started by the youth, will be hijacked by the Muslim

Brotherhood. Some Christian leaders have begun to talk about the possibility that Egypt will become an Islamic state like Iran, and they speak of preparing to suffer martyrdom.

But many others think this is an unnecessary overreaction. It is important to remember that the Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence many years ago (hence it has been denounced by al-Qaeda) and has advocated for the rights of Egypt's Christian minority. The Muslim Brotherhood is known for its pleas for reform, for an independent judiciary and for political, civil and religious liberties.

During the recent Day of Victory on February 11, the one-week anniversary celebration of the ouster of Mubarak, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Sunni cleric who has been exiled from Egypt since 1961, delivered his first public sermon in his homeland in 50 years. A popular television cleric whose program reaches an audience of tens of millions worldwide, al-Qaradawi is an inspiration to the Muslim Brotherhood. At the age of 84, he returned to Egypt following Mubarak's ouster and spoke to a crowd of more than a million gathered in the square.

In his sermon al-Qaradawi struck themes of democracy and pluralism, long hallmarks of his writing and preaching. Interestingly, he began his sermon by saying he was discarding the customary opening "Oh Muslims" in favor of "Oh Muslims and Copts"—a reference to Egypt's Coptic Christian minority. He praised Muslims and Christians for standing together in Egypt's revolution and highlighted how Christians protected their Muslim compatriots while they prayed in Tahrir Square. He even lauded the Coptic faithful who once fought against the Roman and Byzantine empires. "I invite you to bow down in prayer together," he said. The pluralistic emphasis in his sermon highlighted the new interfaith worldview of the young audience standing before him.