

Egyptians say Christian party is not the answer

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Despite continuous attacks on Coptic Christians, a delegation of Egyptian Christian leaders said Wednesday (Feb. 8) they do not support the development of a Christian political party as a possible solution.

"We don't need to add more divisions than what we have," said Atef Gendy, president of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, who addressed a Washington summit hosted by the World Evangelical Alliance.

"I think abstaining from religious parties will help even more, and working with reasonable, moderate Muslims will provide much stability to the country."

Coptic Christians, who constitute about 10 percent of the mostly Muslim country's population, are fearful of continuing repression as candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood and ultraconservative Salafis gained the majority of parliament seats in recent elections.

Ramez Atallah, general director of the Bible Society of Egypt, held up his cell phone that contained an email message about a fatwa, or religious edict, that warned that a planned general strike on Saturday violated Islam. Demonstrators were planning the strike to mark the one-year anniversary of the overthrow of the regime of former President Hosni Mubarak. "It's a perfect example of what we are terrified of," he said.

Andrea Zaki Stephanous, general director of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, said he thinks religion and politics can and should have a "positive relationship" in his country.

"Religion can contribute to the value system that will judge the political and economic system," he said in an interview. He opposes a religious system that does not allow for legitimate "critique."

The Rev. Geoff Tunnicliffe, secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, said it was important for the dozens of evangelical representatives of business, relief and human rights groups to hear the Egyptian leaders' stance on the changing political dynamics in their country.

"We would strongly support what our Egyptian colleagues are saying," he said in an interview. "If there's this move in Egypt to turn it into a religious context politically then they just become a very small voice in that."