

Coptic Christian ex-patriots keep a wary eye on Egyptian elections

by [Lilly Fowler](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service LOS ANGELES (RNS) Abdel was born into a Muslim family in Egypt but embraced Christianity about 15 years ago. The decision eventually landed him in prison.

The government in Cairo does not recognize the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, which meant his children were forced to take Islamic religious courses in school. Job ads in his homeland often specified that Coptic Christians need not apply, and some establishments turned him away.

After distributing Christian pamphlets, Abdel was sentenced to nine days in jail.

"Any threat that you can think of, I've heard it," said Abdel, who emigrated from Egypt about a year ago. He was so fearful of retribution for his family that he asked that only his first name be used. "All this happened under a secular government. So what's coming after this is going to be 10 times worse."

Like thousands of other Christians in Egypt, Abdel, 42, fled his home in Cairo in part because of religious persecution. About 8 to 12 percent of Egyptians (6 to 10 million people) are Christian, the majority of them members of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The fate of Copts looks as tenuous as ever as Egyptians struggle to determine who won this weekend's first-ever democratic presidential elections. Presented with what many saw as a lose-lose proposition, Egyptians had a choice between Ahmed Shafiq, former prime minister of ousted leader Hosni Mubarak, or Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who many fear will turn the country into an Islamic state.

Though final results are not yet in, the Muslim Brotherhood has projected its candidate as the winner. Within hours, Egypt's military caretaker government, which is seen as sympathetic to Mubarak's old regime, issued an interim constitution that granted itself broad power.

Carl Moeller, who leads the Southern California-based Open Doors USA, an organization that works with persecuted Christians worldwide, estimates that approximately 100,000 Coptic Christians abandoned the country for the U.S. or Europe last year following the turbulence of the Arab Spring and attacks on Coptic churches.

"The whole social climate has been strongly encouraging Christians to leave," Moeller said.

New communities of Coptic Christians have formed not only in Southern California, but in Houston and Detroit, Moeller said

The U.S. State Department's 2010 International Religious Freedom report echoed claims of discrimination in job hiring, especially in Egypt's public university system.

And a 2011 report by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life ranked Egypt in the top 5 percent of all countries on both government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion.

According to Brian Grim, senior researcher and lead author of the Pew report, government officials have often tried to prevent Coptic Christians from constructing new churches or improve existing ones. The Egyptian government has also "failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Coptic Christians in a number of cases," which "contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults."

Yet life in the U.S. is not necessarily easy for those who choose to leave. Abdel said it's difficult to do his Christian missionary work here when so much of American society seems consumed by materialism.

Reda and son Robert, also Coptic Orthodox Christians from Egypt who asked that only their first names be used, immigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s. Now they help other Egyptian Coptic Christians who escape to Southern California.

Reda, who works as a contractor, helps fellow Christians do anything from find a place to live, obtain a Social Security card, or get a driver's license.

"When they get here they have no clue how society runs," Robert said.

But the Rev. Joseph Boules, a priest at St. Mary & St. Verena Coptic Orthodox Church in Anaheim, Calif., says it's important to remember the situation is precarious for

many in Egyptian society, not just Coptic Christians.

"The situation right now is grim because of the lack of order in the country," Boules said, referring to what he sees as the lawlessness that pervaded Egypt after the revolution.

"The Christians were already persecuted before the revolution," Boules said. Now, he said, the situation is bad for everyone.

Yet, Boules says he is optimistic about what the future may hold for the country and in specific, Coptic Christians.

"We firmly believe in God's protection in his people," Boules said. "We have that hope that we are in the hands of God."