An antidote to religious strife in Egypt: nationalism

by Monique El-Faizy

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CAIRO (RNS) After decades of polarization along religious lines, Christians and Muslims in Egypt are coming together to rally behind their flag.

The country is in the midst of a swell of nationalism that began during the revolution in 2011 and intensified when citizens took to the streets in June of this year to call for the removal of President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egyptian flags adorn houses and buildings throughout the capital, and everything — from sandbags buttressing military blockades to pillars along the Nile Corniche — has been painted in the national colors of black, white and red.

These sentiments have served to unite Christians and Muslims. In recent decades, Christians had become increasingly cloistered — a trend of “closed communalism” that Gamal Soltan, professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, said has been building since the 1970s. That began to change during the revolution in 2011.

The 18 days of demonstrations during the first Tahrir Square uprising ushered in poignant displays of interreligious unity, with protesters sharing prayers and holding aloft Bibles and Qurans. Political writer and commentator Bassem Sabry called this the “grass-roots manifestation” of nationalistic coexistence.

It was Morsi’s presidency, though, that truly gave Christians and Muslims common cause. While Christians feared the rise of an Islamist state in which they would suffer open discrimination and persecution, many Muslims also objected to the Islamization of Egypt, which has historically been a pious but moderate country.

During his tenure, Morsi was viewed as disregarding Egypt's non-Islamist majority, reneging on promises to appoint an inclusive Cabinet and pushing through an agenda that seemed to confirm suspicions he was working to enact the Brotherhood's goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate.

It was that seeming indifference to the will of the majority that led to the intense backlash.

"Everybody is united against the Muslim Brotherhood," said Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of the Coptic Christian newspaper Watani.

The last time nationalist sentiment was this strong was in 1919, when Egyptians staged near-daily demonstrations across the country to protest British rule. That was also a time of heightened interfaith accord. Essential to the political rhetoric of the day was the notion that Christians and Muslims were the two elements of the Egyptian nation. Known as the 1919 Revolution, those uprisings eventually led to Britain granting Egypt its independence.

Once again, Christians and Muslims view themselves as coming together to fight a common enemy.

"Whenever they feel a collective threat, that feeling of patriotism re-emerges and is revived," said Saad Eddin Ibrahim, founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies and professor of political sociology at the American University in Cairo.

"Nowadays, with the Muslim Brotherhood about to Islamicize the country … there is an overreaction by both the Copts and the majority of Muslims against the attempts of the Muslim Brotherhood to demolish or to abolish the integrity of Egypt," he said.

When Defense Minister Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took to the airwaves on July 3 to announce Morsi's removal, he was surrounded by a coalition of leaders representing different sectors of Egyptian society, including the Coptic pope and the grand sheikh of Cairo's Al Azhar, considered the highest authority of Sunni Islamic thought.

Ibrahim drew a distinction between nationalism, which at times in Egypt's past has been more about pan-Arabism and, by definition, excluded Christians, and what's happening today, which he classified as patriotism.

“That is a loyalty to the land, to a country, a sense of belonging,” he explained. “That is where the Copts feel very patriotic, because they are the original inhabitants of the country.”

The word “Copt” is derived from the ancient Greek word for Egypt, Ibrahim elaborated. Arabs didn’t arrive in Egypt until the seventh century, bringing Islam with them.

Egyptian nationalism is the broad umbrella under which a coalition of anti-Brotherhood forces has assembled, but there is a difference between today’s events and those of the early 20th century. Back then, the threat was external; now it comes from within Egypt and consists of Islamist internationalism.

While Christians and non-Islamists may be joined in their antipathy for the Muslim Brotherhood, a significant percentage of the population in Egypt remains sympathetic to the group. And the current sectarian amity is likely largely confined to the upper and upper-middle classes, political observers said. The lower classes are more conservative and are dominated by Islamists, Soltan pointed out.

So, while Egypt is enveloped in a mantle of goodwill, deep fissures still divide the country. And although the Brotherhood is off the political stage for the time being, what the future will look like is far from clear. The constitution is still being rewritten. Parliamentary and then presidential elections await. All of those things have the potential to unite, or to divide.

“The question is,” Sabry said, “what happens after the euphoria subsides?”