

Egypt's Copts face rising fears, divisions after attacks

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Some women in Upper Egypt donned black in mourning on Easter Sunday. A week after the biggest coordinated attacks in decades against one of the oldest Christian sects in the world, many Coptic churches in Egypt held their liturgical prayers without festivity and some worshipers were afraid to attend services.

Two suicide bombings on Palm Sunday killed 45 people and wounded more than 120 at St. George's Church in Tanta and St. Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria, causing a surge of anxiety and anger through the 10-million-strong Coptic community.

Fadia Ibrahim, a 53-year-old homemaker in Minya, worries especially about her 27-year-old son, Paul.

"Before the Palm Sunday bombs I was worried about Paul's ability to make a good living," she said. "Now I worry about his safety."

While Egyptian security services said investigations into the attacks were ongoing, provincial officials in Tanta said cameras installed at St. George's Church show that a suicide bomber had easy access to the church because the metal detector at the gate was out of service. That's just one more strike against those who have promised to keep Copts safe, say community members.

"There is a huge failure to limit terrorism in Egypt," said Hany Riad, a 43-year-old Coptic social worker in Cairo.

The self-described Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the Palm Sunday bombings, as well as the deadly December bombing at St. Peter and Paul's Church in Cairo. In February the group put out a video declaring Copts—the largest Christian community in North Africa and the Middle East—to be their "favorite prey." Around that time, several Copts living in the Sinai were murdered, prompting hundreds of families to flee their homes.

[IS also claimed an attack on April 18, killing a police officer guarding St. Catherine's monastery in the southern Sinai and injuring four others. The sixth-century monastery is connected to the Eastern Orthodox church.]

Riad, like others in Egypt, said President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi's counterterrorism measures have not only failed to keep people safe but caused a militarization of Egypt's society and economy, which he thinks has retarded wider economic growth and paved the way for the spread of fundamentalist Islamism.

"Instead of religious enlightenment we have discouraged youth in Egypt, willing to blow themselves up as a reaction to their marginalization," he said.

Copts, who make up an estimated 10 percent of the country's population, rely upon the Egyptian government to protect them. They are integrated into Egyptian society, yet they suffer routine discrimination. The community is seen as complicit in the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi, who was backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, and in the days after his ouster, scores of churches across the country were set on fire and Christian-owned businesses and Coptic organizations came under attack.

President el-Sisi has pushed for the "renewal of religious discourse," an official phrase used for efforts to get state-supported clerics to reinterpret Islamic doctrines of jihad and inculcate a commitment to coexistence between Muslims and Christians.

Some Copts scoff at the attempt because it has failed to stop attacks against them. Fady Victor, 38-year-old owner of an advertising agency, was seated in the seventh pew back from the altar of the church in Tanta when the explosion ripped through the sanctuary.

"My face and my body were hit by debris and parts of the exploded victims," Victor said. "So personally, I would prefer silence over the renewal of religious discourse."

[The World Council of Churches expressed hope for solidarity among Egyptians of all faiths, noting in a statement that the head of Al-Azhar university and mosque, Egypt's leading authority in Sunni Muslim learning, condemned the Palm Sunday attacks.]

In an interview with the WCC, Bishop Thomas of the Coptic churches in El-Quosia, Upper Egypt, spoke about the church's response to the attacks, including providing for families financially and pastorally and celebrating the dead as martyrs.

"Don't think that we don't mourn!" he said. "But in martyrdom there is both at the same time: the pain of the cross and the joy of salvation. Just take the example of Mary, the Mother of God. She had to give her child, but she rejoiced in God. This is what Christians in Egypt feel."]

In a first for an Egyptian president, el-Sisi attended Coptic masses officiated by Pope Tawadros II, seen as one of the key pillars of support for the current administration. El-Sisi visited St. Mark's Cathedral again on Maundy Thursday.

"These acts will not harm the unity and cohesion of the people," said Tawadros, who had been presiding over the liturgy on Palm Sunday at St. Mark's but left before the suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt.

Still, the violence has opened up arguments about politics and Coptic doctrine.

"Normally Easter brings families and generations together," said Wael Gally, a 40-year-old lawyer from Mansoura, a city northeast of Tanta. "Families exchange visits and the eyes of the little kids light up when they receive gifts of new clothes."

Gally imagined that many families argued instead on Easter this year. He worries that some Copts are influenced by ideas about Christian martyrdom, citing a popular Coptic TV preacher, Boules George, who thanked the bombers for "allowing Christians to leave this Earth."

"Now for the first time you see real splits in the community, with some blaming the alliance with el-Sisi for our predicament and danger and others defending the crackdown on all dissent and accepting the current situation as a part of Christian faithfulness," Gally said. —Religion News Service; information added from other reports

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