

Egyptian Copts angry at authorities' broken promises after pilgrims massacred

Copts, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population, have seen increasing violence against them since 2013.

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Makarios, the Coptic bishop of Minya, Egypt, spent a weekend among mourners after two buses carrying Coptic Christians were ambushed as they left a monastery, killing seven of the pilgrims and wounding 19.

At Prince Tadros Church, when the bishop thanked provincial officials for issuing the necessary permits to conduct public funerals, the congregation erupted in anger.

"Don't thank them," the mourners shouted, as elderly women leaned in grief over the coffins of the victims.

"With our souls and our blood, we will protect the cross," they chanted, as young men started pumping their fists in the air.

The attack November 2 was the second assault at the same location claimed by the Egyptian branch of the self-described Islamic State. A May 2017 ambush on the road to the monastery left 28 people dead. Coptic Christians say they have had enough of promises from the authorities.

"Government ministers talk about our common citizenship, a concept that is impossible to see when we are constantly subjected to violence," said Kamel Hanna, who had come to stand vigil at Sheikh Zayed Hospital in Cairo's suburbs, where his niece and nephew, along with 11 others injured in the attack, were being treated. "This violence is a tax we pay just for being Christians."

Copts, who make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 100 million people, have seen increasing violence against their community since 2013, when the country's first democratically elected president, the Islamist-backed Mohamed Morsi, was deposed by the army. The months after the coup saw multiple attacks on churches.

A year ago, a gunman killed 11 people in an attack on St. Menas Church in Helwan, near Cairo. That attack came just weeks after the Coptic community had marked the anniversary of a suicide bombing that killed 29 and injured 47 at St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, part of the cathedral complex that includes the Cairo residence of Pope Tawadros II.

Tawadros and the Coptic community have been seen as a pillar of support for the coup leader and current president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Fearful of Morsi's Islamist tendencies, many Copts joined the popular unrest leading to his ouster. Coptic priests have since encouraged their congregations to turn out to vote for el-Sisi, characterizing him and Egypt's armed forces as their protector.

El-Sisi has shown favor to the Coptic churches in return. He has allowed the construction of new churches and pushed for equal protection in employment and the exercise of religion, including a measure easing the way for Christians to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem just as Muslims take time off to make the hajj to Mecca.

Last Christmas el-Sisi attended a dedication ceremony at the massive Nativity of Christ Cathedral, built in the government's new administrative capital, a \$45 billion project rising in the desert 28 miles east of Cairo.

Some Coptic clergy—normally reticent to express themselves politically—are questioning whether this year's Christmas festivities should be held at the cathedral.

"It's a show in the new capital," said Matthias Nasr, a 59-year-old Cairo priest. "We are slaves to a system—it's in a polite way. But even most of the Christian media misleads the public to appease the regime."

Nasr sees the relationship between Egyptian Christians and the government as continuing the discriminatory practices of medieval Islam, even as it wears a modern secular mask.

"The message continues to be . . . you are *dhimmi*," he said, referring to the Arabic term for non-Muslims historically subjected to special protection taxes. "But in front

of the Western world we will present you as equal citizens.”

The regime is also coming under fire for limiting access to the hospitals where the injured are being treated in Cairo and in Upper Egypt.

“Officials are preventing anyone from entering the hospital and reassuring the injured because the attacks show the serious flaws in their security system,” said Steven Rauf, a 20-year-old Coptic Christian medical student at Ain Shams University. He had come to see a high school friend, Youssef Nadi, whom he heard had two bullet wounds in his head and shrapnel in his right hand.

El-Sisi condemned the Minya attack while attending a government-organized youth forum.

“The martyrs who fell today at the treacherous hands of those who seek to undermine our nation’s coherent fabric and I vow our continuing determination to fight terrorism,” he said. “This incident will not undermine the will of our nation to continue its battle for survival and construction.”

A few days after the attack, an Interior Ministry spokesman said security forces killed 19 suspects who were tracked to a desert hideout. The ministry also released photographs of corpses it said were the bodies of the armed assailants of the pilgrims.

But after the attack even some pro-government politicians ceased offering a blanket endorsement of the administration’s approach. Many Coptic youth shared social media memes contrasting the grief of the Minya families with the smiles on the faces of el-Sisi and other Egyptian leaders at the youth forum.

Nadia Henry, a Coptic member of parliament representing metropolitan Cairo, believes continuing terrorism shows a need not only for better police training but also development of an education system dedicated to diversity.

“We need to face radical thought, not just through security measures but also deploying the culture, information, education, and religious departments to fundamentally change attitudes,” Henry said. “Of course, there have been security lapses, but remember, there are terrorist attacks that also strike Muslims.”

Some Copts are more explicitly critical.

“We have no presidencies defending us, only the Lord Almighty,” said Peter Basilious, a pharmacist. “There is disregard of the blood of the Copts that is repeated because of our peaceful piety and the church’s non-escalation policy that looks only for justice in heaven.” —Religion News Service

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