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The Price of Patronage: Coptic Marginalization and Egypt's Church-State Alliance

By Sara Allam Shaltout

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1. The Establishment of the Ottoman Millet System

The millet system, a hallmark of Ottoman governance, was a mechanism designed to manage the Empire's diverse religious and ethnic communities. Often traced back to the investiture of Patriarch Gennadios by Fatih Sultan Mehmet II in 1454, the millet framework formalized the relationship between religious leaders and the Ottoman state, positioning figures like patriarchs as both spiritual and political authorities.[1] Under this system, communities such as Christians, Jews and Muslims were legally recognized and granted autonomy over personal status matters like marriage, divorce and inheritance. Millet leaders were responsible for tax collection, internal governance and ensuring loyalty to the Empire. While the system was formally institutionalized during the *Ṭanẓīmāt* reforms (1839–1876), its legacy continues to shape church-state relations in Egypt today, with profound consequences for the citizenship and rights of the Coptic[2] minority.

In the Egyptian context, the millet system's legacy has entrenched a model of communal governance that continues to shape the political and social position of the Coptic minority.[3] Although Egypt formally ended Ottoman rule in the early twentieth century, the Coptic Orthodox Church[4] has retained considerable authority over its members, particularly in matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. This arrangement has reinforced a communal identity centred on religious belonging, often at the expense of national citizenship. As a result, Copts are positioned less as equal citizens under a unified legal framework and more as church subjects whose rights and protections are mediated through religious institutions.[5] This structural dynamic has made Copts vulnerable to identity-based violence, particularly in moments of political upheaval, such as the attacks following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013. Understanding this legacy is essential for addressing the challenges of achieving equal citizenship and developing policy solutions that protect religious minorities in modern Egypt.

2. Reinforcement of a Neo-Millet System

During the 1950s, an unlikely alliance emerged between President Gamal Abdel Nasser[6] and the leadership of the Coptic Church, driven by a shared desire to weaken the influence of Coptic landowners and elites. Nasser aimed to eliminate these figures due to their ties to the monarchy and the old political order, while the Church hierarchy viewed them as competitors for control over ecclesiastical wealth and endowments.[7] This convergence of interests led to a co-ordinated effort to sideline the Coptic elite. In the aftermath, the Egyptian state began to officially recognize the Coptic patriarch not only as a spiritual leader, but also as the primary political representative of the Coptic community. This status has enabled successive patriarchs to consolidate the Coptic Orthodox Church's authority as the central institution in the everyday lives of most Copts.[8]

1 Tom Papademetriou, *Render unto the Sultan: Power, Authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Early Ottoman Centuries*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 19–27.

2 The word 'Copt' historically referred to all Egyptians but gradually came to denote Egyptian Christians, especially adherents of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Today, it carries both religious and ethnic-cultural meanings – identifying a Christian who belongs to the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Church of Alexandria and also someone who claims a distinct Egyptian Christian heritage. For a detailed discussion, see Maged S.A. Mikhail, *The Copts: A Brief History*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 2014, pp. 1–17.

3 Vivan Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernisation and Identity*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2011, p. 23.

4 The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, tracing its foundation to St. Mark the Evangelist in the first century CE. It developed as a distinct theological and ecclesiastical tradition within Egypt, and, by the fifth century, played a central role in shaping Christian doctrine. The Church rejected the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE due to disagreements over Christological definitions, especially its formulation that Christ has two natures, divine and human, "without confusion or separation". Instead, the Coptic Church, following the teachings of Cyril of Alexandria, upheld a Miaphysite Christology: that Christ is one incarnate nature (*mia physis*) of the Word of God, both fully divine and fully human. This theological division led to the schism between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches, marking the Coptic Orthodox Church as part of the Oriental Orthodox communion. See Mikhail, 2014, pp. 18–31, *supra* note 2.

5 Fiona McCallum, "Christian Responses to Islam in the Modern Context", in Anthony O'Mahony and Emma Loosley (eds.), *Christian Responses to Islam: Muslim-Christian Relations in the Modern World*, Manchester University Press, 2008, pp. 67–77.

6 The rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser following the 1952 Free Officers' coup marked the beginning of post-colonial Egypt and its transformation from a monarchy to a republic. Nasser's regime positioned itself as a revolutionary, anti-imperialist state that sought to dismantle colonial legacies and establish a modern, independent Egypt. His government emphasized Arab nationalism, state-led development, and anti-Western alignment, reshaping Egypt's political, social and religious structures in the post-colonial era. See, generally, Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 273–298.

7 Ibrahim, 2011, p. 177, see *supra* note 3.

8 Paul Sedra, "Copts and the Millet Partnership: The Intra-Communal Dynamics Behind Egyptian Sectarianism", in *Journal of Law and Religion*, 2014, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 491–509.

As Sanna Hassan, insightfully observes in her book, this transformation was paradoxical: Nasser's authoritarian regime, in weakening liberal institutions such as the Parliament and the Communal Council – spaces where Coptic elites once held sway – unintentionally trained the Church to assume a political role in their absence.[9] It is worth noting that in 1955, Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to abolish the millet courts, which had previously overseen personal status laws for non-Muslims and had been in effect prior to the 1952 coup. From that point on, non-Muslim citizens were brought before civil courts, which nevertheless continued to apply their own religious laws. As a result, the Church came to play both a legal and spiritual role in matters of marriage and divorce – a practice that continues to this day. In this context, the Church functions both as a registrar of marriage contracts, exercising a state-like authority, and as the religious institution responsible for administering spiritual rites and doctrines. This dual function is a key feature of the new millet-like system referenced earlier.[10]

3. The Pope and the President Saga

Building on the political legacy left by Nasser, Anwar Sadat's presidency (1970–1981) marked a turning point in the state's relationship with religious institutions, particularly the Coptic Church. Sadat's era began with the enthronement of Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012),[11] who succeeded Pope Kyrillos VI. This transition introduced two markedly different personalities to the political and religious landscape. For several reasons, the relationship between these two figures became increasingly conflictual, ultimately culminating in Pope Shenouda's house arrest in 1981 – just one month before President Sadat's assassination. Contributing factors included the rise of Islámist groups, a surge in sectarian violence, and the emergence of Coptic emigrants in the United States as a vocal lobby opposing Sadat's policies.[12] Additionally, Pope Shenouda's assertive and revolutionary leadership style stood in stark contrast to that of his predecessor, further intensifying tensions with the regime.[13]

However, this period marked a renewed relevance of the millet system, offering an opportunity to reshape its dynamics. The pope emerged as both the spiritual and political representative of the Copts in negotiations with the state. As Islámic movements increasingly dominated the public sphere, many Copts gradually withdrew from civic life and turned to the Church as their primary sphere of engagement. In doing so, the Coptic Orthodox Church expanded its influence, assuming not only spiritual authority, but also central roles in the community's social, cultural and political life.[14] One of the key implications of the evolving millet-like system was the Church's 1971 decision to abolish the 1938 personal status regulation governing Coptic family law and replace it with a new framework.[15] The 1938 regulation had allowed for divorce on several grounds, including domestic violence, severe illness and adultery. However, under Pope Shenouda III's leadership, the Church restricted the grounds for divorce to adultery alone, framing this change as a means of safeguarding the sanctity of the Coptic family. The lives and futures of many were effectively put on hold due to the Church's restrictive stance on divorce. This policy governed Coptic personal status matters until 2016 – five years after Pope Shenouda's death – when his successor introduced a new regulation intended to address the hardships and complexities created by the earlier restrictions.[16]

The Mubarak era (1981–2011) presented a more nuanced phase in church-state relations, shaped by its longevity over three decades. Unlike the relatively harmonious rapport between Nasser and Pope Kyrillos VI, or the highly conflictual dynamic between Sadat and Pope Shenouda III, Mubarak's relationship with the Church was marked by a mix of co-operation and tension. It cannot be characterized as either fully collaborative or openly adversarial, but rather as a fluctuating relationship shaped by shifting political and social conditions. Tadros describes the first two decades of Mubarak's presidency as a period of tactical agreements between the pope and the president.[17] After enduring four years of house arrest under Sadat – a punishment that formally ended only three years after Sadat's assassination in 1981 – Pope Shenouda adopted a less confrontational stance toward incidents of sectarian violence. In return for his political support, including public endorsements of Mubarak's regime and the National Democratic Party during elections, the Pope secured certain concessions.[18] These included greater ease in obtaining permits to build churches and the nomination of Coptic figures for presidential appointments in Parliament.

However, this tacit pact gradually gave way to a more complex and strained relationship beginning in 2004, marked most notably by the *Wafaa Constantine* incident. Wafaa, the wife of a Coptic priest, reportedly went to a police station seeking to convert to Islám. In response, the Church intervened and pressured the state apparatus to return her to Church custody, following large demonstrations by Copts at the cathedral. Wafaa was subsequently returned to the Church, which later announced that she had reaffirmed her Christian faith. Despite this resolution, tensions emerged between Pope Shenouda and state officials who viewed the Church's mobilization of Coptic protestors as a challenge to state authority.[19]

This incident highlighted the deep entrenchment of the *neo-millet* system and its implications for the everyday lives of Copts. In this case, the Church acted as a guardian of the community, mediating with the state to halt what it perceived as a religious defection. This mode of church-state engagement between Pope Shenouda and President Mubarak persisted until 2011, when Mubarak was ousted following the 'January 25 Revolution' of 2011. One year later, in 2012, Pope Shenouda III also passed away, marking the end

9 S.S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 13.

10 Sara Shaltout, "Personal Status Law for Christians – Why are the State and Church not Considering Civil Marriage?", in *Alternative Policy Solutions*, 25 March 2024.

11 Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012) emerged as a central figure in the Coptic revival movement that began in the mid-twentieth century. His leadership was marked by a strong emphasis on religious education, ecclesiastical discipline and the consolidation of Coptic identity in a period of increasing Islámization and social marginalization. As Sanaa Hassan notes, Pope Shenouda III was "a charismatic figure who symbolized the spiritual and political revival of the community", and his papacy reflected both theological conservatism and institutional assertiveness in the face of state pressure and sectarian tension. See Sanaa Hassan, *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 103–123.

12 McCallum, 2008, pp. 69–70, see *supra* note 5.

13 Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2009, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 270–283.

14 Laura Guirguis, *Copts and the Security State: Violence, Coercion, and Sectarianism in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 57–65.

15 Ron Shaham, "Communal Identity, Political Islam and Family Law: Copts and the Debate over the Grounds for Dissolution of Marriage in Twentieth Century Egypt", in *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 2010, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 409–422.

16 Sebastian Elsässer, "The Coptic Divorce Struggle in Contemporary Egypt", in *Social Compass*, 2019, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 333–351.

17 Tadros, 2009, pp. 270–281, see *supra* note 13.

18 *Ibid*.

19 *Ibid*.

of a significant era in the relations between Copts and the Egyptian state.

4. The Church as a Propaganda Vehicle for the State

The January 25 Revolution witnessed the active participation of Copts alongside Muslims, united in their call for political change. However, sectarian incidents quickly resurfaced, highlighting the persistent fragility of inter-communal relations. In 2012, the election of Mohamed Morsi, a president affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood – a group long associated with hostility toward Copts – marked a particularly dark moment for the community. Many Copts feared the resurgence of Islámist influence, having suffered for years from the violence of Islámic movements.

Just one year later, on 30 June 2013, a military-led coup ousted Morsi's administration, signalling the return of military dominance in Egyptian politics. On 3 July 2013, then-Defence Minister General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi appeared on national television alongside a group of political and religious leaders to announce a new roadmap for Egypt following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government. Among those present was Pope Tawadros II (2012–) whose participation signalled the Church's public endorsement of the transition. This moment is widely regarded as the beginning of a renewed church-state pact, even before El-Sisi formally assumed the presidency. A year later, El-Sisi began his presidency with strong support from the Coptic community, who largely viewed him as a saviour from Islámist rule. In a symbolic gesture, he attended Christmas Eve Mass in 2015 at the Coptic Cathedral – a move not seen since the era of President Nasser – signalling a new era of engagement. Over time, however, the Church began to appear as a vehicle for political propaganda in support of the new regime, particularly as El-Sisi sought to counter the international narrative that framed the 2013 events as a coup. Notably, Pope Tawadros II delegated two bishops to the United States to organize pro-Sisi demonstrations during his visit to the United Nations Security Council, promoting the view that the 2013 uprising was a popular revolution rather than a military takeover.[20]

5. Copts Targeted by Terrorist Attacks

This close church-state alignment made the Coptic community increasingly vulnerable to terrorist attacks by Islámist actors, who strategically targeted churches between 2014 and 2018. In August 2013, following the violent dispersal of the *Rábi'áh al-'adawíyyah* sit-in – where Egyptian security forces killed over 800 supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsi – retaliatory violence erupted across the country. More than 42 churches were burned by Morsi's supporters in apparent revenge against Copts who were perceived to have backed the regime.[21] In December 2016, a suicide bombing carried out by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ('ISIS') struck the St. Peter and St. Paul Church in Cairo, killing 29 and injuring 46. In February 2017, seven Christians were killed in North Sinai, prompting the displacement of numerous Coptic families seeking safety in other regions. Two months later, in April 2017, twin bombings targeted Palm Sunday services at churches in Alexandria – where Pope Tawadros II was present – and in Tanta, resulting in the death of at least 30 worshippers. Further violence occurred in May 2017 and again in 2018, when masked gunmen ambushed buses carrying pilgrims to the Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor in Minya, killing 28 Copts in the first attack and seven in the second.

Today, many churches in Cairo resemble fortresses, surrounded by tight security measures implemented by the government at nearly every place of worship across the country. These heightened precautions are a direct response to a wave of violence in recent years, during which Copts have become a primary target of ISIS terrorist attacks – a heavy price paid by Copts in part for the Church's involvement in politics.[22]

6. Religious Identity Overrides Civic Belonging for Coptic Community

From a legislative standpoint, the El-Sisi regime introduced in 2016 the first law regulating the construction and renovation of churches[23] – an issue that had long been a major source of sectarian tension in Egypt. This was accompanied by a significant increase in Coptic representation in Parliament, with the introduction of a *quota* system that led to the unprecedented election or appointment of 36 Copts in 2015 – the highest number in Egypt's history.[24] While this was publicly celebrated as a step forward for Coptic political inclusion, it was also largely the product of the church-state alliance. The Church not only endorsed this narrative, but also played an active role in nominating candidates, continuing a practice dating back to the Mubarak era. This reflects the enduring logic of a modernized millet system, in which the Church remains the principal political representative of Copts, even within supposedly democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, this narrative of progress is routinely instrumentalized to legitimize the regime's broader authoritarian agenda, under the banners of counterterrorism, national unity and the prevention of sectarian strife. The disparity between official rhetoric and the lived experience of Copts is stark. Despite increased parliamentary visibility, Copts have seen little substantive improvement in their daily lives. On the contrary, with growing restrictions on freedom of expression and civil society, they are largely unable to voice their concerns – whether through ecclesiastical channels, the media or independent organizations. The state continues to suppress any advocacy for human rights, equality and democratic reform, framing such efforts as threats to national security and public order.[25]

This silencing of dissent extends beyond political participation and into deeply personal matters, most notably in the area of personal status law for Copts. One of the most contentious issues affecting the daily lives of Coptic citizens, the personal status law – particularly regarding marriage and divorce – remains entirely under the Church's jurisdiction rather than that of the state. As mentioned earlier, the current controversy dates back to 1971, when Pope Shenouda III annulled the 1938 regulation that had previously allowed divorce on several grounds, including domestic violence, severe illness and irreconcilable differences, narrowing it instead to adultery as the sole acceptable reason. In the final years of his papacy, this policy became a growing source of tension, as an increasing number of Copts protested against Church authorities in frustration over unresolved marital disputes. Upon assuming the papacy, Pope Tawadros II inherited this crisis, facing thousands of cases from separated individuals seeking formal divorce and permission to remarry – requests that remained in limbo under the Church's strict framework. Within just a few years of his papacy, Pope Tawadros II

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20 Candace Lukasik, *Martyrs and Migrants: Coptic Christians and the Persecution Politics of US Empire*, New York University Press, 2025, pp. 126–129.

21 Georgeos Fahmi, "The Coptic Church and Politics in Egypt", in *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, 18 December 2014.

22 Alessia Melcangi and Paolo Maggiolini, "Christians Navigating through Middle East Turbulences: The Case of the Copts in Egypt", in Laura Zanfrini (ed.), *Migrants and Religion: Paths, Issues, and Lenses*, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden, 2020, pp. 175–204.

23 Sara Allam Shaltout, "'No Masses Without Muslims' Approval": The Crisis of Building and Restoring Churches in Egypt: Three Case Studies from ElMinya Governorate", Master's Thesis, American University in Cairo, 2022, pp. 15–33.

24 *Ibid*.

25 Esmat Elsayed, "Copts in Egypt: Between Minority Protection and Power Leveraging", in *IRIS Catalogo dei prodotti della ricerca*, 2020, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 15–19.

initiated a significant overhaul of the Church's approach to divorce by reforming the Clerical Council – the ecclesiastical court system established under Pope Shenouda III. He also succeeded in bringing the Holy Synod to agree on more liberal provisions regarding the granting of divorces and annulments. This shift marked a major departure from the restrictive framework that had governed Coptic family life for decades. By revisiting and revising the Church's strict interpretation of divorce law, Tawadros appeared to acknowledge the growing pressure from within the community and the need for a more compassionate and realistic response to personal crises. At the same time, the lived experiences of divorced Copts reveal the complex paths many have taken to navigate a legal and ecclesiastical system that often left them in limbo. The reform of the Clerical Council opens a new chapter in the largely uncharted territory of Coptic divorce, raising questions about the balance between tradition, authority and the lived realities of Coptic believers.[26]

Since 2015, the Egyptian state has held ongoing meetings with Christian leaders from all denominations in an attempt to draft a unified personal status law for non-Muslims. Yet, these meetings have remained confined to clergy representatives, excluding civil society actors and the very Copts whose lives are directly impacted by these laws – particularly those suffering under the current divorce restrictions. This approach reflects the deeply embedded millet framework through which the state continues to define its relationship with Christian citizens, treating the Church as their sole legal and social representative. As a result, Christians in Egypt have no civil path to marriage or divorce outside ecclesiastical authority. For example, the Coptic Church requires a document known as a 'Certificate of No Impediment' for a Christian marriage to take place – a declaration issued by a clergy member affirming that the individual is not previously married. This certificate is routinely denied to non-practicing Christians, effectively preventing them from marrying.

This structural gate-keeping has been powerfully captured in *God's Ways*, a novel by Coptic author Shady Lewis, which portrays how Christian identity is legally defined not by citizenship, but by religious affiliation.[27] The state's exclusion of individual Christian voices from the law-making process thus reinforces a system in which religious identity overrides civic belonging and personal rights are filtered through the lens of institutional religion.

7. Toward Civil Rights and Legal Pluralism for Copts

This policy brief has examined the deep entanglement between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state, highlighting how this relationship has shaped not only political representation, but also the personal freedoms and everyday lives of Copts. While the church-state alliance has at times offered symbolic recognition and limited political gains, it has ultimately reinforced marginalization by sidelining civil rights, suppressing dissent and embedding sectarian logic into state structures. The Church's dual role as a spiritual authority and political intermediary has constrained the ability of Copts to articulate grievances, seek justice or claim equal citizenship outside the bounds of religious identity. These dynamics underscore the need to radically rethink church-state relations and to develop new models of civic inclusion that transcend the limitations of the *neo-millet* framework.

Rethinking this partnership is essential to advancing a modern concept of citizenship – one that recognizes Copts as equal individuals rather than as members of a religious collective. The current arrangement consolidates the state's control over the Church and, in turn, the Church's control over the Coptic community. This mutual dependency entrenches the status quo, as both institutions benefit – while ordinary Copts bear the costs.

Reform could become viable through the emergence of strong Coptic civil society organizations capable of pressuring both the Church and the state to reframe the legal and political frameworks governing Christian lives in Egypt, particularly around personal status laws. The post-25 January 2011 period saw the rise of such activism, including the 'Maspero Youth Union' which actively advocated for Coptic civil rights, especially regarding church construction.[28] However, the post-30 June 2013 crackdown on civil liberties significantly curtailed these efforts.[29]

Broader political engagement is also critical. If political parties and members of parliament raise these issues at the national level, beyond the confines of Christian circles, the dismantling of the millet framework becomes more plausible. A key step would be transferring marriage and divorce jurisdiction from the Church to a civil legal system – or at a minimum, offering Christians both civil and religious options.

Equally important is insulating the Church from state politics. The instrumentalization of clergy in support of regime narratives has entangled the Coptic community in the state's political conflicts and alliances. The Church must be repositioned as a spiritual institution focused solely on religious and pastoral affairs. Only through such structural shifts can the foundations be laid for a more inclusive and equitable model of citizenship for Egypt's Christians.

Sara Allam Shaltout *is a Ph.D. researcher at the Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies, University of St. Andrews, United Kingdom. She holds an M.Sc. in Theology and Religious Studies from the University of Edinburgh and an M.A. in Middle East Studies from the American University in Cairo, with research focusing on Christian-Muslim relations and the Coptic Church.*

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[26] Elsässer, 2019, pp. 270–281, see *supra* note 16.

[27] Nevine Abraham, "Copts in the National and Religious Discourses: A Narrative of Resistance in Shady Lewis's Novel Turuq Al-Rab", in *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies*, 2024, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 57.

[28] Candace Lukasik, "Beyond Church and State: Contentions of Minority Citizenship in Egypt", in *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, 2022, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 179–201.

[29] Elsayed, 2020, pp. 15-19, see *supra* note 25.

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