

Title: Confronting Discrimination in Egypt

Author: ʿImād Jād

Publisher: al-Waṭān News

Date: 09 January 2017

There is sort of an agreement between Egyptian authors and thinkers that what occurs in Egypt with respect to Copts can not be described as persecution. There is a degree of disagreement after that regarding the accurate description of the current reality. There are those that see discrimination, from which stems a set of stable policies; and there are those that see marginalization, which describes policies that are less harsh and comprehensive than to be discriminatory. What is important here is the consensus between Egyptian writers and thinkers on the existence of a real problem, and their agreement regarding the need to address and cure it, so as to preserve [our] national fabric and strengthen national cohesion. In my opinion, what is stipulated in the 2014 constitution [represents] a good first step [towards] resolving the issue of discrimination or marginalization of Egyptian Copts. [The document] states equality between [all] Egyptians, regardless of their religion, race, and sick class. [The document also] stresses [the need to] fight discrimination between Egyptians, as well as establishes a commission to confront discrimination between Egyptians. It is this commission that is tasked with observing [documenting] and addressing all kinds of discrimination in the country. What happened, however, is that the law related to this commission has yet to be issued. The Head of the Executive Authority could have issued [this law] by decree until the new parliament meets [again]. This has not happened, similar to a variety of other issues related to the country's religious and sectarian circumstances, [legislative] activity on which tends to be extremely slow. In my opinion, today we are in dire need of the bravery [required] to break through this field so as to enact radical solutions to issues of religious and sectarian discrimination, which have been infesting this country for decades. This hinders [our ability to] consolidate patriotic principles. Suffice it to note the seasonal controversy surrounding the permissibility of congratulating Copts on their feasts and the infractions that are committed within the scope of these controversies.

Observers of Egyptian affairs document that religious and sectarian affairs in Egypt are in a state of pronounced decline, which started in the beginning of the 1970s. This deterioration reached its peak with the end of the first decade of the 21st century, when sectarian tensions reached their highest point, and when Egypt witnessed the crime of Naja' Ḥamādī and, afterwards, the bombing of the Two Saints Church. This continued until the first signs of the January 25 Revolution began to appear in 2011, whereupon the situation began to change quickly.

The deterioration [in religious and sectarian affairs] in Egypt began with the arrival of the late President Anwar al-Sādāt, who had to succeed a [very] charismatic president. The man looked for leadership support or a [constituent] base, to no avail. At the same time, nationalist and leftist groups across Egyptian universities organized against him. It was at this point that he decided to don the cloak of religion [religiosity]. He put together armed Islamist groups in Egyptian universities to fend off both wings, Nasserist and leftist. He also intensified the dose of public [surface-level, superficial] religiosity, and made sure to uphold this image in front of regular [poor, uneducated] Egyptians. Al-Sādāt succeeded in Islamizing the public domain in Egypt and managed, in a few short years, to divide the ranks of Egyptians. He identified himself as the faithful president and Egypt as the country of knowledge and faith. He described himself as a Muslim president to a Muslim country, and so the [armed Islamist] groups became more active and began to commit murder missions against Copts, especially in Upper Egypt. With the end of the 1970s, Egypt was on the verge of a religious explosion when al-Sādāt's assassination came at the hands of the very groups that he himself assembled. This re-routed Egypt without any explosions, civil wars, or extensive, bloody clashes. In came Mubārak, who preserved al-Sādāt's moderate posture. He [Mubārak] did not feed religious extremism, nor he

did he actively confront it, unless it concerned the need to distance Islamist political factions from leadership positions. Mubārak limited the scope of his confrontation with these groups to the domain of political leadership only and left them to their own devices in the social domain. Moreover, he also handed over to them precedence over the educational process and over a large portion of community [charitable] activity. All of this was there, but he never acted against them unless they edged towards the domain of political leadership in an effort to overtake it. He played with the Muslim Brotherhood a game of role division, wherein he made sure they were present in the political sphere, conducted deals with them, and presented them as a tyrannical group who represented the only alternative to him and his regime. [In this representation,] the Muslim Brotherhood was presented as extremist, anti-Israel, and anti-West. In return, his [Mubārak's] regime, no matter how authoritarian and dictatorial, was in the West's favor because the only alternative was the rulership of the Supreme Guide [*al-Murshid*] and the Brotherhood. To be continued.