



Egypt on the Edge

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The dust of the Arab Spring has already started settling down in the Arab world but nothing seems to be happening for the well-being of the post-Tahrir Squire Egypt. Political instability has become much more flashy after the departure of Mubarak. National economy is in constant decline and social cohesion is under threat. A high proportion of people are suffering from sense of frustration and dissatisfaction. Moreover, religious intolerance is spilling over from ideology to public life and the new regime is grappling with numerous ideological and political questions. Amidst all these developments, a statement by Osama Yehia Abu Salama, Muslim Brotherhood (MBH) member and an expert on family law has baffled many liberals and women when he said that “women need to be confined within a framework that is controlled by the men of the house”.

However, the issue did not end there. A leading member of MBH and the Professor of Science of Hadith at Al-Azhar, Mr. Abdur Rahman, pronounced a *Fatwa* that exchange of greeting with the Coptics at the eve of their festivals was an un-Islamic act. This *Fatwa* by Mr. Rahman has annoyed many and underlines the MBH’s pretence about democracy and pluralism. He argued in his verdict that exchange of greeting should not be practiced as long as the religious norms and values of the Coptics were in violation of principles of Islamic Shariah. Such demands now have spilled over in public domain, manifesting the mind of Salafist proclivity that harbour a traditional animosity towards the Coptics.

This verdict is a reflection of regressive outlook for a nation carving out its trajectory of democracy and cultural pluralism after an extended phase of revolution. The statement of senior leader of MBH has come at a time when sectarian strife between Muslims and the Coptics in Egypt has touched a new height. Last month, five Copts were killed in a clash with Muslim youths in northern Egypt after an Islamic institute was daubed with graffiti. Later, one more person was killed and eighty others were injured when the mobs attacked the funerals of those five killed earlier in the village of Khosous in Qalioubiya.

In a similar clash, the compound of St. Mark Cathedral of the Coptics came under a frenzied assault when a local church, nursery and several of the Coptic's houses were set on fire. The assailants threw Molotov cocktails at the Cathedral where the Coptic mourners had sought shelters after the altercations. Instead of protecting the Cathedral, the security forces reportedly fired tear gas into the complex.

The assaults against the Coptics have become more prominent and blatant after the rise of Islamist and the spread of MBH among the poor section of the society. The incident has ensued at a time when the Coptics themselves are feeling marginalised and blaming the new government for their cultural isolation (maybe, even deprived of political participation and their citizenry). The head of the local Coptic community has accused the Muslim clergy of instigating the mobs against the community who damaged their houses. To express the grievances, Pope Tawadros II, Coptic Pope of Alexandria is planning to make an official visit to the Vatican City for talks with Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church. It will be the first such visit by a Coptic Pope to the Vatican since Pope Shenouda III's visit in 1973.

Reacting to the events, Egypt's churches expressed "deep sorrow for the unprecedented attack on the St. Mark's Cathedral, which represents the symbol of Christianity in Egypt, the Arab world and the entire Middle East." Al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb also voiced alarm at the incidents in Khosous, saying that "It is a national and religious duty to protect our country from sectarian strife and attitudes." President Morsi in a statement told that he considers any attack on the Cathedral an attack against him.

What is unfortunate is the alleged involvement of security forces in the events. The opposition parties have raised this matter as well, During a press conference at the Shura Council, the upper house of Egypt's parliament, opposition groups, representatives of civil and political forces together with Coptics and independent members of the National Assembly called for the dismissal of the Interior Minister and the immediate reform of the ministry. The National Salvation Front (NSF) youth movement brought out a march towards the Cathedral in a show of solidarity with the Coptics.

The Ulema and the high ranking members of MBH should not be oblivious of the fact that these statements could undermine the unfolding and maturing political and cultural diversity in the country. They should also not overlook that it is a phase of democratic evolution and ethos of democracy lie primarily in the protection of the minorities. It is a time when one should adhere to the principle of rationality and understand that exchange of greeting has nothing to do with the faith of a person.

One does not know the true intention behind the verdicts whether it was the expression of religious passion or politically driven deposition, is debatable. However it would have a long-term adverse impact in the future, given the present state of affairs in the country. The MBH-inspired Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) has been in power for nearly a year now, but the Egyptian people are still in the streets protesting the policies and ideology of the party. The MBH does not seem to be keeping pace with the changing political milieu of the country.

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