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## As Tensions Rise for Egypt's Christians, Officials Call Clashes Secular

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

CAIRO — A monastery was ransacked in January. In May, monks there were kidnapped, whipped and beaten and ordered to spit on the cross. Christian-owned jewelry stores were robbed over the summer. The rash of violence was so bad that one prominent Egyptian writer worried it had become “open season” on the nation’s Christians.

Does [Egypt](#) face a sectarian problem?

Not according to its security officials, who insist that each dispute represents a “singular incident” tied to something other than faith. In the case of the monastery and the monks, officials said the conflict was essentially a land dispute between the church and local residents.

“Every incident has to be seen within its proper framework; you study an incident as an incident,” said an Interior Ministry spokesman who grew furious at the suggestion that Egyptians were in conflict because of their differing faiths. It is customary for security officials not to have their names revealed publicly.

“An incident is an incident, and a crime is a crime,” he said.

But the Egyptian security apparatus is increasingly alone in its insistence.

As more and more conflicts pile up and as the tensions of daily life increase, many people in Egypt and around the region said the problem of sectarian clashes had become more urgent. They said that ordinary conflicts had become more bitterly sectarian as religious identity had become more prominent among Muslims and Christians alike.

“It is as if there is a struggle — each against the other — and it creates a sectarian atmosphere,” said Gamal Assaad, a former member of Parliament who is a Coptic intellectual and a writer. “This tense atmosphere makes people ready to explode at any point if they are subjected to any amount of instigation or incitement.”

Egypt is the most populous Arab country, with about 80 million people. About 10 percent are Coptic Christian.

For most of Egypt’s Coptics, the major flare-ups — the attack on the Abu Fana Monastery or riots in 2005 in Alexandria — are faraway episodes that serve only to confirm a growing alienation from larger society. For most, the tension is more personal, a fear that a son or daughter will fall in love with a Muslim or of being derided as “coftes,” which means “fifth column.”

“We keep to ourselves,” said Kamel Nadi, 24, a Coptic who runs a small shop in the Shubra neighborhood of Cairo. “Muslims can’t say it, but it’s clear they don’t accept us. Here no one can speak the truth on this issue, so everybody’s feelings are kept inside.”

Christian Arabs have increasingly complained of being marginalized in the Middle East, with large numbers leaving over the decades. Now it appears that pressure on these communities is spiking, whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan or the West Bank. In each, Christians speak of specific national behavior that has made them feel less welcome. While governments are generally regarded as more accommodating than they used to be, the overall environment is seen as less hospitable.

“Yes, we are feeling marginalized,” said Dr. Audeh Quawas, a surgeon in Amman, Jordan, who serves on the central committee of the World Council of Churches, a Geneva-based group. He rattled off a list of grievances, from the refusal of the state to acknowledge Easter as a national holiday to the insistence that Christians abide by Islamic law regarding inheritance.

For Egypt, sectarian tensions are complicated because they are connected to many other challenges burdening the nation, including crushing inflation and high unemployment among the young.

Many Egyptians around Cairo and in the south said that conflicts often arose over everyday matters — a dispute between farmers, an argument between students — but that once sparked, they deteriorated into sectarian name-calling, sometimes worse. That is partly because religious identity is paramount now, more important than a common citizenship, Mr. Assaad said.

“When something happens, it always comes back to Muslim and Christian,” said Tharwat Taki Faris, 45, a subsistence farmer in Mansafees, a village of about 33,000 people five hours south of Cairo.

The village is poor, its unpaved and uneven roads filled with barefoot children in tattered clothing. There are two churches, each guarded by men with shotguns. There are also two mosques, where security men are posted outside on Fridays, just in case the faithful become overwrought during prayer, people here said.

It was midday, and villagers back from working their small plots of land began to gather to discuss relations with their Muslim neighbors. Any conflict between Muslim and Christian is a “singular incident,” they all said, using the same phrase. Villagers said that the government was adamant about keeping things “singular,” so whenever a Muslim and a Christian had a problem, they knew to go to the police before the matter escalated.

“If someone can’t resolve it, they go to the police station,” said John Riyad, 23. “Trust me, the police will make him resolve it.”

The crowd quickly swelled as men and women and children joined the conversation, which almost imperceptibly began to shift toward grievances: There are no Christian officers in the police force. The villagers cannot get permission to build another church. There are no high-ranking Christian officials in their governate. And of course, if their daughters married Muslims, they would kill them.

Then, just as suddenly, the crowd thinned. The reason: state security was on the way. A village informant had already reported the conversation.

“The police know you are here now,” said Mr. Taki Faris, before he, too, made himself scarce. “They are very anxious these days.”

Egypt is an authoritarian state held in line by a vast internal security force, about twice the size of the army. Certain topics are out of bounds. People know it is taboo to say openly that a sectarian problem exists. So they are cautious.

“We feel pressure, maybe not all the time, but we do,” said Ashraf Halim, 45, a grocery store owner in the Shubra neighborhood in Cairo. “We have liberty of speech, and religion, but it’s as if somebody was telling us at the same time, ‘Don’t speak and don’t practice your religion.’”

Mr. Halim’s grocery is next to a hair salon with the word “Allah” atop the storefront in large Arabic letters. He responds in his own small way, with a picture of St. George on his dairy cooler.

“Me, I try to keep a certain distance from Muslims,” said Mr. Halim. “We have simple relations: I give you this, you give me this. That’s it. They don’t want more than that, either.”

The underlying tension in Egypt flares periodically around the country. There were riots when word spread of a Coptic play supposedly denigrating the Prophet Muhammad and again over plans to expand a church. The state treated each case as a security problem.

But the violence at the ancient Abu Fana Monastery in May elevated events to a new level. In a follow-up report issued last month, the National Council for Human Rights described the atmosphere in Egypt as an “overcharged sectarian environment” and chided the state, saying it “turns a blind eye to such incidents” and was “only content to send security forces after clashes catch fire.”

Frustrated by the official posture of denial, a small group of Egyptian bloggers decided in January 2007 to try to bring Muslims and Christians together to talk. The group, which calls itself Together Before God, began with about 20 members of both faiths.

They posted an Internet survey to gauge Muslims’ and Christians’ ideas about each other and received about 5,000 responses. Two-thirds were from Muslims, the rest from Christians.

The survey showed profound misunderstanding on both sides, said Sherif Abdel Aziz, 36, a co-founder of the group. Some Muslims declared that Coptic priests wore black to mourn the Arab invasion of Egypt in the seventh century. Some Christians believed that the Koran ordered Muslims to kill all Christians.

Did the group discover a sectarian problem? Absolutely, and it was compounded by the lack of frank public discussion, Mr. Abdel Aziz said.

“The religious discourse has to change from both sides because it incites hatred, even if it does so indirectly, increasing fanaticism from both sides,” Mr. Abdel Aziz said.

*Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting from Cairo and Upper Egypt, and Nadim Audi from Cairo.*

