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Title: Egypt's Presidential Elections and Christian Fear

Author: Cornelis Hulsman

Egyptian Christians are certainly not pleased with the strong shift towards Islamism in Egypt. The Islamist parties have collectively won 73.8 percent of the votes in Parliament. Many Christians now fear for the worst: an Islamist president who will enforce restrictive laws for Christians and liberals in the country. But is this fear justified?

Since the January 25 Revolution, violence in general and also against Christians, has increased. Some of the more prominent examples are the church burnings in Sūl (near Atfīh)¹, Imbābah (a quarter in Cairo), and al-Al-Mārīnāb². The terrible violence at Maspero in Cairo on October 9, 2011, which resulted in 27 deaths, made headlines as well.³ More specifically, Salafi groups have organized nasty demonstrations against Christians, for example falsely claiming that Camelia Shehata, the wife of an Orthodox priest, had converted to Islam. The same group posted a film on the internet repeating the ridiculous claims of Dutch NOS journalist, Lex Runderkamp that Christians in the village of Al-Mārīnāb had set fire to their own church under construction.⁴ Coptic Orthodox Priest, Father Yu'annis from the village of Qufādah, around 180 km south of Cairo, reports that Christian girls in villages have to be dressed very conservatively if they want to avoid problems with local Muslims.⁵ Many Christians fear the future and try to leave the country if they see an opportunity, as Pastor Ashraf did from the Presbyterian Church in Maadi, Cairo. He left without informing his own church council before his departure. After he left, he wrote them a letter stating that he had left with his wife and children to work on his Ph.D. in the USA.⁶ But would he ever come back?

The greater freedoms for expression after the Revolution have provided a forum to speak out and consequently, opportunities for radicals to express opinions that show little respect for others. Proposals for new laws have been presented in the newly elected parliament that are outright shocking: a draft law proposing to restrict NGOs even more or a draft law proposing the reduction of the age of marriage to 16—some lawmakers would like to go even further to 14 years of age.⁷ This would be a tremendous setback from the children's law that Suzanne Mubārak had promoted in the 1990s, setting

¹ Cornelis Hulsman. "The history of tensions in Sūl, 'Ātfīh," *Arab-West Report*, 1 Nov 2011 URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-44/27-history-tensions-sul-atfih>.

² Lamīs Yahyá. "What Happened in Mārīnāb Village?," *Arab-West Report*, 12 Oct 2011. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/what-happened-marinab-village>.

³ Jayson Casper. "Analyzing Video Evidence from Maspero: Bloody Confrontations following the Coptic Protest of October 9, 2011," *Arab-West Report*, 26 Oct 2011. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/analyzing-video-evidence-maspero-bloody-confrontations-following-coptic-protest-october-9-2011> and Cornelis Hulsman, "Eyewitness: Maspero," *Arab-West Report*, 26 Mar 2012. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-13/24-eyewitness-maspero>.

⁴ Cornelis Hulsman. "Commotion around Dutch journalist's reporting about Mārīnāb," *Arab-West Report*, 6 Dec 2011. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2011/week-49/14-commotion-around-dutch-journalists-reporting-about-marinab>.

⁵ Visit Father Yu'annis, April 28 -29, 2012.

⁶ Meeting with council member of his church, March 2012.

⁷ Interview Volkhart Windfuhr, Chairman, Cairo Foreign Press Association, April 8, 2012.

the minimum age of marriage at 18 years of age.⁸ Do such proposed laws have a chance to become law? No one knows in this stage.

The tourism sector, where many Christians were working, was badly hit following the Revolution. Tourists are unaware that the tensions and violence that they see between demonstrators and police and/or the army occur only in isolated areas, mainly in Cairo, while life in other parts of the city continue as if nothing has happened. The media tends to focus on the negative rather than giving a complete and accurate image of the circumstances in Egypt. Of course this has had a tremendously negative effect on Egypt's tourism industry on which millions of Egyptians depend for their income.

Christian fear is very genuine and understandable. Much of this is due to a combination of experiences and reporting, both in Coptic activist circles and in the media. The tendency is to highlight violence against Christians. This, in combination with the strong economic deterioration of most Egyptians' livelihoods, makes the future seem bleak. Is all this fear justified?⁹

What is certain is that Egypt at this stage is extremely fluid. Events develop in an instant and no one can predict the outcome. The problems Egypt faces are also much larger than those of, for example, Greece.¹⁰ The country is overpopulated; 85 million inhabitants are living in the Nile valley and Delta, which is about the same size as The Netherlands. Over 80 percent of the population is not or is insufficiently educated; around the same size of the population lives on or close to the poverty level. Perspectives on improving life standards are poor. Water shortages are expected in the nearby future because the population keeps growing. Prices of petrol and food are rising and resulting in demonstrations. The government is weak. Massive amounts of scarce fertile agricultural land are lost to unregulated building.¹¹ Economic perspectives are gloomy. It would be very unwise indeed if Europe would not assist Egypt to get out of this downhill spiral.

A Struggle for Power

Egypt is now facing a struggle for power whereby little attention is given to the dire economic needs of the country. The main focus is now on the presidential elections that are planned to take place on May 23 and 24. Egypt has a presidential system and the president therefore has great powers. The President,

⁸The Children's Law of 1996 (Civil Law No. 12, 1996) made a child a minor up until the age of 18. Cornelis Hulsman, "Open letter to former US Congressman Pastor Ed McNeely for writing President Bush a letter with wrong claims about Christian girls being kidnapped by Muslims," *Arab-West Report*, 9 Aug 2003. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2003/week-30/34-open-letter-former-us-congressman-pastor-ed-mcneely-writing-president-bush>.

⁹ Reporting in the West tends to be focused on the negative, often lacking context. See my lecture for a meeting organized in the European Parliament, May 9, 2012. Cornelis Hulsman, "The Harms on Misreporting in Egypt," *Arab-West Report*, 8 May 2012. URL: <http://arabwestreport.info/harms-misreporting-egypts-christians>.

¹⁰ Meeting Dr. Ronald Meinardus, Director of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, Cairo, February 2012.

¹¹Cornelis Hulsman and Jenna Ferrecchia. "Post-Revolutionary Construction in Egypt," *Arab-West Report*, 22 Mar 2012. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-12/68-post-revolutionary-construction-egypt>.

and not Parliament, nominates the Prime Minister, who forms the cabinet. The President will also play a major role in writing the Constitution. Islamists want Parliament to elect most of the members of the Constitutional Committee, while secularists prefer a selection that reflects major groups in society and want the SCAF to play a larger role in this. No doubt that role will be taken over by the elected President of Egypt. It is thus not surprising that the power struggle over who will be the next president is fierce.

The three main power blocks are:

1. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), controlling around 30 percent of Egypt's economy;
2. Islamists (with all the variations and differences that exist), among them many businessmen and support from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait. The combined Islamists received around 69 percent of the votes and 75 percent of the seats in Parliament. The large turnout for Islamists is the result of Egypt being a conservative Muslim country. Religion is important to people. The large percentage, however, does not reflect their membership, which is much smaller. The Islamists can certainly count on the votes given in the Shūrā Council elections.
3. Secularists (mostly liberal, but also social democrats), including many liberal businessmen. Various secularist parties have obtained around 23 percent of the votes and 18 percent of the seats in Parliament. Egypt's richest man, Najīb Sawiris, a Copt, has been funding the election campaign of the liberal Egyptian Bloc (al-Kutlah al-Misrīyah), a bloc consisting of 3 parties, receiving only 7 percent of the votes and after the parliamentary election, divided again.

With this outcome of the Parliamentary elections one would expect the electorate to vote for an Islamist presidential candidate. Coptic Christians fear this, but it is not certain at all that this would be the outcome.

The first struggle was over who was eligible to become a candidate and who was not. This resulted in surprises. 'Umar Sulaymān, former Chief of Egyptian Intelligence, Hāzim Abū Ismā'īl, Salafī lawyer, and Khayrat al-Shātīr, member of the Guidance Office of the Muslim Brotherhood, were rejected. Abū Ismā'īl's followers did not swallow this, staged demonstrations at al-Tahrīr Square and clashed with military before the Ministry of Defense. Clashes were not widespread, however, and Egyptians I met showed no sympathy for these demonstrators.¹²

The Main Presidential Candidates

Polls of the Al-Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies (ACPSS) show that the two main secular candidates 'Amr Mūsá and Ahmad Shafīq may obtain 51 percent of the votes; the Islamist candidates,

¹² I was at Tahrīr on May 4, 2012. While demonstrators were clashing with the military before the Ministry of Defence, Tahrīr and also other parts of Cairo I visited were quiet. Egyptians I met showed no sympathy for the demonstrators.

Abū al-Futūh, Muhammad Mursī and Salīm al-ʿAwā are together good for 36 percent in this poll, while the leftish candidates may obtain ten percent of the votes.¹³

ʿAmr Mūsá is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Secretary-General of the Arab League.

Ahmad Shafīq is a former Minister of Civil Aviation who has been the head of Egyptair and briefly was Prime Minister during the last days of Mubāarak.

ʿAbd al-Munʿim Abū al-Futūh was for 22 years a member of the Guidance Office of the Muslim Brotherhood, belonging to their more liberal wing and broke away from the Brotherhood in 2009 (before the Revolution!). Arab-West Report interviewed him extensively.¹⁴

Muhammad Mursī, chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, was previously head of the Muslim Brotherhood group in Parliament during the days of Mubāarak

Muhammad Salīm al-ʿAwā is an Islamist and reformist lawyer. He has become disappointed in Muslim-Christian dialogue following the Regensburger lecture of Pope Benedict XVI and the way Pope Shenouda pressed Egyptian security authorities to return Wafaa Costantine, a wife of a priest who sought conversion to Islam in order to enforce a divorce that the church did not want to grant her. In 2010, Al-ʿAwā clashed with Metropolitan Bīshūy over a number of unfortunate statements made about Islam and Muslims.¹⁵

The election rules are that either the candidate receiving over 50 percent of the votes will become president or, if this does not happen (which is expected), the two candidates with the highest number of votes will continue to the second round of the elections.¹⁶ Not all observers agree as to who the two frontrunners will be. Would this be Abū al-Futūh and Muhammad Mursī? Or, perhaps, ʿAmr Mūsá and Ahmad Shafīq? I think the two most likely frontrunners are Abū al-Futūh and ʿAmr Mūsá.

In these presidential elections large organizations and public opinion play a major role. Abū al-Futūh has obtained the public support of major Muslim organizations and Egyptian Salafīs, as their own candidate Hāzim is no longer in the race. Abū al-Futūh is charismatic and made positive statements about Egypt's Christians, but since he has made statements about the need for the shari'a to be enforced and Salafīs supporting him, a number of Copts and liberals that initially had been supporting him have withdrawn their support. One of them is Muná Makram ʿUbayd, professor of political science and member of a prominent Coptic family. She indicated on May 2 that she was switching her support from Abū al-Futūh to ʿAmr Mūsá, due mostly to the Salafī endorsement of Abū al-Futūh. Muná Makram ʿUbayd always championed citizenship rights over sectarian thinking. Her public endorsement of Abū al-Futūh was an

¹³ Information provided by a senior Egyptian diplomat May 8, 2012.

¹⁴ Cornelis Hulsman. "Interview with ʿAbd al-Munʿim Abū al-Futūh, Presidential hopeful," *Arab-West Report*, 19 Feb 2012. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-8/48-interview-abd-al-munim-abu-al-futuh-presidential-hopeful>.

¹⁵ Cornelis Hulsman. "Intolerant Climate in Egypt and Media Manipulations Result in Row Around Bishop Bīshūy," *Arab-West Report*, 25 Oct 2010. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/node/26586>.

¹⁶ For more information about the electoral process see the *Al-Ahram* Voting Guide, May 2, 2012, URL: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/36418.aspx>.

indication that at one point in his campaign he seemed to be able to pick up a significant fraction of secular Copts. Her desertion is an indication that he is now losing that support.¹⁷

‘Amr Mūsá is, of course, well-known inside and outside Egypt. He is not well favored by Islamists and is seen by many as having been associated to the old regime, but if the choice is between an Islamist and old guard, many may choose the old guard. He is seen as well-experienced in politics. His age, 75, is for many an assurance that he will serve only one term and not remain in power as long as Mubārak has been.

Probability for ‘Amr Mūsá to be Elected

Would ‘Amr Mūsá have a chance if 69 percent of the electorate voted Islamist in the Parliamentary elections? Mūsá himself believes he stands a good chance. “A president needs only 51 percent of the vote,” he said.¹⁸

The past elections for Parliament and Shūrā Council (Senate) show that Islamists have a constituency of at least five million voters and a maximum of 18.6 million. That electorate may not be entirely stable. Muhammad Al-Katatnī, Freedom and Justice Party speaker of Parliament, was depicted as wanting a very expensive car. But after years of Mubārak the general population is fed up with the elite trying to obtain excessive prerogatives. That reminded many too much of the days of Mubārak when the circle around Mubārak had luxuries that were far beyond reach of the average Egyptian.¹⁹ Father Joseph Scatolin, Comboni, expert of Sufism in Egypt, informed me that many Sufi Muslims had voted for the Salafī al-Nūr Party because both Sufis and Salafis are very pious, but since Salafis oppose many Sufi practices, they could well lose that support in the next election.²⁰

Islamist parties are able to mobilize their constituencies usually better than non-Islamists, which works in favor of Islamists if the turnout is low, but if the turnout is high, this could well work in the favor of Mūsá.

Neither Abū al-Futūh nor Mūsá are anti-Coptic. The radical Ismā‘īl Abū Hāzim is no longer in the race and the confrontational Salīm al-‘Awā does not seem to have a very good chance. Yet Copts express fears for the direction the country is going. Sāmih is an example: “Some Islamists plead for rapid change as Abū Ismā‘īl and others plead for gradual change such as Abū al-Futūh, but ultimately all want to make the

¹⁷ “Trickle into a flood,” Salamamoussa, Blog. 1 May 2012, URL: <http://salamamoussa.com/2012/05/01/trickle-into-a-flood/>.

¹⁸ Press conference. ‘Amr Mūsá with the Cairo Foreign Press Association, April 8, 2012.

¹⁹ Interview Volkhart Windfuhr, Chairman Cairo Foreign Press Association, April 8, 2012.

²⁰ Meeting with Father Joseph Scatolin in March 2012.

country more Islamic.”²¹ Others, such as Yūsuf Sīdhum, Editor in Chief of Watanī, are less fearful because he sees many hurdles for Islamists in making the changes they would like to see in the country.²²

The presidential elections are not going to be the end of the transition process. Some observers believe Islamist groups may violently oppose the election if Mūsá gets elected. If this would indeed happen it would give the military an excellent excuse to interfere and suppress it, increasing their role in politics.²³ It would be best for the country if the transition were to be peaceful and a modus vivendi would be found between both Islamists and secularists whereby the main focus would be on addressing the significant economic challenges the country is facing.

²¹ Sāmih is a friend of mine, April 2012.

²² Cornelis Hulsman. “Christian leader: No fear for Islamist landslide in Egypt,” *Arab-West Report*, 1 Jan 2012. URL: <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2012/week-1/22-christian-leader-no-fear-islamist-landslide-egypt>.

²³ Interview Volkhart Windfuhr, Chairman Cairo Foreign Press Association, April 8, 2012.

Appendix: Electoral results in Parliamentary and Shūrā Council elections*

Total electorate ≈ 50,000,000 people

Party bloc	Parliament (People's Assembly)- elected December 2011 – January 2012			Shūrā Council (Senate) – elected January – February 2012		
	Votes	Vote %	Total seats	Votes	Vote %	Total seats
Islamist						
Democratic Alliance for Egypt (led by Freedom and Justice Party)	10,138,134	37.5	235	2,894,922	45.04	105
Islamist Bloc (led by al-Nūr Party)	7,534,266	27.8	123	1,840,014	28.63	45
Al-Wasat Party (centrist Islamist)	989,003	3.7	10	0	0	0
Total Islamist	18,661,403	69	368	4,734,936	73.67	150
Secularist parties						
New Wafd Party (national liberal)	2,480,391	9.2	38	543,417	8.45	14
Egyptian Bloc (social liberal) – split after elections	2,402,238	8.9	35	348,957	5.43	8
Reform and Development Party (liberal)	604,415	2.2	9	0	0	0
The Revolution Continues Alliance(left)	745,863	2.8	7	0	0	0
Justice Party (center)	184,553	0.7	1	0	0	0
Democratic Peace	0	0	0	95,273	1.48	1
Total secularist parties	6,417,460	23.8	90	987,647	15.36	23

NDP offshoot parties						
NDP offshoots	1,986,271	7.4	18	84,936	1.32	3
Independents						
Independents	--		22	--		4
Totals	27,065,134	100	498	5,807,519	90.35 *	180
Overall voter turnout	54%			11.6 %		
Appointed by SCAF (as in previous years these MP's were appointed by the president)			10			90

*This table is based on Wikipedia and I have not been able to verify this. Yet, it gives a good indication in the strengths of the different political groupings in society. Elections for the Shūrā Council are not popular and thus votes here can be considered to have come from the hardcore constituents of each political grouping.