

Problems on hold

## Commanding virtue and banning vice?

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*Al-Amr bil-Maarouf wal-Nahy an al-Munkar* (AMNM), literally Commanding Virtue and Banning Vice, is the vice police Egyptians used to hear of in the more conservative Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia. Dressed in Islamic garb, its members roam the streets to check passers-by are adhering to the norms of Islamic propriety. If they see someone 'indecently' dressed, or a man or woman too close to each other for Islamic comfort, they directly intervene. They begin with offering advice then, if unheeded, threats and if these do not bring about the desired result, resort to the more ominous physical assault.

In Egypt, AMNM is an upstart movement that came into being with the escalation of Islamism in the wake of the 25 January 2011 Revolution. Every once in a while stories circulate of some preposterous deed by some of its members. Only a month ago a young man in Suez was killed because he was with his fiancée in the park and rejected orders by AMNM to separate from her. The AMNM men stabbed him—they later said they had not intended to kill him—the young man died a couple of days later of his wounds.

Obviously, the security and law breakdown currently rampant in Egypt offer the right medium for activity such as AMNM's. The fact that AMNM members frequently get away with their crimes—but in the Suez case the culprits were caught and are facing trial—means that even if they lie low for some time they are bound to resurge.

The most recent move by AMNM is particularly disquieting in the sense that it fully reveals the potential threat that imperils the community once deviant thought is allowed free rein. Individuals or groups who claim they possess the right to impose their version of righteousness, and consequently take the law in their own hands and implement whatever penalty they see fit to whoever they see as iniquitous, end up usurping human rights and the dignity of the State. It is my opinion that such a state of affairs should be dealt with very firmly; we should not give in to the terror erroneously inflicted in the name of religion.

So what has the AMNM finally done? They have sent threats to Christian bookstores in Cairo, Alexandria, and Ismailiya—and possibly other places in Egypt—that they should stop displaying or selling Christian icons, paintings, or statuettes since these constitute 'unclean' idolatrous items and are symbols of apostasy.

Those who received these threats did well to report them to the police and insist on filing official complaints of the risk they are subjected to. I imagine that the relevant authorities have taken the matter very seriously and are working to find out and catch those behind the threats. It is no secret that offence against Copts is the litmus test the terrorists apply to sound the resoluteness of the State in standing up to offenders. If the authorities prove to be lax or disinterested, if they prove irresolute or reluctant to hit back in defence of the security and peace of the community, it gives the green light for terrorists to hit wider, more general Egyptian targets. By then, however, matters would have got fully out of the hands of the State.

Another recent incident against a Copt occurred on a street in the Alexandria district of Miami two weeks ago. Passers-by were stunned to see a young man in a short white *jilbab*, the typical garment donned by hardline Muslim men, rush to shatter the rear window glass of a passenger car parked by the sidewalk, and hurl a Molotov cocktail inside. The car blew up.

Why? Because the [Christian] owner of the car had posted on it a sticker with the words: " 'God is there.' Pope Shenouda". There can be nothing against the quote or against the man who said it; Pope Shenouda was loved by Muslims as well as Copts. The problem clearly lies with the culture of hate that has been steadily growing, unchecked. All the symptoms of hate are there, very obvious and visible, yet nothing is being done to confront them.

I am not a normally pessimistic person, neither am I terrorised by the successive waves of terrorism in the name of religion. I strongly believe in the capacity of Egypt to override the current dilemma and emerge triumphant in its age-old faith, moderation, peace, and wealth of diversity and plurality. It will remain the Egypt blessed by the holy texts, by its icons and statuettes.