

Problems on hold

Political or religious asylum:**A lifeline for Muslims;
treason for Copts****Youssef Sidhom**

News that the Netherlands is implementing more lenient measures for the assessment of the cases of Coptic applicants for political or religious asylum made all hell break loose in Egypt. Politicians, media men, and Islamists indulged in a wave of Copt bashing. Copts were accused of high treason, offending the motherland, and tarnishing the image of Egypt in the world. Public figures hosted on talk shows condemned asylum seekers and embarked on a tirade of ornamented patriotic rhetoric that extolled Egypt as a home to all its sons and daughters with not a speck of discrimination against any of them. They alleged the Netherlands was interfering in Egypt's domestic affairs and creating a schism in the Egyptian national front.

Amid the general keenness to ride the wave of patriotic bragging, no-one appeared to have given a thought to a few facts. Any citizen or family who feels persecuted in their own country, cannot be served lawful justice there, or are deprived of security by the authorities or by fellow citizens, are entitled to seek political or religious asylum. The country that is willing to offer asylum thoroughly inspects the applicant's file, and accordingly offers or withholds asylum. The entire matter has nothing to do with conspiracy, treason, or divisiveness; it is the result of hard, harsh reality that can only be changed through candid self-searching and cleansing, and faithful efforts to put the house in order. Only then will the need for asylum be nullified; a citizen need not look for the help of strangers to save him or her from their own fellow citizens.

I wish to remind those who so wrathfully raised their voices against the Copts that, for the past four decades, the numbers of Muslim Egyptian asylum seekers have far exceeded that of the Copts. The long list of political dissidents and Islamists who fled Egypt to Pakistan and Afghanistan and from thence to Europe or the US to escape the Egyptian authorities that would have otherwise hounded them, is known to all. Yet none of them was ever accused of treason or of offending Egypt. No, they were applauded as brave self-denying heroes and, once they gained asylum and moved with their families to the host countries they turned against their gracious Western hosts with antagonistic terrorist attacks. At home, they were hailed as heroes and symbols of *Jihad* .

It is all nothing but a flagrant depiction of the duality we suffer from. If the asylum seeker is a Muslim who flees Egypt or who comes into Egypt to escape the persecution he faces in his home country, he earns sympathy, support, and asylum. But if he is a Copt who dared cry out against the bitter conditions that swamp him at home, and his lack of safety and security while the laws and authorities do him no justice, he is an outright traitor: an ungrateful who deserves the death sentence.

How easy for one who never was in any way persecuted or had his freedom, family, business, or property imperilled to use sugar-coated words to draw an image of a safe and secure Egypt that knows no discrimination between its children, bonded by age-old compassion. Such honeyed rhetoric denies the facts on the ground and makes a mockery of the suffering of a significant sector of Egyptians. The agony need not involve all Egyptians for us to acknowledge it; if a single Egyptian feels sufficiently unsafe to ask for help for himself and his family, what is a home, clan, or even homeland worth? And how can he be blamed for asking for the help of strangers?

For the benefit of those who know nothing of the agony of being excluded and banished from the homeland even while residing on its soil, I print here an email I received on 15 August from M.F from the Upper Egyptian city of Assiut. It is obvious the email has been sent to several foreign countries demanding asylum. "I live with my family in Assiut, and have been the victims of the worst form of religious persecution. I feel our lives are imperilled by the hatred and menace that surround us. Because I put a cross on the door of my home, Islamist Jihadis broke into my home and assaulted me with knives and daggers, and beat up my aged mother. I had to be taken to Assiut public hospital for treatment, the doctors there wrote a report of my injuries and I was able to accordingly file a complaint to the police regarding the assault. After questioning the assailants, the police released them. They are today free, and have resumed their menace and offences against us whenever we dare go out of our home."

Now that I have printed this complaint, will the Egyptian authorities move to investigate it? Will the National Council for Human Rights do anything to right the wrongs against this man? If nothing is done, and this Egyptian's only resort is to ask for the help of the outside world, is there anyone we can blame but ourselves?