

Problems on hold

Voting on Coptic feast days

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President Mursi's era is bound to go down in Egypt's history as unprecedented in that the presidency rushes through decisions that bring on wrathful public response, then quickly goes back on these decisions or, at best, amends them. This did not escape the legendary Egyptian sarcastic humour, and the joke now making the rounds says: "Hurry, read the President's latest before he goes back on it!"

Throughout Egypt's history, even at times of despotic regimes, the presidency always enjoyed public respect and prestige. It was always backed by a team of highly qualified consultants and aides who would unfailingly check every detail of each presidential decision to make sure it was in line with established protocols, principles and formalities before it went public. It was unheard of to attribute to the presidency any slip that betrayed the slightest recklessness or oversight, and any error whether intentional or offhand, was unforgiveable.

On 21 February, the President of the Republic issued the decision number 134 of 2013, by which he invited voters to elect members of the House of Representatives. It was a decision Egyptians had been impatiently awaiting, given that the new law governing the People's Assembly and the exercise of political rights had been ruled by the Supreme Constitutional Court unconstitutional in several of its articles. It was thus returned to the Shura Council—the Upper house of parliament—for reformulation, to accord with constitutional principles.

The President's decision stipulated that the elections for the House of Representatives would be held over four rounds. The first round would involve among other governorates, Cairo, and was scheduled to take place on Saturday and Sunday 27 and 28 April, with the reruns scheduled for 4 and 5 May. Other rounds of the elections and reruns would subsequently follow in other governorates until 27 June. Article 3 of the presidential decision extended an invitation to the elected House of Representatives to hold its first session on Saturday 6 July 2013 at 11:00am.

No sooner had the decision been made public than the Copts—and not a few Muslims—noticed that the election and rerun dates scheduled for the first round coincided with the significant Christian dates of Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. These dates are no secret; they are predetermined and included in calendars, and are well known to all State institutions.

Saturday 27 April this year coincides with the Saturday of Lazarus; it precedes Palm Sunday and involves special prayers in all Coptic churches, and its evening is Palm Sunday Eve. Sunday 28 April is Palm Sunday; huge numbers of worshippers flock to churches to mark Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The evening starts the rituals of Holy Week. Saturday 4 May is Easter Saturday, also known as Saturday of Light; it signals the completion of Holy Week, the emergence of the Holy Light of the Resurrection, and the Easter Eve grand celebrations of the Resurrection. The presidency should be well aware of this particular date, since it is customary for a presidential representative to attend the celebrations to wish the Copts Happy Easter. Easter Sunday is Sunday 5 May, also a date on which many officials and public figures visit the Pope to extend their good wishes.

The presidential decision thus gave rise to a thorny situation created intentionally or unintentionally by the disregard of these significant Christian dates. This disregard meant that many Christians in Cairo, Beheira, Minya, Port Said and North Sinai—the governorates involved in the first round of the elections—might have refrained from taking part in the parliamentary elections. It is not acceptable for the presidency to use the pretext that these occasions are not official State holidays to justify the disregard, since the matter is not about the 'officiality' of the dates, but about the State's prior awareness of the traditions important to Copts.

The gross error led to a wave of denunciations and condemnations of the presidential decision, alleging that the presidency has intentionally set these dates to keep the Copts from heading to the polls. I prefer not to jump to this conclusion, even though I perfectly understand the pained feelings that generated it.

Once the wrath broke loose, the presidency hastened to amend the dates to correct the error and detangle the overlap between the elections and the Coptic occasions. The first round of the elections should now take place on 22 and 23 April, and the reruns one week later. Other rounds of the elections will subsequently follow, until 24 June. The House of Representatives' first session will be held on Tuesday 2 July 2013.

During the Mubarak years, Copts used to complain of school and university examinations that were scheduled on Christian feast days. Even though these dates would normally be amended once the Christians objected, they felt their citizenship rights were being curtailed. By setting parliamentary elections on dates that mark significant Christian occasions, however, the Mursi years are carrying this a huge step forward in the direction of blasting away the rights of Copts as Egyptian citizens.