Egypt destabilised in wake of bomb attack on Coptic Church

Jean Shaoul
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A bomb attack on the al-Qiddissin Coptic Church in Alexandria, where more 1,000 people were praying during a service on New Year's Eve, killed 21 to 25 people and injured at least 97, according to various reports. A nearby mosque was also damaged. Those injured included eight Muslims at the mosque and three police and an official guarding the church.

Egypt was placed on a state of high alert yesterday, ahead of the January 7 Coptic Christmas, with leave cancelled for police and armed checkpoints set up. Seven arrests have been made in connection with the bombing.

There were clashes Sunday at Cairo's St. Mark's Cathedral, during which 45 policemen were wounded and the state minister for economic development, Osman Mohammed Osman, was pelted with rocks.

The bombing is by far the most serious attack to date on Egypt's Christian community. The Copts, 10 percent of the population, have faced mounting economic, communal and religious discrimination, orchestrated in large part by the authorities to deflect public anger over social and political problems along sectarian lines.

With churches in Egypt heavily guarded by police, the blast prompted angry questions as to how it could have happened. According to Egypt's Interior Ministry, the attack was the work of a suicide bomber, not a car bomb. The locally made explosive was filled with nails and ball bearings worn by a bomber who was killed in the attack. No one has as yet claimed responsibility.

President Hosni Mubarak, in a rare television appearance, blamed the attack on "international terrorism". He said that it bore all the hallmarks of "foreign hands", a euphemism for Islamic militants allied to Al Qaeda, seeking to destabilise Egypt. This accusation flies in the face of repeated claims by the Mubarak regime that Al Qaeda has no significant presence in Egypt and has never been conclusively linked to any attacks in the country.

Mubarak added that "all Egypt is the target" and "we are all in this together and will face up to terrorism and defeat it". He urged Christians and Muslims "to stand united" in the face of a common enemy.

The government-controlled press warned that a civil war could break out. The pro-government daily *Rose al-Youssef* said, "Someone wants this country to explode… We must realise that there is a plot aimed at triggering religious civil war".

General Amr Moussa, secretary of the Arab League, called on Copts and Muslims "to join their efforts in order to be able to face the dangers that aim at undermining Egypt's security and stability".

Muslim leaders expressed their condolences, while the main opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood, said no religion in the world could condone such a crime.

Angry worshippers leaving the church fought with the police, blaming the government and security forces for doing little to protect them.

The next day, thousands of people attended the funerals and refused to accept condolences from officials and politicians. Crowds shouted, "No, no, no", as a church official tried to read out condolences from Mubarak. Furious clashes broke out, with protesters screaming anti-government slogans, heckling the police and pelting them with stones. They shouted, "O Mubarak, the heart of the Copts is on fire!" The police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Many called for Adel Labib, the governor of Alexandria, to resign. He had directly linked the bomb attack to Al Qaeda, a claim that was widely rejected. Protests spread to Cairo Sunday, with hundreds of young Copts fighting with police and being penned in for hours by a cordon nine-deep.

Protesters at St Mark's, the seat of Orthodox Pope Shenouda, shouted, "Revolution, revolution in Egypt, in all churches of Egypt."

Sectarianism has escalated alongside the growth of political Islam, which the regime itself promoted after the death of Nasser in 1970 with the reintroduction of Sharia law. The following are a few examples of the attacks that have been whipped up against the Copts:

Last November, clashes between riot police and Copts

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broke out after the construction of a church was halted. It followed years of increasing difficulties in obtaining permission to repair, expand or build new churches. The clashes spilled out into sectarian violence, as dozens of Muslims joined the fray, leading to the deaths of two Christians and the arrests of more than 150 Copts who were accused of attempting to murder the security forces policing the riots.

For weeks in September and October in the run-up to the election there were mass Muslim demonstrations in downtown Cairo, sanctioned by the authorities, demanding the "release" of Camillia Shehata and Wafa Constantine, the wives of Coptic priests who were believed to have converted to Islam and been imprisoned in their monasteries. Following an attack by an Iraqi group linked to Al Qaeda on a church in Baghdad in which 53 people died, the group threatened to attack Egyptian Copts if the women were not released.

At the beginning of last year, six Christians and a Muslim policeman were killed in a drive-by shooting on the eve of the Coptic Christmas outside a church in Upper Egypt. The gunman was a known criminal, but protected by people connected with Mubarak's ruling clique. Muslims ransacked Christian shops and homes, while the police stood back.

A report published last April by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights highlighted the increase in religious violence between 2008 and 2009 and called for the prosecution of the offenders.

In 2009, the government's response to swine flu was to order the slaughter of 300,000 pigs, despite the evidence that humans cannot contract the illness by eating pork. This was seen by the Copts, the largest breeders of pigs in Cairo, as an attack on their livelihoods. The *zabaleen*, or rubbish collectors who are mostly Copts, collect Cairo's household waste, sorting and recycling it. They feed the vegetable waste to the pigs, which are slaughtered and sold on as pork to Cairo's shops and restaurants.

Mubarak's despotic regime faces a worsening crisis at home. He has ruled for nearly 30 years with the aid of emergency laws that outlaw all dissent. Strikes and demonstrations are illegal. The press is censored and newspapers are routinely closed down. "Disappearances", detention without trial, police brutality and torture are commonplace. There is deep dissatisfaction at the conditions confronting the mass of ordinary working people. Forty percent of Egypt's population live either below or near the official poverty line. There is high unemployment, a shortage of affordable housing, and skyrocketing food prices.

Egypt has been gripped by social unrest, with strikes, and protests and demonstrations in downtown Cairo that could find no expression through the official political processes. In the elections at the end of November, the government went to extraordinary lengths to exclude candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition party that had secured 20 percent of the seats in the 2005 elections, and other political parties. The election was characterised by violence, fraud and ballot rigging.

In the event, all but 12 seats went to Mubarak's New Democratic Party. Less than 15 percent of the electorate turned out to vote, so disgusted were they with the whole charade. On top of this is the uncertainty and infighting over who will succeed him. While Mubarak himself has tried to clear the way for his son, Gamal Muburak, a businessman, this is unpopular with the old guard and the military, which have kept him in power and own much of the country.

As well as fuelling internal dissent, the Coptic Church bombing is being exploited internationally to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment.

Pope Benedict issued a New Year's address declaring, "This vile gesture of death, like that of putting bombs near to the houses of Christians in Iraq to force them to leave, offends God and all of humanity."

Italy's foreign minister Franco Frattini urged the European Union to respond forcefully to "religious intolerance, above all against Christians".

In Germany, the deputy leader of the governing Christian Democrats, Annette Schavan, called on Islamic leaders around the world to take a clear stand against religious violence.

Stefan Mueller, the parliamentary leader of the Christian Social Union, called for aid to be tied to the question of whether or not Christians are persecuted, while the parliamentary human rights spokesman of the Greens, Volker Beck, declared that "the condemnation of such attacks is not enough." *Deutsche Welle* cited Beck as expecting Muslims in Germany "to more clearly formulate their disgust, as has been done around the world."

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