

Egyptian regime inflames sectarian violence

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Over the past week, at least seven people have been killed in sectarian clashes in Egypt. Violence erupted last Friday in the town of Al-Khosous, north of the capital, Cairo, when five Copts (Egypt's minority Christians) and one Muslim were killed.

Violence continued on Sunday, when assailants attacked Christian mourners at the funeral for the Coptic victims at St Mark's Cathedral in the Abbasia district of Cairo.

Media reports and eye-witnesses accuse the ruling Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and US-backed Islamist President Mohamed Mursi for being either responsible for the clashes or even for being directly behind the violence.

Mursi and the ruling Islamists are deeply unpopular, and the regime is seeking to channel rising social and political discontent in a reactionary, sectarian direction.

Hani Sobhi, a young Copt who was present at the funeral, explained that armed assailants attacked mourners at St Mark's Cathedral as they chanted slogans against the regime. "Inside the cathedral we chanted 'Down with the Brotherhood rule,' and that was aired live on television. At the exit [of the cathedral], people were ready and waiting for us," he said.

Other eyewitnesses said that police forces present at the scene were siding with the attackers, firing tear gas at mourners. "The police are firing [tear gas] at us...they're taking the assailants' side," said one young Copt.

Copts and Muslims alike who attended the funeral accused Mursi of the violence. An injured man inside the church told *Egypt Independent* he wanted to tell the president, "Why are you doing this to the Egyptian people? We want you to leave. Muslim, Christian, we want you to leave."

Al-Khosous residents also believe that the regime is behind the sectarian clashes, which broke out after the

Imam of Hoda Al-Nabwi mosque called upon Muslims to take up arms against Christians and burn a local church, according to Christian and Muslim witnesses.

An eyewitness, Milad Saad, told *Ahram Online*, "The police had an active role to play in the violence, since they were initially standing 100 meters away from the church the sheikh had called on people to burn. They left all the side streets empty and stood far from the church so when the violence would escalate between the Muslims and Christians, the Christians would get caught in the middle."

Bishop Suriel Yonan of the local Mar Girgis Church stated that the initial conflict between a Christian and Muslim man—in which a Muslim, Mohamed Mahmoud, was killed—erupted for personal and not sectarian reasons. He described the clashes that followed as "collective punishment," adding that "someone" is benefiting from inflaming sectarian strife.

Al-Khosous residents reported that snipers on rooftops shot at pedestrians for two days. An initial forensic report published by the Qalyubia governorate stated that four Copts were killed by bullets from automatic weapons. Marsouq Atteya was shot in the face, Morkos Kamal in the heart, Victor Manqarios in the head, and Essam Zakhary in the face and shoulders.

Yonan said, "The people of Al-Khosous are poor and everyone knows that. Who in Al-Khosous has the money to spend on the bullets? In one day, more than 2,000 bullets were shot between 1 and 7 a.m. This is almost worth 50,000 Egyptian pounds [\$7,300]. Who paid for this?"

He added, "Someone is spending this money to incite hostility between Muslims and Christians, to give room for extremists to manipulate them."

On Tuesday, Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II publicly attacked Mursi in an interview with private satellite news channel ONTV. He criticized the actions of the security forces and of Mursi, stating that the police use

of tear gas on the cathedral grounds “breached all the red lines.”

St Mark’s Cathedral is considered the heart of the Egyptian Coptic Church and is also the Patriarch’s residency.

While Mursi publicly condemned the violence against the church, the government is seeking to further inflame sectarian tensions. In a statement published on Sunday, the interior ministry blamed Copts for the violence, claiming that “a number of mourners began to damage cars in the area which led to confrontations with residents of the area.”

Mohamed Soudan, the foreign relations secretary of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political arm of the MB, also blamed the Coptic mourners, claiming that the Christians “seem to be up to something” and were hiding weapons inside the churches.

The Egyptian ruling elite has intensified its stirring-up of sectarian tensions since the mass working class uprising against former dictator Hosni Mubarak in January 2011. Only weeks before the uprising, a bomb attack on the al-Qiddissin Coptic Church in Alexandria killed 23 people and injured dozens more.

After Mubarak’s ouster, the then-ruling military junta sought to use sectarian strife to split the working class and disorient the mass revolutionary movement that seized the country. In October 2011, the Egyptian military attacked a mainly Coptic demonstration in front of the Maspero state TV building in Cairo with tanks, massacring 28 demonstrators and wounding hundreds.

Since Mursi and the MB took office, attacks on Coptic churches and property have increased.

The latest sectarian violence comes amidst a powerful railway strike, the largest since 1986. On Sunday and Monday Egypt’s transport system came to a complete halt, as thousands of railway workers went on a nationwide strike for higher wages and better working conditions.

Confronted with ongoing massive strikes, the Egyptian bourgeoisie is seeking to split the working class along religious lines to create the conditions for a more severe crackdown on any political or social opposition.

On Monday the Egyptian government moved towards using the military to break the railway strike. Workers have received letters from the Central Agency for

Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), which is supported by the Armed Forces, conscripting them and ordering them back to work.

In its counterrevolutionary offensive against the Egyptian working class, the Mursi regime relies on liberal and pseudo-left opposition groups and the so-called independent trade unions. Mohamed Abdel Sattar, the head of the Independent Railway Workers’ Syndicate, gave his tacit support for the military crackdown on the strike. He openly spoke out against the strike, declaring, “We believe there are other solutions instead of a strike. We should all sit at a table and negotiate instead.”

The National Salvation Front (NSF)—an umbrella group of liberal and pseudo-left parties led by Nasserite politician Hamdeen Sabahi and former UN official Mohamed ElBaradei—also declared its readiness to collaborate with the ruling Islamists and military. At an NSF conference at the beginning of the week, ElBaradei called upon Mursi for a process of “national reconciliation.”

ElBaradei warned, “The state today is collapsing. It is a collapsing state politically, economically, socially and security-wise. And I don’t think we have long to fix this.”

In the meantime, US imperialism—which is closely tied to the Islamists, the Egyptian military, the NSF and independent trade unions alike—is boosting its support for the Egyptian ruling class. According to official documents obtained by the Egyptian daily *Al Masry Al Youm*, a shipment of 140,000 teargas canisters from the US arrived at the Abadeya Port in Suez Sunday.



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