

Christians Talk of Leaving Egypt for Good Under Muslim Brotherhood Reign

Politically connected Christians in Egypt give credit to the Muslim Brotherhood for one thing: they can win elections. The Brotherhood got 13 million ordinary Egyptians, many of them poor, rural and illiterate, to the polls in June to vote for their presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi.

Governing has been a different matter.

“What is helping us today is that the **Muslim Brotherhood** and political Islam are not always clever,” said Hassan Ismail, secretary general of the Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organizations. He has been networking among Christians, moderate Muslims and secularists to assemble a political counterweight to the more numerous supporters of the Brotherhood and the fundamentalist Salafis.

“Average people are starting to be against them because they don’t see anything helping them,” Ismail said, passing a sultry autumn afternoon at a Cairo café table. “Our bet is on the stupidity of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Since the January 2011 revolution that toppled former President Hosni Mubarak, economic growth has slowed and Egypt’s unemployment rate has been running at 12 percent. Prices are up by 20 percent, and likely would be higher if not for the central bank’s raid on its foreign cash reserves to prop up the value of the Egyptian pound. Textile workers and doctors alike have staged walkouts for higher wages. Tourism is moribund. The day after he was enthroned, new Coptic Pope Tawadros II said he and Egypt’s 10 million Christians would

reject the proposed constitution, drafted by a committee dominated by Islamists, if it retained language establishing a religious state.

“The **Muslim Brotherhood**, they don’t know politics. Every day they provide us with proof,” said Dr. Ehab El Kharrat , a psychiatrist, member of Egypt’s upper house of Parliament, and a Christian member of the country’s constitution-drafting committee until he walked out in protest. “They are not the underdog any more. Now they are making one mistake after another.”

This was the view several weeks ago, when growing public exasperation with the impotence of the Morsi government appeared to open a plausible path for Christians to secure some space for themselves alongside Egypt’s widely popular Islamist political movements.

But it also was before Morsi made his late-November lurch for power with a series of decrees—since rescinded—that expanded his authority and shielded him from court oversight. It was before he ordered the committee drafting the constitution, already deserted by frustrated Christians and the object of widespread protests, to finish the job in a single night, and scheduled a popular vote for Dec. 15.

Cairo streets filled with tens of thousands of protesters, and with even more Morsi supporters, in sometimes violent confrontations. Tanks lined up in front of the presidential palace. In the streets, the dividing line has become a largely religious one: The Brotherhood and Salafis on one side chanting in support of Islam and majority rule; and opponents on the other chanting in support of a constitution without religious preferences and that protects minorities.

Article 2 of the proposed constitution establishes Islam as the state religion. “Principles of Islamic Sharia are the

principal source of legislation," it states. Article 219 spells out those principles as "general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence, and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the larger community." Article 44 outlaws blasphemy.

Now that the national vote is nigh, ordinary Christians told World Watch Monitor through an interpreter that their way forward likely will be a longer, harder grind under a system of laws tilted against anyone who is not Muslim.

"The result will be fraud and the Brotherhood will win," said Meshel Gerges, 30, a Catholic electrical engineer.

"Nothing will happen for us as Christians after the ratification of the constitution in the short term. But I think after two years they will get rid of their enemies," Gerges said. "The church will face persecution and they will not allow us to build churches."

Meriam Hana Wadeaa, a 32-year-old industrial manager and a Coptic Christian, said "we will see bad days" under the constitution.

"Life will be pitched," she said. "Everyone is scared and don't know what they do (except) pray to God to save us from this nightmare quickly."

"The constitution is not appropriate for us as Christians because the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis are the majority who wrote the constitution," said Sameha Ibrahim, a 45-year-old cleaning worker and Coptic Christian. "My feelings toward it are a very intense fear for my children and the country."

The mutation of Egypt's revolution against a dictator into a sectarian struggle troubles Mohamed El Dahshan, a Cairo-based

economist and policy adviser.

“Painting society as a pro-Islam vs. **anti-Islam** binary choice isn’t a political dispute—it’s a civil one,” El Dahshan blogged Monday for *Foreign Policy Magazine*. “Because there isn’t a region, a street, a family where people don’t disagree about politics; if this kitchen table conversation is transformed into one about faith, then we’re lost. And the damage will reach all the way to the deepest threads of the society that we love to compare—mostly thanks to a Christian minority that throws in some diversity—to a complex, tightly woven tapestry.”

Giving voice to El Dahshan’s fear, several Christians who spoke with World Watch Monitor said talk of leaving Egypt for good is common in their church congregations.

Among his young church peers, 25-year-old teacher Michel Rauof said there are worries the approval of the constitution will make a bad economic situation worse, and that the unemployed will simply be forgotten. “Many think of emigration, but there is no way to emigrate,” he said through an interpreter.

Though they are likely to come out on the short end of Saturday’s constitutional referendum, Egypt’s 10 million Christians will not be left completely empty-handed.

“If this constitution were allowed, there are natural and legitimate channels to make the objection of people and organizations,” Dr. Reverend Safwat Al-Bayaadi, head of the Anglican Communion in Egypt, told World Watch Monitor through an interpreter. “And we will do so, but the church does not call for disobedience. We’ll look for ways and legitimate channels for objection and request for reconsideration. However, we reject disobedience.”

A Christian history professor in Cairo, speaking anonymously

to protect his position, said believers will have little option but to confront injustices directly, and loudly.

"The oldest and best way is continuing our resistance and exposing it to the whole world," he said. "Go publicly to the international society, while resisting on the inside."

"We are preparing ourselves for a long, long struggle and battle with Islam," the professor said. "What is happening with Islamists in the streets is one part of that. We win some of these small battles. We have some of the rights we fought for."

Even if Christians have run out of time to gather the votes needed to reject the proposed constitution Saturday, the professor said they continue to win converts to the cause of religious freedom for Egypt.

"The number of people refusing political Islam is increasing every day," he said, "and this is encouraging us that maybe we will be victorious in the future."