

Coptic Christians Harassed by Egyptian Muslims

It was a quick skirmish and no one was hurt, but it was typical of what Egypt's Coptic leaders say are increasing attempts to harass Christians since the country's 2011 revolution.

The latest incident occurred Monday, Nov. 5, in the Shoubra el Kheima district of northern Cairo, where a Coptic Orthodox Church service center is under construction.

Following the afternoon Muslim prayers, a group of Salafi Muslims occupied the construction site. They hung a sign: Masjed El Rahman, or "Mosque of the Merciful."

The Maspero Youth Union, a Copt activist group, said on its Facebook page that the intruders insisted the church did not have the necessary permits to build. Government officials later affirmed what the church already know: The church had all the required permissions in place.

For about 24 hours, however, members of the Coptic Church had to reckon with a group of Salafis who insisted Christians had no right to the land. In the early-morning hours of Tuesday, several members of the Maspero Youth Union made their way to the building site and began asking questions of the occupiers.

"We have a small mosque at the end of the street and the presence of a church here will offend us," one of the Salafi occupiers said, according to one of the youth union members.

"And this small mosque has a license?" the Copt youth said he asked in reply.

"Do the houses of God need a license?" he quoted the Muslim as saying.

"I was shocked by the answer," the Copt youth said.

Coptic Bishop Antonius Marcos, who oversees that region of Cairo for the church, urged Christians to avoid direct confrontation with the Salafis even as he lodged complaints with the government officials.

"The church doesn't intend or wish to have any kind of confrontation with anybody. We are all brothers living in a same country," Bishop Marcos said.

According to Middle East Concern, a Britain-based Christian human-rights association, the church's construction project has the support of the governor for that region of Egypt.

The Salafi occupiers left the construction site Tuesday.

The brief occupation of the construction site occurred only one day after Copts selected their new pope, Bishop Tawadros II, who will assume the throne on Nov. 18. He succeeds Pope Shenouda III, who died in March. Copts make up more than 10 million of Egypt's 80 million people.

In a television interview Monday before the Salafis took over the Copt parcel of land, Tawadros said the Egyptian government must do more to protect Copts, who have been the object of an increasing number of assaults. The incoming pope also said the proposed new Egyptian constitution, currently under debate across the country in advance of an upcoming national vote, should not be built upon Islamic law as hard-line Muslims, such as Salafis, are insisting.

It's not known if the Salafis were responding directly to Tawadros when they took over the Coptic construction site. But

that's the way it looked to Fr. Rafic Greiche, pastor of St. Cyrille Greek Melkite Catholic Church and a spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt.

"Such an action is nothing new in Egypt, but this is the first time that extremists directly go after a high-profile Coptic prelate," Greiche told Vatican Radio.

The episode prompted denunciations from the Coptic hierarchy, and from liberal allies such as the Free Egyptians Party and Egyptian Social Democratic Party. Salafism is a movement that advocates a strict adherence to the form of Islam as practiced by the earliest generations of Muslims. The Salafist Nour Party in 2011 won a quarter of the seats in the Egyptian parliament, second only to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Together with other conservative Muslim groups, Salafis staged a demonstration Friday in Cairo's Tahrir square to demand a prominent role for Islamic law, or sharia, in the new constitution. More moderate Muslims, together with Christians and other liberal elements, are trying to keep the constitution as neutral as possible on the issue of religion.

They held their own demonstration a few weeks earlier in Tahrir, though they are greatly outnumbered in the Constituent Assembly, which is drafting the constitution and is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Nour.

The Maspero Youth Union takes its name from the huge building that is home to the Egyptian Radio and Television organization, where youths staged a demonstration in Oct. 2011 to protest the earlier destruction of a Christian church in southern Egypt. Security forces and the Army killed 28 of the protesters, most of them Copts.

Egypt ranks No. 15 on the World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.