

Network for Inter faith Concerns

Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 1 2007

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In Egypt:

Constitutional amendments in Egypt and the issue of citizenship and Shari'a law:

After a long debate during the last three months, on March 26th Egyptians voted on the referendum of constitutional amendments to 34 constitutional articles which President Hosni Mubarak had asked to amend on 26 of December. These include banning parties based on religion, and emphasis on the principle of citizenship and other articles.

The amendments on some articles triggered a long debate and huge controversy among liberals, Islamists, Copts and other groups, such as inserting the concept of citizenship in the first article of the constitution to become: "Egypt adopts a democratic system based on citizenship" instead of "Egypt is a democratic, socialist state based on an alliance of the people's working forces." Meanwhile a group of intellectuals and journalists called upon the president to amend the second article of the constitution -that Egypt is an Islamic country and that Islamic shari'a is the source of legislation. This second article, added to the constitution by President Anwar al-Sadat in 1980, encouraged Islamist groups and left the Copts feeling like second class citizens, reported Hani Danial in (*al-Watani* No. 2356, 18 february 2007). Many liberal and Copt intellectuals argued that in order to achieve reform and apply the concept of citizenship the second article of the constitution should be amended. (*Al-Ahram weekly* – No. 835, 8-14 March 2007). There were also reports of a policy conflict within the church over the abolishment of a term in the Egyptian constitution which considers Islamic Shari'a the only source of legislation in Egypt. However, Pope Shenouda III, the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, announced that the Coptic Church accepts the term in the Egyptian constitution which considers Islamic Shari'a the only source of legislation in Egypt. Furthermore, he called upon Copts not to interfere in legislative reforms and to leave the matter in the hands of those in charge. (*al-Ahram weekly* 1-7 March No. 834.) In an interview with *al-Arabiah TV* (*alarabiya.net* 19 March 2007) Pope Shenouda III, expressed his concern that the debate over article-2 in the constitution could trouble Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt. He confirmed that Copts do not aim to rule Egypt, and opposed the idea of forming a Christian political party.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) "strongly opposed including the concept of citizenship in the constitution, describing it as a bizarre, heretic notion." The MB spokesman in the Parliament MP Hamdi Hassan said that the concept of citizenship involves "unethical rights", and that "it was inserted in the constitution to counter the second article which stipulates Egypt as a Muslim state and that Islamic shari'a is the main source of legislation." (*al-Watani* – No. 2360, 18 March 2007).

Muslim Brotherhood and independent MPs decided to boycott the debate over the initial draft of the amendments in the Parliament and later on to boycott the referendum. According to the official results, only 27.1 per cent of Egypt's 36 million registered voters went to the polls. (*al-Ahram weekly* - Issue No. 838, 29 March 2007)

Fetnat El-Takfeer (The Sedition of Making Infidel)

A new book by the Islamic scholar Muhamed Emara enraged Coptic Christians for including a paragraph which explicitly describes Christians as infidels. The book, published by the Ministry of *Waqf* (Religious Endowments) and under the auspices of Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Academy (1st ed. 2006), deals with rifts among different Islamic sects, Shi'a, Sunni and Wahaabi, and calls for their unity.

In a report titled "Old text, new strife" by Gihan Shahine in *al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue No. 827, 11-17 January 2007) – the Coptic lawyer Naguib Gabriel, who took the matter to the general prosecutor against the book and the author, complained: the book includes a paragraph which "explicitly describes Christians as infidels... who are destined to eternal hellfire in the afterlife and whose property and lives can be lawfully seized during their lifetime." *al-Watani*, a Christian weekly (issue No. 2349, December 31st) was the first to draw attention to the book. Consequently, several Copts filed official complaints to the prosecutor-general against Emara. For his part, Emara explained that he just quoted El-Ghazali's definition of what faith and infidels mean. He clarified that non-Muslims have always had equal

reverence, rights and duties as Muslims under Islamic Sharia (law), and hence “a great scholar like El-Ghazali would never make the mistake of sanctioning the taking of their lives and property.” However, Emara regretted that he quoted the old text without “thinking”, and apologised. The Religious Endowments Ministry pledged to publish a new, corrected edition of the book in early 2007, and this is indeed free of all the offensive phrases. Sameh Fawzi, the managing editor of the Christian *al-Watani* seemed hardly satisfied with Emara's apology, saying that this is not the first time Emara affronts Christian theology, referring other articles by Emara which sparked Christian uproar in 2004.

This land is mine:

A new dispute over lands occurred between Christians and Muslims in Ezbet Hanna Ayoub in al-Minya, 325km south of Cairo. The homes of 29 peasant families (mainly Christians) were demolished on 15 February in order to build an Islamic Azhari institute, on the pretext that the land is owned by the Land Reclamation Authority (LRA). Since 1985 the land's residents filed successive applications to the LRA to purchase the land and legalise their stay but were refused. Instead the 20 qirats land was sold to one of the residents of the nearby al-Birka village (a Muslim village), to build an Islamic Azhari institute. Father Abdel-Messih Lamei, priest of the Catholic Church in the hamlet told the Christian weekly *Al-Watani*: “What sense is there in building an Islamic institute or school on land in a predominantly Christian hamlet? Ninety-eight per cent of Ezbet Hanna Ayoub's residents are Copts.” The full story with interviews was reported by Nader Shukri in *al-Watani* (Issue 2358, 4 March 2007).

Sleepless Armant:

In Upper Egypt, 15km south of Luxor, Christians and Muslims have always lived together in peace in Armant, a village of 70,000 inhabitants. Last February, the village witnessed a sectarian incident in which three shops and two houses owned by Copts were set aflame by some Muslim young men. The rampage came in the wake of rumours that Coptic men were seducing Muslim young women and persuading them to convert to Christianity. The village's young men were motivated by Islamic groups that indoctrinated youth in extremist, fanatical thought, MP Muhammad al-Nubi explained. These groups became active in Upper Egypt since 1990s. Nevertheless, the villagers have united to thwart any hard feeling between Copts and Muslims. Mr Nubi led efforts to arrange for a courteous get-together, and asserted that the problem was mainly social not a sectarian one. Thus, he asserted the importance of developing the area and providing work for young people. The full story was reported in *al-Watani* (Issue 2356, 18-25 February 2007).

The Islamic Call Society and the government of Libya donate a church to the Episcopal diocese of Egypt –

In 29th of January 2007, the Islamic Call Society handed over to the Episcopal Church in Egypt a church building in the Old City of Tripoli, Libya. The church, built by the Catholic Church in the 14th Century and recently used by the government as a museum, is called St. Mary the Lady of Angels.

Rt. Rev. Mouneer Anis announced the news considering this gift as one of the fruits of interfaith dialogue with the Islamic Call Society who made an appeal to the president and relevant government officials for the Episcopal/Anglican congregation to use this church. The official re-consecration of St. Mary's Church was planned during the visit of Bishop Mouneer Anis to Libya in March 2007. The statement was published in the *Newsletter of the Anglican Diocese of Egypt* (31 January 2007).

The arrest of the Rev Emil Nabih and the destruction of the Ras El Soda Community Development Centre -

13 February 2007, without prior warning, police forces pulled down a social services building that belongs to the Episcopal Church in Alexandria, on the pretext that the building was unlicensed. The demolished building housed a clinic and a nursery in Ras El Soda, one of the poorest areas in Alexandria, and served Muslims and Christians. Rev Emil Nabih, who served in the centre tried to intervene, he was arrested, beaten and insulted and was released the following day. The losses amounted to some half-a-million Egyptian pounds. The full story is reported in the *Newsletter of the Anglican Diocese of Egypt* (16 Feb. 2007) and in *al-Watani* (Issue 2356, 18 Feb. 2007).

A “New Document on Mutual Respect between Religions” at the meeting of the Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Cairo

Members of the Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue held a meeting in Cairo on 29-31 March 2007 to discuss the project of a “new document on mutual respect between religions” presented by Dr. Muhammad Salim al-Awwa. The working paper introduces the principles of mutual respect and refers to its religious and moral foundations. It emphasizes the importance of mutual respect between different religious creeds and denominations, and the necessity of promoting cooperation between Christian and Muslim Arabs. As a result of the discussion, a subcommittee was formed to discuss and incorporate the members’ contributions to the working paper. The meeting also discussed the recent updates of Christian-Muslim Relations in the Middle East, and touched on the issues of “citizenship, religion and the state”. There was a special focus on Sudan and on issues of co-existence in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. A session was held at the end to elect a new administrative board. The press release is available at (*al-Mustaqbal Newspaper no. 2567, 3 April 2007*), (*Annahar no. 22964, year 74, 3 April 2007*).

The Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue includes a number of prominent Arab Muslims and Christians-intellectuals, religious scholars, and people engaged in public life from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, the Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

In Palestine:

Christians and Muslims join in Jerusalem:

In early January 2007, leaders of 13 different churches in Jerusalem issued a “call to unity” expressing deep concern about worsening relations between the two main Palestinian political parties Fatah and Hamas, calling for an end to violence and an urgent return to “real priorities” of Palestinians. In their statement, the church leaders urged people to pray for their neighbors rather than “hurling accusations at each other.” They called for unity of Palestinians and for peace with justice for all people living in the Middle East, including Christians, Muslims and Jews. They concluded by offering to play their part in ending strife and seeking to mediate. The plan was to work on a similar Christian-Muslim message with Jerusalem’s top Islamic leaders. The statement was published in major Christian newsletters. The full text is available at (*WCC News Release, 15 January 2007*), (*The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem Newsletter, February 2007*), (*the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation 23 February 2007*).

Later on after the clashes over excavations in Islamic holy sites, Christian and Muslim leaders gathered in East Jerusalem to show solidarity against the Israeli excavation under Al-Aqsa mosque, and the destruction of the Moroccans (Magharabeh) Gate. The Archimandrite Atallah Hanna of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, who joined the demonstration in Wadi Joz as a part of the Christian delegation, stated “On behalf of Christian churches in Jerusalem, on behalf of Palestinian Christians, I stand with you in the legitimate struggle to defend the

holy al-Aqsa Mosque, because an assault on al-Aqsa is an assault on all of us.” (*Palestinian News Network, 22 February 2007*). Moreover, heads of churches paid a solidarity visit to Muslim clerics and leaders after recent clashes in the holy sites of Islam. They talked about “how to keep holy sites protected, respected and not challenged by any one party’s unilateral actions.” (*the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation 23 february 2007*)

The Holy See: Religion can aid peace in Holy Land

In a recent conference sponsored by the UN committee dedicated to the rights of Palestinian peoples, Monsignor Pietro Parolin, undersecretary to the Vatican Secretariat of State for relations with states, recalled the Christian presence in the area and the contribution they can make to the resolution of conflict by responding, in a constructive manner, to the urgent needs of their respective societies and the whole region. Msg. Parolin in his addressing the conference on March 22nd referred to Pope Benedict XVI’s Christmas message to Catholics in the Middle East, in which he appealed to peoples of different Christian confessions and of different religions “who seek peace, justice and solidarity by listening, and sincere dialogue.” He concluded: “in the name of the Holy See, I wish to state my firm conviction that the different religious confessions present in the Holy Land can make a decisive contribution to the relaunching of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians.” The full report is available at (*The Catholic News Agency (ZENIT), 26 March 2007*).

In Lebanon:

Christians and Muslims gathering to celebrate the Annunciation:

On March 25th - the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the Catholic school of “the Lady of the Mass” and the Jesuit schools in Lebanon invited Christian and Muslim clergy and people from all confessions to participate in a special service for the Virgin Mary. The service included presentations, hymns and prayers by both Christians and Muslims to express the Virgin Mary’s devotedness as it is recognized in both faiths. The aim of this gathering as set by the director of the school Nagi al-Khoury was “to present the mission of Lebanon in promoting peace, dialogue, co-existence, respect, forgiveness and love to all Lebanese from different confessions and religions... The Virgin Mary represents the example that provides motherly love, security and unity to all Lebanese peoples.” The attendance concluded with a joint Christian-Muslim prayer. The full report is available at (*Annahar no.22958, year 74, 27 March 2007*)and all Lebanese dailies.

Patriarch Gregory III Lahham explains the causes of the Christian flight from the region

In His message from Vienna to all Muslims on the occasion of celebrating Easter, Patriarch Gregory III Lahham - Patriarch of Antioch and the East, Alexandria and Jerusalem for the Greek Catholic Church - expressed the fears that haunt Christians in the Arab World [in particular, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine] and lead to their emigration from the region. He pointed to the issues of citizenship, democracy, human rights and co-existence as issues to be addressed by both Muslims and Christians. The Patriarch called upon Muslim rulers, clergy and religious leaders, asking their cooperation in stopping the Christian flight, emphasizing that “our congregations want to continue living in co-existence with our Muslim brothers, not as protected “dhimmis” but as co-citizens attaining the same rights and duties. We want to build our countries together and contribute to the future, as it has always been the historical role of Christians in this region.” He asked for the freedom of Christians to practice their faith and build their churches beside the mosques of their Muslim brothers, asserting that such attitude will grant security and reassurance and help stop the emigration. Furthermore, the Patriarch indicated the immense capacity of Christian

schools, hospitals, universities, charities and cultural institutes which provide services to both Christians and Muslims and contribute to the development of the region. (*AKI- Andkronos international- Italian News Agency, 3 April 2007*).

The concern over Christian emigration has been recently expressed by several media sources. In a study carried out by Information International- an independent research body in Beirut, the political and economic crises in Lebanon after the war of July 2006 and the rise of radical Islam create feelings of insecurity and lead to emigration. Sometimes described as exodus, about 60.5 per cent of Christians have already left or they are considering emigration. Christians make up 22 per cent of the population but their influence is waning as a result of the power struggle between different factions in Lebanon. (*The Sydney Morning Herald, 2 April 2007*)

Nevertheless, the same study indicated that 58.7 per cent of Muslims (some 22 per cent Shiites and 26 per cent Sunnis) are also considering going abroad. The study concluded that political stability, social security and creating job opportunities are the main conditions for stopping emigration. The study was published at (*Annahar- no. 22941, 10 March 2007*).

In Syria:

The Grand Mufti of Syria attends Prayers for Peace at St. Ephraim church in Aleppo

In early January 2007, the Syrian Orthodox Church in Aleppo invited Christians and Muslims to pray for peace in the Middle East at St. Ephraim cathedral in Aleppo. The Grand Mufti of Syria and numerous Christian and Muslim clergy and people participated in this occasion. The service included sermons, hymns and prayers, which reflected the harmonious Christian-Muslim co-existence in Syria. The attendance included a considerable number of Iraqis who fled to Syria after the War. *This event was fully covered by the Syrian TV and all official Syrian dailies (Tishreen and al-Thawra 6 January 2007)*

In Nigeria:

The Anglican Church and the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) collaborate to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS

The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) together with the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs NSCIA and other leading faith-based groups in Nigeria launched their joint project "Positive Living for Persons living with HIV/AIDS" in Abuja on March 21st. This initiative aims to ensure a holistic and practical approach toward combating HIV/AIDS by providing care and spiritual support to persons living with HIV.

The Church of Nigeria has already made notable progress in this service through its 122 dioceses around the country. The Rev Sam Akale, the National Coordinator of the Church on HIV/AIDS, said: "the greatest achievement is that the Church in Nigeria is now addressing HIV from the pulpit and thus affirming God's love and care for persons living and affected by this pandemic." It is hoped that the project will provide training to ministers of religion, community leaders and youth on how to prevent the spread of HIV. The project will be implemented in 12 states in Nigeria in collaboration with the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) which provides facilities for faith groups to support HIV/AIDS. The full report is available on (*ACNS Digest 28 March 2007*).

Another religious feud in Nigeria

Another religious feud took place in Gombe City, North-East, when Muslim students had killed a Christian teacher, accusing her of desecrating the Koran. The teacher was attacked by the students outside the school campus after she had supervised an exam. For fear of unrests, all schools in the city have been shut down. The story was reported by (*Afrol News, 22 March 2007*).