

Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 2 2012

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Introduction

Welcome to the second issue of the Christian-Muslim News Digest for 2012. This issue looks at Egypt and the presidential candidates' attempts to woo Christians before the second round of the presidential elections on the weekend of 16th-17th June 2012; Bishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon of Kaduna, Nigeria, warns religious leaders to stop fanning the embers of hatred in the country; also in Nigeria, a visit by an international delegation led by Olav Tveit of the World Council of Churches and Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan examines the current situation and the factors behind the present tensions; in Pakistan, the Ministry for National Harmony holds a seminar on forced conversions; finally, we look at the Sudan, at the situation of those made stateless in the north by last year's secession of the South.

Egypt: Presidential Candidates and Christians

The first round of elections for a new president did not provide a decisive result, with three candidates each polling more than 20%. The two leading candidates, Ahmed Shafiq, aged 70, a former air force commander, and Mohamed Mursi, aged 60, of the Muslim Brotherhood, will contest the run-off election held on 16th-17th June. Hamdeen Sabbahi came third, only just behind the two leading candidates, but was not permitted to join in the run-off. The run-off candidates reflect a polarisation of voters, leaving many of those who protested in Tahrir Square in order to topple Hosni Mubarak without an obvious candidate to further their expectations.

Both candidates appear to be trying to win the confidence and support of the Christian community, which accounts for around 10% of the population.

The Christian community, led by the late Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, generally supported the former regime, as it offered them a measure of protection. It is expected that many Christians will support Shafiq, who briefly held office as Prime Minister under Mubarak last year. However Mursi has made a number of statements encouraging Christians to support him and the Muslim Brotherhood has drawn up an agreement with Evangelical Christians.

In the April 2012 Diocesan Newsletter, Bishop Mouneer Anis wrote:

It is the first time in recent decades that the Egyptians will choose their president! It is the first time for us to see presidential debates between the candidates. Among these candidates there are the Islamists who try to use Islam to influence the people and the Muslim-liberals who put an emphasis on human rights and freedom for all Egyptians. ... In the middle of all this, the Egyptians use their great sense of humor in commenting on the candidates! ... Egyptians have great expectations of the new president who I don't think will have the power and resources to meet them all. It is going to be a very difficult task, especially at this time when the people are still in the Revolution mode. Do pray for wisdom and insight for all people who will go to vote.

The article includes examples of the cartoons being posted by Egyptians; the caption of one encapsulates the dilemma for voters. ‘A candidate who would like to be Islamist for the Islamists, Liberal for the Liberals, Farmer for the Farmers, supporting the rights of the Christians, etc..’

The Reuters interviews with the candidates show the ways in which Shafiq and Mursi regard Christians, and the concerns of many secular/liberal Egyptians that Shafiq represents a continuation of the old order, whilst the Muslim Brotherhood have ‘stolen’ the revolution.

In ‘[Egypt's Shafiq - Islamist rival heralds “dark ages”](#)’, Reuters’ correspondents report Ahmed Shafiq’s attack on his rival at a press conference, in which he said:

I represent a civil state, the Brotherhood represents a sectarian Brotherhood state. I represent moving forward, they represent going backwards, ... Women of Egypt, I will not permit that the powers of extremism take you back to the dark ages.

The reporters said that Sunday’s statement appeared mainly to play on the fears of liberals, Christians and women.

In ‘[Egypt Islamist says he is choice for revolutionaries](#)’, Reuters interviewed Mohamed Mursi, who:

... offered a number of policies intended to appeal to the centre and stressed that he was now the only alternative to more military rule, whatever misgivings about the Brotherhood still troubled those who launched the protests against Mubarak. “This nation and this people, who have revolted against Mubarak, will not accept his system again,” said Mursi, laying claim to a revolutionary mantle which the Brotherhood’s critics say is ill-deserved due to its hesitation in taking on Mubarak. ... Seeking to broaden his appeal, Mursi has reached out to rivals who lost in the first round, saying he was opening up the vice-president posts and even premiership to those outside his group. He has tried to woo wary liberals and Christians, saying in office he would not impose Islamic strictures on society.

Jayson Casper, a reporter for Arab-West Report, posted a series of reports on the on-line edition of *Christianity Today* about the agreement between Evangelicals and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as reflecting on what the elections may mean for Christians in Egypt.

Casper posted an article ‘[Egyptian Christians Back to Square One Ahead of Election: After a year of new forms of political engagement, why do Copts still face the same ‘bitter choice’ of old regime vs. Islamists?](#)’ on 29th May 2012, which explores the dilemma facing Christians in general and Copts in particular:

The majority of Copts voted for Shafik, ... “Not from love, but to oppose the Islamists, because [Shafik] is from the army and will know how to run the transition, and because he is clear and firm in his word and decision.” ... Yet many Copts wonder why this bitter choice has returned. Since the revolution began in January 2011, Egyptian Christians have attempted many new forms of political engagement. Many supported the campaign of Abdel Munim Abul Futuh, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood whose centrist campaign sought to bridge the gap between Islamists and liberals. His final share of the tally, however, came up short at 17 percent. Another effort was led by Bassem Victor, a Coptic activist dedicated to reconciling Christians and Salafis, those ultra-conservative Muslims intent on applying Shari‘ah law. He questions, however, the overall scale of new political engagement by Copts. “Copts do not participate in society-building activities. Even their presence in Tahrir was weak. They stay in their homes and in their churches until something touches their community.” Yet for Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of Coptic newspaper *Watani*, Coptic withdrawal was understandable. “The Copts left Tahrir first because they believed the revolution succeeded by toppling Mubarak. Then they increasingly went to Maspero because they did not feel welcome any longer as political Islam came to dominate, my colleagues were there every Friday, both professionally and in spirit. They were hurt and horrified by the speeches the Muslim Brotherhood issued from their separate stage.”

Indeed, three-quarters of the electorate rejected the old regime, and three-quarters rejected the Muslim Brotherhood. Copts—like all Egyptians—are back at square one for the moment, but their future has never been more revolutionary.

Casper also posted an article '[Muslim Brotherhood Signs Agreement with Egyptian Evangelicals: But is the 10-point agreement worthy of trust?](#)' which details the agreement made between the Muslim Brotherhood and Coptic evangelical leaders:

17 Coptic evangelical leaders met with five Muslim Brotherhood counterparts at the Brotherhood's headquarters on February 28, and crafted a joint statement of common values, which both sides agree the new Egyptian constitution and government should uphold. Evangelicals comprise a minority of Egyptian Christians, almost 90 percent of whom are Coptic Orthodox.

During this period the Coptic community has been preoccupied with mourning the death of Pope Shenouda III in March and the election of a new pope.

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Nigeria: Bishop of Kaduna speaks out

In an article in the Nigerian newspaper *Vanguard*, Bishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, Church of Nigeria (Anglican) Bishop of Kaduna, and also a member of the management committee of the Network for Interfaith Concerns of the Anglican Communion, asks: '[Murder in the name of which God?](#)'.

Idowu-Fearon, writing about a sermon that he preached in Maiduguri, challenged those religious leaders who are espousing the use of violence:

In the message I made three points about the implications of the synod theme. It was also made clear to the congregation that the problem between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is not about whether we worship the same God but who is worshipping the true God! The three religions we recognize in Africa and Nigeria all have similar teachings about this One God. ... For extremist leaders on both the Christian and Muslim sides, we suggest that they go through the document "A Common Word: Muslims and Christians Loving God and Neighbour" (<http://acommonword.com>) and take the trouble to read the various comments from the two communities.

The world of Islam has moved on from that of the periods before the 21st century and it is in the interest of Christlike leaders to study the paradigm shift in Christian-Muslim relations, eschew the combative crusader spirit and embrace the spirit of dialogue. ...

I have continued to speak out on the teachings we have had in the northern parts of Nigeria that all of us who worship this One God as a Trinity are *dhimmi* i.e. 'protected citizens'. That means we do not

share the same platform as our Muslim colleagues who worship this One God as a Unity! Because of the uninformed knowledge of a huge number of Muslims in the northern parts, the murder of a Christian is not seen as a murder but a so-called religious duty though the Qur'an forbids forceful conversion.

Those leaders who are informed should as a matter of urgency begin a massive programme of balanced teaching of the Qur'an and Hadith as well as contextualisation of Islam to a pluralistic society like Nigeria. On the Christian side, there is a lot of ignorance of the religion of Normative Islam. Christian leaders need to go back to school and learn a bit more about the struggles the early Church had with the Person of Jesus Christ and the development of the Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead.

Such leaders need to study Islam from the theological point of view, understand normative Islam and climb down [from] their high horses so as to see the Muslim as one genuinely desiring to worship this One God as taught by his religion. The denigration of an entire religion, its civilisation and its adherents in the name of God is not Christlike and it is breeding a future generation of leaders who are intolerant, extremist and arrogant. No nation has ever survived and developed with this type of mindset, Nigeria cannot be an exception.

The article was covered in the *Church Times* in a summary titled 'Idowu-Fearon gives 'hatred' warning' on 11th May 2012.

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Nigeria: Visit by Christian and Muslim religious leaders to examine causes of violence

At the end of May a delegation of Christians and Muslims visited Nigeria, on a visit arranged by the World Council of Churches (WCC), led by its general secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, and Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, chairman of the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. Delegates also included the Archbishop of Dublin, the Most Revd Michael Jackson, who is Chair of the Anglican Communion's Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON), and Clare Amos, Programme Executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, World Council of Churches, and former member of the NIFCON management committee. The visit was facilitated by the Christian Council of Nigeria and the office of the Sultan of Sokoto.

The visit was made in order to investigate at first-hand the situation and factors in the present tensions; also, the delegation by its presence was expressing to the political and religious leaders in Nigeria the concerns of the international community about the violence.

A press release at the end of the visit '[Christian and Muslim leaders visit Nigeria](#)' stated the General Secretary of WCC as saying:

The joint involvement of Christian and Muslim leaders in this visit is meant not only to encourage an end to the violence but also to serve as an example of inter-religious cooperation in fostering peace and harmony between people of different religions.

The release explained that:

On 23rd and 24th May, the delegation visited Kaduna and Jos in Northern Nigeria, areas highly affected by the violence perpetrated by the *Boko Haram*, a militant group. During the visits delegates met with government officials, religious leaders, traditional rulers and the families of victims of violence to gain first-hand knowledge of the situation.

The delegation issued a statement '[Delegation to Nigeria hopes for “transformed reality”](#)', 29th May 2012, stating that the purpose of the visit was to 'demonstrate an international model of Muslims and Christians working together in inter-religious engagement aimed at fostering peace and harmony between people of different religions.'

The statement was issued at a press conference of the delegation in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. It expressed concern over the violence in the country and stressed the need for the religious communities to work together for peace and conflict resolution.

"We believe that both Christianity and Islam are religions which long for peace, and that in both our faiths love of God and love of our neighbour must belong together."

The delegates met with government officials, religious leaders, traditional rulers and the families of victims of violence during their visits to Abuja, Kaduna and Jos. In their statement they expressed their hope in the transformation of the situation in Nigeria. "In hearing the pain of those who have spoken to us we also caught a glimmer of their dreams, and the hopes of many, both religious leaders and ordinary people, that a transformed reality is possible."

Nigerian media reported on the visit: Ismail Mudashir, writing in *Daily Trust*, '[World Muslim, Christian leaders in Nigeria ... Don't break the country, they plead](#)', reported on a meeting with religious leaders and victims of the post-election riot in Kaduna.

The grand mufti of Bosnia, Dr. Mustafa Ceric, urged Nigerian leaders to always preach unity among all. "No matter the problem, don't break Nigeria because the country is better off together," he said.

In his address, the chairman of the Jama'atul Nasrul Islam (JNI), Sheikh Ja'afaru Makarfi, told the delegation that their visit to the state may not yield the desired result. "You should have come privately and not through the government so that you can have first hand information about the remote and immediate causes of the crises in the state. There is need for you to get all sides in order to be able to contribute in addressing these problems."

Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigerian (CAN), Kaduna State chapter, Reverend Sam Kujiat, reiterated his determination to partner with the organization for the sustenance of peace in the state.

After a period of reflection the delegation will issue a joint report on what they saw and experienced and will identify areas and projects where Christians and Muslims can work together to end the violence.

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Pakistan: Forced Conversions

The May 2012 issue of the Diocese of Peshawar *Frontier News* reports on a seminar organized by the Ministry for National Harmony in Islamabad on '[Forced Conversion in Pakistan](#)'. The report explains that participants were drawn from various faith communities.

Dr. Paul Bhatti, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Pakistan with the authority of Federal Minister, Pakistan, and Chair, All Pakistan Minority Alliance, welcomed all the guests at this occasion. Mr. Akram Masih Gill, the Minister of State for National Harmony also accompanied him. The seminar specially focused on the forceful conversion of Hindu and Christian girls who are kidnapped by majority Muslim land lords or well to do people and forced to marry.

The Bishop of Peshawar, the Rt. Revd. Humphrey S. Peters, stressed in his speech at the seminar that:

(i) The Religious Minorities of Pakistan must be given equal rights according to the founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah's presidential address to the constituent assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 and Article 25 (1) of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973. (ii) Age of the abducted girls must be determined by the Court. (iii) Police must register the cases lodged by the aggrieved parents. (iv) At the time of Courts decisions, the girls must be allowed to meet their parents.

PKAffairs reports an interview with Akram Gill, [Harmony minister speaks out: Gill wants tougher legislation against forced conversion](#), in which he stressed that such practice on the part of Muslims was against the injunctions of Islam. He plans to introduce legislation in the next session of parliament in order to protect minorities from forced conversions:

Gill remarked "We will seek a religious decree from the Council of Islamic Ideology and a ruling by the federal shariat court on the issue before introducing the required law".... Gill recommended the formation of official bodies to authenticate whether or not anyone had converted to Islam or any other religion with his or her own free will and not under coercion. "Learning the basic principles and teaching of Islam should be made obligatory, under the proposed laws for all those who decided to embrace Islam".... Gill added that the minority members of Parliament have recommended that the federal government introduce legislation to check forced conversion.

Gill explained that forced conversion resulted from 'sexual lust' that made Muslim men force non-Muslim girls to convert.

Previously, in 2010, the law division opposed legislation against forced conversion when the federal ministry for minorities had presented a draft. Also, other ministries regard existing measures in the penal codes of Pakistan as being sufficient.

Iftikhar Khan, in an article [Steps urged to curb 'forced conversion'](#) published in the *Dawn* newspaper dated 16th May 2012, quoted Dr Paul Bhatti who said that:

... poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and social injustice made the victims an easy target for forced conversions [and] ... stressed the need of bringing poor minority peasants into mainstream of economic and social uplift as a long term solution to this problem. [Saying] "We can encourage small cottage industry in areas which are more vulnerable". He called for preparing educational curriculum on such a pattern that it promoted inter-faith harmony.

The writer of the article was of the opinion that the seminar failed to come up with concrete proposals to solve the issue in a more effective manner and cited some of those present who saw the charges of forced conversion as being part of a conspiracy against Muslims.

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Sudan: Returnees from the North

During the civil war in Sudan, many people left the South. Some of them moved into neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda and Kenya, where many continue to live in refugee camps. Others moved to the North, becoming Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). Large IDP settlements grew up around greater Khartoum and Omdurman, the largest being Mandela in Khartoum and Wad al-Bashir in Omdurman. Most people from the South are Christians or follow traditional religions, whilst the North is mainly Muslim, this difference has led to raised tensions between the different communities.

Following the secession of South Sudan from Sudan last year, the government in Khartoum declared all IDPs who originated from South Sudan to be stateless and ruled that they should leave Sudan and return to South Sudan, one of the major contributing factors to this decision is that the southerners are mainly non-Muslim.

Transport routes to the South require travel by both road and river. Transhipment points, such as Kosti, in White Nile State, 300 kilometres south of Khartoum, have become crowded with IDPs waiting for river transport to carry them and their goods south.

In early May the media reported on the situation of South Sudanese stranded in Sudan. The coverage lasted for a few days because of one particular incident. A BBC report '[South Sudanese refugees flown home from Khartoum](#)', dated 14th May 2012, explained that a first plane load of 164 southerners had arrived in Juba from Khartoum. They were part of a group of 15,000 who had been stranded for months at Kosti, in White Nile State. The governor of the Kosti area declared the migrants a security threat, and they were told that they must leave Sudan by 5th May 2012, before the deadline was extended to 20th May 2012.

Sudan's authorities refused to let them travel south by barge, citing security concerns, so they instead travelled 190 miles north from Kosti by bus over the weekend to Sudan's capital, from where their flights departed.

The report explained that this group of returnees are part of at least 350,000 southerners remaining in the north who lost their Sudanese nationality after South Sudan gained independence last year. There are also believed to be some 80,000 Sudanese living in the South. The two countries are still negotiating about whether the southerners will be allowed to stay in Sudan or if they will all be forced to go to the South.

A Sudanese English language paper, the *Sun Daily*, in an article '[Airlift of South Sudanese begins from Khartoum](#)', on 14th May 2012, quoted Cecilia Peter, one of the returnees:

"It is my first time to the South. I was born here," Cecilia Peter, 27, said through a translator as she lined up for a boarding pass with her five tiny children. Peter said the family had spent 13 months in Kosti, after losing her job as a teacher.

The report went on to explain that:

All ethnic Southerners were dismissed from Sudan's civil service ahead of South Sudan's independence last July under a peace deal that ended 22 years of civil war which killed two million people and drove many more to the north.

The South Sudanese in Kosti are among about 350,000 ethnic Southerners who the South Sudanese embassy estimates remain in the north after an April 8 deadline for them to either formalise their status or leave Sudan.

Gurtong, an on-line news site, which has the strap-line 'Bringing the South Together', had a report '[Returnees arrive in Bor](#)', dated 13th May 2012. This explained that 3,000 returnees had arrived in Bor, capital of Jonglei State by boat from Kosti, having hired a river steamer and set off from Kosti in September last year. The authorities in Bor expected another steamer to arrive in a few weeks.

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