

Egypt's Christians keep wary eye on Muslim Brotherhood

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CAIRO (RNS) In Magdi Shnouda's cafe in Cairo, pictures of Jesus and the saints hang on the shabby walls, and the men playing backgammon and dominoes are a mixture of Christians and Muslims.

Sucking down glasses of sweet tea and strong coffee, they drape arms around one another and talk of how well they get along. They live in a neighborhood dotted with mosques and churches, and grew up like brothers, they say.

Another thing they agree on is the toppling of the regime of Hosni Mubarak, who left office after 17 days of anti-government protests. The country is now being run by the military, which has dissolved a parliament full of Mubarak cronies.

"It's excellent what's happening," said Nasraddin Mustafa, 55, a decorator and friend of Shnouda's. "Christians and Muslims are the same ... there will now be more safety and more friendship between Christians and Muslims."

The revolutionary solidarity in Shnouda's cafe was shaken, however, when the subject of the Muslim Brotherhood came up.

"If the Brotherhood take control, I will be the first to leave the country," said Baha al-Rashid, 40, a driver playing backgammon.

The Brotherhood, a strictly Islamic political party, is the country's most organized opposition group. Some Christians fear that if it gains more influence, it would impose Shariah, or Islamic law, and forbid them from practicing their faith.

"Neither Christians nor Muslims like them, because they are a group with their own ideas, but the rest of the Muslims are good with Christians," said Eid Ibrahim, 41, also a driver and a Christian.

Egypt has about 8 million Christians, the largest Christian population in the Middle East. Most belong to the Coptic Orthodox church ("Coptic" means "Egyptian"). The faith has been in Egypt for 2,000 years, they say.

The Bible says Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with the infant Jesus to escape King Herod's decree that baby boys in Bethlehem be killed. Tradition holds that St. Mark brought Christianity to Egypt in the first century. Islam did not arrive until six centuries later.

Christians here have long complained that they are shut out of some government jobs and treated as second-class citizens.

Christians have been targeted by terrorists in attacks that Mubarak's Interior Ministry blamed on "foreign elements." In the largest of many attacks against Christians last year, a car bomb in the northern city of Alexandria killed 21 people in December at a Christmas ceremony.

But during the recent demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, many Christians joined in, protecting Muslims from police and Mubarak supporters while they prayed. Christian doctors manned some of the first-aid stands, and posters with a crescent moon and a cross proclaimed unity.

At St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral on Sunday (Feb. 13), there were christening parties and worshipers caressed babies and chatted. They agreed that a new Egypt is a good thing but that there could be problems ahead.

"In the last year, there (have) been a lot of demonstrations," said David Samuels, 31, a master's student and a Christian, speaking in a bar near the upscale Heliopolis area of Cairo. "They were protesting because of anger and discrimination against them."

Many Christians say they suspect the government was involved in the attacks to keep Egyptians divided.

"When the demonstrations started, I doubted that what would happen in Tunisia would happen here," Samuels said. "But then I understood that there was real anger and people were talking about being Egyptian, not about being Christians or Muslims, and my Muslim friends were angry that the government was making conflict between Christians and Muslims worse."

Despite the euphoria, he, too, is nervous about the Brotherhood.

"I read a lot about the history of the party," he said. "They know there are a lot of bad vibes against them, so they will first try to get to the top of all the syndicates and then come to power, which would be

the worst for Christians.

"Christians have been raised on fear, and they are always afraid," he said.

In Shnouda's cafe, the owner was quiet as his friends chattered about the revolution, about how the political elite who stole all the money had gone, how Egypt was entering a time of more freedom and how the new government would not try to divide Christians and Muslims as the old one did.

Asked whether he agreed that the government would bring people closer, Shnouda paused. "Come and ask me this question in a year," he said. "We hope it will be better."