

Egypt rocked by sectarian violence in new regime

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As Egypt approaches the anniversary of the protest movement that overthrew former president Hosni Mubarak, the country still finds itself torn by sectarian violence. On October 9, a demonstration in Cairo protesting an attack against a Coptic church in the Aswan province erupted into the worst violence since Mubarak's ouster in February. Two dozen people were killed and more than 200 wounded.

Coptic Christians, who constitute about 10 percent of Egypt's 80 million people, blamed the church attack on Muslim radicals. According to media reports, Egyptian troops, which accused the Cairo protesters of shooting at them, shot rubber bullets and tear gas into a crowd of thousands.

Demonstrators denied the charges and said the protest was a peaceful one, though some news reports said "thugs" bent on violence had fired at the soldiers.

Addressing the nation October 10 on state television, Egyptian prime minister Essam Sharaf said the clashes between army forces and Coptic Christian protesters had brought the country back to the kind of violence seen at the onset of the revolution. "Instead of going forward, we found ourselves scrambling for security," said Sharaf.

Despite scenes of unity during the revolution, when Muslims joined Christians in protests against continuing sectarian violence and Christians were seen protecting Muslims during their prayers at Tahrir Square, attacks against Christian targets have continued. Prior to the recent attack, some 24 people had been killed, 200 injured and three churches attacked during the first five months of the post-Mubarak regime.

Christians say they fear the growing power of conservative Islamic groups. The second article of the Egyptian constitution declares Shari'a, or Islamic religious law, as the law of Egypt, leaving Christians fearful of their future place in the country if that provision is enforced. —ENInews