

Wary of Morsi

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Mohamed Morsi announcing himself president in June. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Drumzo](#).

President Mohamed Morsi's decision to reinstate the dissolved parliament has set off a firestorm of debate in Egypt. Is Morsi fighting for full democracy against a military regime? Or is he trying to institute a full Islamist takeover of government? Christians worry about the second possibility.

"There are attempts to take control of all state institutions," said Karam Ghobrial, an activist with the Coalition of Egypt's Copts, "and the biggest proof is Morsi's decision to bring back parliament." Ghobrial is one of many lawyers who filed an injunction against the president's ruling. Ghobrial's comments reveal a deep-seated Coptic distrust of Islamists. "There should be international attention from the United Nations to protect minorities," he said, "because Morsi broke his oath to respect and uphold the law."

Morsi's presidency did not start off this way. "We as Egyptians, Muslims and Christians," he proclaimed in his victory speech, "are all equal in rights, and we all have duties towards this homeland." He resigned from the Muslim Brotherhood, pledged to appoint a Coptic vice-president in his administration, and conducted a series of meetings with Christian leaders.

In talks with Bishop Pachomious, acting patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Morsi promised to keep close ties with the church and not allow any condescension toward Christians. In talks with representatives of other denominations, Morsi related how as a parliamentarian under Mubarak he interceded in a church building conflict.

These meetings created a very good impression. Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis of the Episcopal/ Anglican Diocese of Egypt wrote in his diocesan newsletter that Morsi desired to assure Christians that he will be “the president of all Egyptians.”

Safwat el-Baiady, president of the Protestant Churches of Egypt, was encouraged as well. “Morsi is friendly and he knows us very well,” he said. “We don’t feel the barriers with him that existed with other presidents. I hope he stays this way, but how long it will last I don’t know.”

This last hint of uncertainty is shared by many. A focus of concern is the role of the Grand Sheikh of the Azhar, a mosque and university esteemed by many Egyptians as the home of moderate Islam. Some Egyptians, however, criticize the current Azhar administration as an extension of state authority. Hanna praised Grand Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib to the president—especially in regard to his Family House initiative, in which all heads of Christian denominations participate. Morsi then “immediately agreed to host one of these meetings,” reported Hana. “I shared this news with [Tayyib] who was happy to hear that the president will give [it] serious attention.”

But the Grand Sheikh did not get serious attention at Morsi’s inauguration. After being seated unceremoniously at the back, Tayyib left midway through the event. President Morsi called him a few days later to smooth over the misunderstanding, but it was perceived by many as an insult.

“I cannot believe this was not on purpose,” said Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of the Coptic newspaper *Watani*. “As a Copt and an Egyptian there are many reasons to raise serious questions about his presidency, and [wonder] if he has a hidden agenda to be the voice of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

The Azhar is important to Copts, and the church has cultivated good relationships with its leaders. They trust the Grand Sheikh’s moderate approach.

Nowhere is this more evident than in responses to the drafting of the constitution. Article Two of the previous charter declared Islam to be the religion of the state and

the principles of the shari'a law to be the main source of legislation. Most expect Article Two will be preserved.

This wording is acceptable to Christians, since the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that the word "principles" applies only to universally agreed upon interpretations. But it is not acceptable to ultra-conservative Salafi Muslims, who see the word "principles" as a means to avoid applying shari'a law in full. A preliminary compromise in the drafting committee adds a clause that allows Christians the right to refer issues to church laws but makes Azhar the constitutional arbiter to determine the "principles" of shari'a law. This worries Christians, for though they esteem the current Grand Sheikh, they believe Islamists aim an eventual takeover of the institution.

"I don't expect any shocking decisions against the Copts, but it is more like the slow boil of a frog," said Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Orthodox Church. "The Brotherhood has been working for 80 years with the clear goal of establishing the caliphate and applying shari'a, even if they do it in a slow and political way."

Thomas noted that an Islamist presidency indirectly affords extremists the opportunity to enforce morality. In Suez a group of local Islamists allegedly murdered a man for walking publicly with his fiancée. Actions such as these have begun to mobilize Copts in opposition, though no unified stance has emerged. Some conducted a march on the presidential palace; others are creating a Christian Brotherhood in imitation of political Islam.

Sidhom believes such organizing efforts are a mistake and that it is moderate Muslims who need support. "To go ethnic is to commit suicide," he said, "because it is another effort to isolate Copts from the mainstream of Muslims, leaving us a lonely minority." He also questions making a Copt vice-president. He thinks such a move is sectarian, and that one person should not be given the task of representing the whole community.

Baiady agrees, "I don't want a vice-president because he is a Copt—only if he is efficient and happens to be a Copt. We don't want him simply to fill a space."

Baiady told Morsi that Christians are obligated to pray for him and ask God's guidance in leading the country. Such commitment is necessary to promote cooperation for the good of Egypt, he believes, but also to open up Christians to the possibility of working with Morsi and his followers.