

A new pope, a new approach?

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Roughly 2,400 electors on 29 October will cast ballots to narrow the field for the papal seat of the Coptic Orthodox Church from the current five candidates down to three.

Six days later, on 4 November, a blindfolded child will select the name of the successor to Pope Shenouda III from among these three candidates, at the altar of Saint Mark's Coptic Cathedral in Abbassiya.

There is little question that the new pope will bear an enormous weight of expectation on his shoulders. Not only will he occupy the papal seat in the wake of arguably the most successful pope of the modern era, Shenouda, but he will still further have to reckon with the instability in sectarian relations that has prevailed in Egypt since the 25 January revolution.

Thanks in large part to Shenouda's example, as well as that of his predecessor, Kyrillos VI, the Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt now demand far more from their pope than they have at any time in the modern era. Whereas a century ago, the Coptic community had a vigorous, politically active lay leadership, the clerical hierarchy has now assumed much of the responsibility for communal leadership that once belonged to the laity.

In an important sense, Kyrillos and Shenouda were the chief stewards of a fundamental shift in power within the Coptic community, as part of which the church's temporal role in Copts' lives has grown enormously. Arguably, the most important question the new pope will confront is whether to reverse that trend, or to continue to encourage it.

Whatever the pope's choice, there are, to my mind, six steps that the new pope could take in the temporal realm that would substantially ease the burden that Copts face in today's Egypt. I list them here in ascending order of importance.

1. Reform the papal elections process

This might seem an odd place for a new pope to begin a campaign of reform, having just received a mandate through this process. But there could be no better time to enact change, with the community just having experienced the process — and its manifold shortcomings.

Perhaps most problematic are the restrictions on participation in the Coptic "electoral college" of 2,400 members — restrictions that are rooted in socioeconomic status. By democratizing this process in the spirit of the 25 January revolution, the new pope could send a clear message to the community that, in the eyes of the law, not only are Copts equal to Muslims, but the poor are equal to the wealthy.

2. Insist on transparency in church affairs

Beyond the unrepresentative nature of the "electoral college," one of the problems that has come

to the fore during the papal elections process is the lack of transparency in the administration of the ballot. Critical decisions were made within the Coptic Orthodox Church hierarchy — for instance, regarding the qualifications of candidates for the papal seat — without the slightest attempt to explain or account for them.

Unfortunately, this is not uncharacteristic of the conduct of the church hierarchy.

If the pope's purview was limited to the realm of the spiritual, one could conceivably justify the lack of public accounting for significant decisions. But that the pope possesses a temporal role, and a critically important one at that, is beyond doubt.

In light of this temporal role, it seems equally beyond doubt that the church hierarchy should expose its decision-making processes to the parishioners whose lives and livelihoods its decisions affect.

3. Institutionalize dialogue with a range of lay organizations

Much like the electoral reforms and transparency urged above, a serious effort at dialogue with the Coptic laity would accord with the democratic spirit of the times, in the wake of the 25 January revolution.

The Coptic community is currently witnessing a flourishing of activism beyond the precincts of the church, and for the church to coordinate with lay organizations would benefit both the clergy and the laity — particularly in the face of the struggles for equality in citizenship that Copts are currently waging.

4. Expand the grounds for divorce in line with the 1938 bylaw

This is, to my mind, simply a moral imperative: Coptic women should not have to bear an exceptional burden of suffering in Egypt, due to strictures introduced in relatively recent memory. Nor, for that matter, should Coptic men.

5. Leave national politics to the laity

Since the rise of Pope Kyrillos VI to the papal seat, there has existed a partnership of sorts between Egyptian presidents and their counterparts in the Coptic papacy. Under the terms of this partnership, presidents have regarded the Coptic pope as the chief representative of the Coptic community — in both the spiritual and the temporal realms.

This practice should end, for to regard the Coptic pope as the chief representative of Copts in the temporal realm represents a failure to acknowledge the diversity of the Coptic community. The church cannot speak for all Copts, and the state should not expect it to do so.

6. Decentralize authority

In a sense, this is the broad theme within which the various steps above play a part. Yet this would appear diametrically opposed to a theme that now enjoys great esteem in particular sectors of the Coptic community — that the church needs to rally from within against those threats that Egyptian Christians face within Egypt at large.

All I can say, by way of response, is that I hope the new pope resists this impulse, so common in times of political unrest like that through which Egypt now passes. In resisting the impulse to centralize, the pope will afford Copts from all walks of life the opportunity to demonstrate that they are not "victims," as they are so often designated in the press.

The best way the new pope can demonstrate his confidence in the community is by taking a step back — by permitting Copts to speak for themselves, as equal citizens, in all their diversity.

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