



The Dark Side of the Arab Spring

by Jonathan Aitken

THE ARAB SPRING is fast becoming a winter of discontent for Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. In Washington the first stirrings of protest were hailed as a breakthrough for democracy. But the second phase of the uprising has brought fear, discrimination, and violent pressure against Christians in countries rebelling against incumbent regimes across the region.

This is particularly disappointing because the early signs of tolerance were hopeful. One of the most moving aspects of the crowds in Tahrir Square was that Christians and Muslims protested alongside each other in unity. Such was their solidarity that at prayer time on Friday the Christians formed a human shield to protect their kneeling fellow demonstrators from police baton charges. The cooperation was reciprocated but it was too good to last.

Egypt's 8 million Coptic Christians are now having a rough time. The vacuum left by Mubarak is being filled by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Both are extreme in their Islamism. They campaigned for their followers to vote "yes" to the new and flawed constitutional proposals that will result in discrimination against religious minorities, women, secular organizations, and progressive youth groups. Small wonder that when the "yes" vote was confirmed to have won, the ultra-conservative Salafist leader Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Yacoub was quoted as saying, "That's it. The country is ours."

There are sinister signs of the anti-Christian direction in which the Islamic extremists want to take Egypt. On New Year's Day, 21 Christians were killed and another 70 injured by a bomb that exploded as worshippers were leaving midnight mass at Al Qidissin (The Saints) church in Alexandria. On

March 8, 13 Christians died and another 70 were injured when Salafists attacked Copts who were demonstrating against the tearing down of their church in Sool village and the murder of a priest in Assait. On March 20, Salafists in the town of Qena cut off the ears of 45-year-old Coptic Christian Ayman Anwar Mitri after accusing him of having had an affair with a Muslim woman. These episodes are part of a continuing pattern of outrages, including lynchings and beatings of Copts. In a lecture given in London on April 8, the Anglican leader in Egypt, Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis, said, "The plight of the Coptic Christians is getting worse. They are living in a climate of uncertainty, fear, and apprehension."

Bishop Mouneer's words apply to minority religious communities all across the region that some Washington commentators have far too optimistically hailed as "the new Middle East." If the Salafists, jihadists, and Muslim Brothers have their way it will become the medieval Middle East, notorious for its intolerance and persecution of Christians. Who is going to prevent this?

Until recently it was a strange paradox that some of the most repressive political regimes were protective of religious minorities. In Syria, the beleaguered Bashar al-Assad has a good record of safeguarding the rights of the Druze, the Christians, and the Jews. As a traveler to Damascus in 2008, I was moved by visiting the well-preserved Christian churches and holy places of the city, including those on Straight Street. They are not much changed since the blinded Saul of Tarsus had his sight restored there by Ananias and was lowered down the wall in a basket to escape his pursuers. I also saw the tomb of John the Baptist that President Assad visits once a year to lead

a Christian prayer ceremony. Such tolerance is unlikely to last. The regime, even if it survives, will have to dilute its secularism by further concessions to its Islamist partners like Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

If you want to understand how grim the future looks for Christians in the Middle East, go to Baghdad, where the continuing sectarian violence has driven most of them out of the city and the country. Once they worshipped peacefully under Saddam Hussein. Now 80 percent of Iraqi Christians have emigrated. Those that remain are mainly elderly, although there are heroic younger congregations who literally have to fight the good fight to remain churchgoers.

ONE OF THE BRAVEST MEN I know is Canon Andrew White, Vicar of St. George's, Baghdad and author of *Faith Under Fire* (Monarch Books, 2011). I recently shared a platform with him at a Christian Solidarity Worldwide event in London. As we discussed the situation in the Arab world, I was moved to tears by his description of what he and his flock have to endure.

"Christianity in Iraq is under very vicious attack," says White. "It is a question of abduction, bombing, torture, rape, and murder. Christians are forced to pay *jizya*, the tax historically imposed by Islamic states on non-Muslims—in effect, protection money. So things are very difficult. Last year alone 93 members of my congregations were killed. The threat is particularly great for those who convert to Christianity. I baptized 13 adults secretly last year. Eleven of them were dead within a week."

Occasionally the deaths of persecuted Christians send shock waves in the right direction. One of the first casualties of the Tunisian revolution was a Polish priest, murdered for his faith by jihadists. His martyrdom caused protests in the streets that produced clear statements in favor of religious diversity by the new regime. Would that this example might prevail in other countries. Unfortunately all the signs point to greater intolerance.

Away from the dramatic episodes of bombings, assassinations, and ear or limb amputations by Islamist extremists, the everyday reality of life for Christians in the Middle East is that they face increasingly uncomfortable experiences of discrimination. Thanks to subtle or often unsubtle Islamist pressures, Christians have far less chance of employment in such organizations as the police, the mili-

tary, the universities, the teaching professions, and the government bureaucracy. They also find themselves at a disadvantage in matters like housing or the issuing of driving licenses. One of their many problems is that they are suspected of being pro-Western. This is odd since more than 70 percent of

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Middle East Christians are from the Oriental Orthodox Churches—Armenian, Syrian, and Coptic—while an Eastern Catholic Church with the Maronites and the Chaldeans forms the second-largest group in the region. The doctrinal differences between these elements go back to the historic ecumenical Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus, held respectively in AD 325, 381, and 431. It has taken the Arab Spring of 2011 to put them on the front line of hostility and persecution.

When the popular demonstrations against unpopular Arab rulers began earlier this year, the Christian churches in the region saw the movement with mixed emotions of hope and fear. Sadly, fear is now in the ascendant. The Christian community's hope of equality in freedom of speech and freedom of worship within pluralist democracies is being brutally obstructed by the Islamic extremists. Yet it is too early to despair. These revolutions have some way to go and many of their younger and more moderate Muslim supporters know that intolerant Islamism is not the answer to the problem of how to change society for the better. We Westerners should watch and pray! ❁

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