

The Copts under British Rule in Egypt 1882 - 1914

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The Egyptians became Christians in the early centuries of the Church, but the majority of them were separated from the main body of the Church subsequent to the council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Since then Egypt had an autonomous Orthodox Church embraced the Monophysite doctrine. Under the rule of Muslim Arabs many Copts had converted to Islam for different reasons, consequently the others became a minority and they were gradually Arabized in tradition, way of living and they gradually abandoned the Coptic language in favour of Arabic.¹

During the nineteenth century, under Mohamed Ali and his successors, Egypt became more free of control of the Ottoman Turks than it had been before, and the regime was comparatively favourable for the minorities. There was a gradual shift from the concept of theocracy to that of a nationalism which could include Copts as well as Muslims, and Copts continued, as before, to hold many positions in the Government.²

When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, the Copts were the backbone of the bureaucracy. Most of the fiscal tasks were performed by them. In the beginning of the twentieth century about 97 percent of all tax collectors were Copts.³ Some were granted lots of land by the sovereign, others were cheating in handling peasants' account and obtain big landownership. Basilyus Bey, head of al-Ruzname (the Fiscal Department) at Mohamed Ali's time belongs to the former category, and al-Mu'alim Rizq, chief tax collector of the Delta around the 1840's, is a good example of the latter. He could acquire tracts of land big enough to form a new village near Mit-Ghamr known as Kafr Rizq, his descendants kept holding the land at least up to the inter-war period.⁴

¹ Hourani, A.H. : Minorities in the Arab world, Oxford Univ. Press, 1947, P. 44.

² Ibid: P. 45.

³ Baer, G. : Population and society in the Arab East, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1964, P. 97.

⁴ Raouf Abbas: al-Nizam al-Ijtima'i fi Misr fi Zil al-Milkiyyat al-Zira'iyya al-Kabira 1837-1914, Dar-al-Fikr al-Hadith, Cairo, 1972, P. 98.

Among the village Sheikhs and Umdas (headmen) there were several Copts. Some Copt families, such as Hanna of Minya, Grees of Mansura and Bushra of Asiat, kept holding the rank of Umda in their villages all over the nineteenth century. There were five Copt village-headmen out of seventy five members in (Majlis Shura al-Nuwwab) the Assembly of Delegates, a constitutional representation body set up by khedive Islam'il in 1866.⁵

The most influential category of Copts was that of the wealthy wholesalers who came to be engaged in international trade after the breakdown of the monopoly system, the introduction of market economy and the development of agriculture in the second half of nineteenth century. They were almost agents for European trading companies, acquired alien nationalities in order to enjoy the Capitulations and the privileges of alien investors. Though being originally Egyptians, some were Vice-Consuls of European countries in the main trading centers.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, profits gained from dealing in agricultural products were higher than those from other commodities. Merchants, especially Copts, invested capital in agrarian production buying up large estates and becoming landlords. Wisa Buqtur was a prominent example of this. Around the end of the 1870's he began buying agrarian land; by 1898 he owned 12,000 feddans and that same year he bought 16,000 feddans of Da'ira.-el Saniyya land.⁶

The bulk of the Copts, as of the Muslims, were peasants in the villages of the Nile valley and Delta. They were producing the same crops, suffering the same oppressions and facing the same economic problems. Both Copts and Muslims lived in mixed villages, not in villages inhabited exclusively by Copts: in 1897 and 1907 there were only twelve villages with less than ten Muslims. They have similar customs for birth, marriage and death, similar superstitions and folklore, similar relics of that Nile-worship which has been called the real religion of the Egyptian peasant. It is enough to quote the conclusion of Lord Cromer in which he stated that «the only difference between the Copt and the Muslim is that the former is an Egyptian who worships in a Christian church, whilst the latter in an Egyptian who worships in a Mohammedan mosque».⁷

It could be the key point of the Copt's attitude toward the British colonial rule in Egypt. Although the wealthy Copts; landlords, merchants and high officials were supporting the occupation in order to keep their ranks and protect their interests, the bulk of the Copts were, from the early days of the occupation, against it, an

⁵ Ibid: P. 200.

⁶ Ramzi Tadrus: al-Aqbat fi al-Qaran-ul-Ishrin, Part III, Cairo 1911, PP. 74-75.

⁷ Cromer, the Earl of: Modern Egypt, Macmillan and Co. London 1911 vol. II, p. 619.

attitude which raised the hostility of Cromer to the community as a whole. The British imperialist could imagine that his Egyptian co-religionists did not hesitate in showing their unfriendly feelings towards the so-called 'English reformer'. Having no confidence in the Copts employed by the Government to perform fiscal tasks, the occupation authorities replaced them, gradually, by the Syrian Christians whom were agreeable agents. But around the beginning of the twentieth, century the occupation started employing the young Copts educated in the schools established by the American missionaries and could master English. Almost these individuals were belonging to the wealthy Copt families able to send their children to such costly schools and eager to keep friendly relations with the occupation authorities.⁸

Looking for having control over the whole community, the Coptic bourgeoisie made manoeuvre to eliminate the power of Coptic clergy. As early as 1874 the Coptic bourgeoisie founded a secular council al-Majlis al-Milli al-Amm lil-Aqbat al-Urthudhuks. One of its explicit purposes was to take over the Coptic waqfs from the clergy. In the early days of the occupation the Coptic bourgeoisie could get the official regulation of May 14, 1883 vested the management of all Coptic Khayri Waqfs in this council. From then on, the power of the Coptic patriarch, the clergy and the monks was severely undermined by secular organizations managed by the notables of the community.

Naturally, these endeavours faced the resistance of the clergy: At first it appeared as if this resistance would be once overcome. The crisis happened to take place in 1892 when Mostapha Pasha Fahmi, a Premier acting in general conformity with the occupation, sent the Coptic patriarch to one of the desert monasteries. Egyptian opinion; both Copt and Muslim was against the seclusion of the patriarch and few months later the Government had no other alternative but to recall him.⁹

For the occupation authorities the movement of the young intellectual Copts was affording ground for hope, especially those being educated in missionaries' schools in Egypt or British universities or the American university of Beirut and provided the occupation rule with cadres. The rise of Pan-Islamism and the foundation of al-Mu'ayad' daily newspaper in 1889 to be its organ was regarded by suspicion and fright, provide convenient condition for the young intellectual Copts to start their movement and mobilize their community in order to support certain communal claims. The mobilization was done through the charitable and educational institutions. In 1896 their organ 'Misr' appeared, drawing the attention to the

⁸ Ibid, II: PP. 622-624.

⁹ Ibid, II : PP. 624-625.

ancient Egyptian culture and referring to Copts as the heirs of that culture. On one of his essays, Akhnoukh Fanous, a graduate of the American University of Beirut and leader of the young Copts movement, called for the resurrection of Coptic language which was vanished under the rule of Muslim Arabs.

In May 1897, a delegation headed by Akhnoukh Fanous submitted a memorandum concerning the communal claims, on behalf of the Copts, to the British Agent and Consul-General in Egypt. The memorandum called for the recognition of the Coptic language as formal one, Sunday to be weekend, Copt religious festivals to be national days and an equal share of the Government positions for Copts. A copy of the memorandum was submitted to each European Consul in Cairo, a disgraceful action which raised the hostility of both Copts and Muslim. In an essay came out in al-Ahali, the organ of the rural notables, Bushra Hanna Bey, a leading Copt, challenged the delegation to announce whom do they represent and who has elected them for such purpose. He denied the representation of the whole Coptic community claimed by the delegation. According to hi the latter contained pro-British individuals of the young Copts aiming to divide the nationalist movement for the interest of the occupation.¹⁰

As the Coptic opinion was against the delegation supporting the national movement the occupation authorities shows no sympathy to the delegation and the communal claims pointe out in the memorandum.

Hence the nationalist movement accelerated under the leadership of Mostafa Kamel. He could gain the support of all Egyptians regardless their creed. He did serious endeavours to propagate the Egyptian Question in Europe depending on the contradictions between the imperialistic powers and sticking to the Ottoman sovereignty in order to evacuate the British. On consequent of the Entante Cordiale 1904, Mostafa Kamel had begun to rely more on the mass support calling for nations education and constitutional democratic rule as essential pre condition to prepare the nation for national liberation struggle. For that purpose he had founded the 'al-Hizb al-Watani' the nationalist party in 1907.

Such circumstances did not provide a chance for the elite of the young Copts to gain their community's support for communal claims. Thousands of Copts had signed the petition for a constitution and the elimination of the absolutist regime. Al-Azbakiyya Park conference held by the Nationalist Party to organize the constitutional claims was attended by the bulk of Copts as well as Muslims.

¹⁰ Al-Ahali daily newspaper, May 7-12, 1897.

The occupation authorities tried to take the advantage Mostafa Kamel's death in order to divide the nationalist moment, Al-Muqattam, Misr and al-Watan, the pro-British papers described the national movement as Pan-Islamic fanatic one a persuaded the Copts to stick to their communal claims instead of supporting the National Party. In response, Wisa Wasif a leading national Copt, delivered a speech in a public meeting in Alexandria. He stated that «the Egyptian nationalism is modern one similar to that of Europe» and that «the National party accepts the membership of Copts, Jews and Muslims».¹¹

Therefore the nation-wide movement for the constitution and democracy continued after the death of Mostafa Kamel supported by the Copts except the pro-British elite led by Akhnoul Fanous. He kept calling for the reformation of the Coptic community. Nevertheless, the nationalist Copts counter-attack Akhnoukh Fanous. In one of his essays Wisa Wasif mentioned that the former being a Protestant (Anglican), does not represent the bulk of the community and described him as «a servant of the British, abandoned his religion and denied his people». He attacked, also, al-Sheikh Ali Yousef, editor of the Pan-Islamic paper al-Mu'ayyad, for the tables he published concerning the share of the Copts in the Government positions which was regarded by him as unfair for Muslims. For Wisa Wasif such behaviour should lead to tension and clash between fellow- citizens and serves the aims of the British.¹²

Nevertheless the movement of the young Copts' elite was developed into a political party called al-Hizb al-Misri (the Egyptian Party) founded by Akhnoukh Fanous in Sep. 2, 1908 with membership of about twenty people. The party issued a manifesto calling for the settlement of the Anglo-Egyptian relations within the framework of autonomous control under the British protection. Accordingly Egypt has to keep the British communications with India. In response, the U.K. would keep Egypt's independence and defend the country against foreign interference which means, in a sense, the admission of the status quo. Although Constitution was the desirable issue of the nationalist movement, the Egyptian Party proposed a consultant body nominated by the Government from the landlords and intellectuals. A certain number of seats should be devoted for the representation of minorities and aliens. The party had absolutely denied the necessity of issuing a Constitution.¹³

That pro-British attitude was followed in Nov. 1908 by the nomination of Butrus Pasha Ghali as Premier. He was known by loyalty to the occupation and involvement in the 1899 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement concerning the Sudan. He had

¹¹ Abdul-Rahman Al-Rafi : Mohamed Farid, PP. 60-69.

¹² Al-Liwa, March 15, 1908.

¹³ Al-Ahrar, Sept. 2, 1908.

been the head of the special Court formed in 1906 to decide the case of Denshiway and judged the innocent peasants to be hanged and lashed, such action shocked both Egyptian and European opinion. He started his function by re-enforcement of the 1882 Press Censorship Bill in March 1909 to tighten the anti-British campaign.

Though the Premiership under the British occupation meant nothing because the Premier had to act in general conformity with the occupation authorities the nomination of Butrus Pasha Ghali was considered as challenge to the national movement. Immediately after his nomination the Ministry of Education, controlled by the British advisor, decided teaching certain anti-Islamic books in the secondary schools and the school of Teachers. Few months later the Government applied to the Legislative Council and the General Assembly for the extension of Suez Canal session.

Such actions accumulated the national disloyalty credit of Butrus Ghali and raised the hostility of the public opinion. In their critique the fanatic Pan-Islamic writer Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Gawish and Sheikh Ali Yousef mixed between the Premier's creed and actions. They regarded him as enemy of Islam and Muslims and claimed that 'Islam is considered as alien in his country'.¹⁴ Hence the national movement suffered a crack and most of the leading nationalist Copts kept away from the Nationalist Party. A frustrated campaign started by the pro-British Press, including the young Coptic elite Papers (Misr al-Watan) calling upon the Copts to ask the protection of the occupation authorities and to hold a Coptic conference in order to discuss the communal claims. The assassination of Butrus Pasha Ghali by a Muslim youth in Feb. 20, 1910 marked the peak of the fanatic tension.

The Coptic Conference held in Asiut March 6-8, 1911 was surrounded by anti-Muslim feelings. Few weeks later, a Muslim Conference was held in response, and consequently the national movement became divided. Behind the screen, the British Agency was supporting both sides in order to widen the gap between them.¹⁵ Then it was a good excuse to eliminate the national movement. Put the nationalist leaders in jail whilst no attention was paid to the communal claims of the Copts.

At the beginning of the World War I, Egypt had become British Protectorate, Egyptians: both Copts and Muslims suffered colonial direct control. Such painful experience made the solidarity of the Egyptian people and paved the way for the

¹⁴ Those writings appeared in al-Liwa and al-Mu'ayyad April 1909-Feb. 1910.

¹⁵ The resolutions of the Coptic Conference were published in Arabic (see : A'mal al-Mu'tamar al-A'm Lil Aqbat al-Mun'aqid fi Asiut, 6-8 March 1911, Misr Press Cairo 1911) whilst the debates of the Muslim Conference appeared in al-Mu'ayyad and al-Jarida, April 1911.

1919 revolution against the British colonial rule. Among the revolutionary leaders there were several Copts: al-Qummus Sergayus a priest kept preaching patriotism in mosques as well as churches, Wisa Wasif, Sinout Hanna, Morqus Hanna, Wasif Ghali and Makram Ebeid. It was not strange that Ibrahim Gindi, Copt editor of al-Watan, and Sheikh Gawish, the Pan-Islamic writer, having divided the nation once for sake of imperialism were against the 1919 revolution.