

The Evolving Role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in 20th Century Egypt: Social, Economic, and Political Dimensions

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Abstract

This article highlights the influence that the Coptic Orthodox Church had on Egyptian culture, politics, and the economy during the 20th century. It covers the complex role that the Church had in Egypt throughout that time period. It investigates the process by which the Church evolved from a strictly spiritual institution into a prominent social player by founding schools, hospitals, charity organizations, and cultural institutions. Additionally, the research explores the economic roots of the Church, which include endowments, commercial ventures, and assistance from non-Christian organizations. The Church's ongoing relationship with different Egyptian governments is studied from a political perspective, with a particular focus on the Church's growing engagement in state issues and its representation of the Coptic people. For the purpose of providing a thorough view on the impact that the Church has had on contemporary Egyptian culture, the essay makes use of a mix of historical and sociological methods in terms of its methodology. Based on the findings of the research, it can be concluded that the Coptic Orthodox Church played a significant role not only in the maintenance of religious identity but also in the formation of public life in Egypt during the last century.

Keywords: Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt, Twentieth Century, Religion and Politics, Social Development, Economic Impact, Coptic Diaspora

Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church is among the world's oldest Christian institutions, tracing its origins to Saint Mark the Evangelist in the first century AD. While its primary function was once limited to spiritual guidance and religious rituals, the twentieth century witnessed a significant transformation in the Church's role, particularly in Egypt's rapidly evolving sociopolitical context (Fahmy, 2024). Amid the rise of nationalism, socialism, and eventually neoliberalism, the Coptic Church emerged as not only a religious authority but also a social, cultural, and political actor with substantial influence. Throughout the twentieth century, the

Church expanded its presence in public life through institutions such as schools, hospitals, charities, media outlets, and youth organizations (Youssef, 2023). It became a source of identity and solidarity for millions of Egyptian Christians during times of national upheaval and societal transition. This extended influence was most notably institutionalized during the papacy of Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012), who redefined the Church's role in education, political representation, and international diplomacy (Saad, 2021). This period saw the Church balancing its spiritual mission with socio-political responsibilities, often acting as a mediator between the state and its congregants (Middle East Institute, 2023).

Simultaneously, the Church's increased engagement with the state and political affairs sparked internal debates among Copts regarding its monopolization of communal representation. Critics argue that this alignment with political power sometimes occurred at the expense of democratic participation and secular activism (Soliman, 2024). Nonetheless, the Coptic Orthodox Church continues to play an indispensable role in shaping the religious, political, and cultural life of Copts both in Egypt and abroad. The latter half of the century witnessed the Church's expanded involvement in civil society, particularly under the leadership of Pope Shenouda III. His tenure was marked by efforts to centralize Church authority and enhance its social services, thereby reinforcing its position as a pivotal institution within Egyptian society (Manara Magazine, 2022). Simultaneously, the Church faced challenges, including internal debates over its political engagement and external pressures from state policies and societal shifts (Chatham House, 2018).

This paper seeks to analyse this transformation by addressing the following question: How did the Coptic Orthodox Church evolve from a spiritual institution to a comprehensive societal force during the twentieth century in Egypt? To answer this question, the article adopts a sociological framework grounded in the sociology of religion and uses a qualitative methodology to assess the Church's impact in four primary domains: social development, economic engagement, political involvement, and transnational identity. By tracing the Church's development across these domains, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that reevaluates the role of religious institutions in non-Western, postcolonial societies, especially those navigating complex religious pluralism and authoritarian governance (Hasan, 2024A).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily from the sociology of religion, postcolonial theory, and minority politics to interpret the evolution of the Coptic Orthodox Church's role in 20th century Egypt.

Public Religion and Institutional Resilience

At the heart of the analysis is José Casanova's (1994; 2019) concept of *public religion*, which challenges secularization theories by asserting that religious institutions in many societies continue to play active roles in public discourse and civil society. The Coptic Church, particularly in postcolonial Egypt, functions as more than a site of worship, it is an institution of advocacy, identity production, and community organization. As Casanova (2019) asserts: "Religious traditions... are being reinserted into the public sphere, often in response to perceived moral and social crises" (p. 21).

In tandem, the concept of religious institutional resilience, the capacity of religious institutions to adapt to political and social constraints, offers insight into how the Church survived marginalization, negotiated power under authoritarian regimes, and expanded its social services (Hasan, 2024A; Ibrahim, 2021). These dynamics are characteristic of minority institutions that function as both spiritual centers and socio-political shelters.

Communal Representation and Sectarian Governance

This study also engages with sectarian governance theory, particularly in the Middle Eastern context, where religious identity is often intertwined with state recognition and resource allocation (Makdisi, 2020). In Egypt, the Coptic Church has operated within a system in which the state treats religious identity as a basis for communal representation, frequently engaging with the Church as the sole representative of the Coptic population. This phenomenon has led to the marginalization of lay and dissident voices within the community (Tadros, 2023). Zaki (2023) emphasizes that this model often results in what she terms “sacralized citizenship,” in which belonging and rights are mediated through religious affiliation rather than individual status.

Postcolonial Identity and Cultural Memory

Finally, postcolonial theory is employed to understand how the Church’s narrative of persecution and martyrdom has been central to the construction of a distinct Coptic identity. Through liturgy, iconography, and education, the Church has maintained a collective memory of survival and resistance, framing itself as the protector of an ancient, authentically Egyptian heritage (Elshakry, 2022). This narrative, deeply embedded in the Church’s historical consciousness, has allowed it to function as a counter-hegemonic institution, one that simultaneously upholds tradition and negotiates modernity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines historical analysis, document-based research, and interpretive sociological methods. Given the multifaceted role of the Coptic Church in religious, political, economic, and cultural domains, a single disciplinary lens would be insufficient. Therefore, this research integrates approaches from religious studies, political sociology, and Middle Eastern history to construct a comprehensive view of the Church's development.

Historical-Analytical Method

The historical component of this research aims to trace the institutional development of the Coptic Orthodox Church throughout the twentieth century. This includes examining:

- Political relations between the Church and the Egyptian state across monarchical, Nasserist, and post-Nasserist regimes.
- The Church’s responses to major historical events such as the 1919 revolution, the 1952 Free Officers Movement, the rise of political Islam, and the post-2011 revolutionary period.

This method draws on both primary sources (e.g., Church documents, pastoral letters, and periodicals) and secondary historical literature (Hasan, 2024A; Ibrahim, 2021; Meinardus, 2023). These sources are analyzed through a critical historiographical lens, assessing not only the narrative content but also the political context in which these sources were produced.

Sociological and Institutional Analysis

To analyse the Church as a social institution, the study uses interpretive tools from the sociology of religion. This involves examining how the Church constructs and performs its authority, how it mediates community identity, and how it engages with the state as a representative institution (Casanova, 2019; Tadros, 2023). The analysis also considers the Church's role in:

- Social services (schools, hospitals, orphanages).
- Political advocacy and communal representation.
- Diasporic engagement and transnational identity formation.

The study recognizes the limitations of official narratives, especially those issued by state-recognized Church authorities. Therefore, it supplements institutional sources with interviews, media reports, and academic critiques to ensure a more balanced understanding.

Case-Oriented Approach

Rather than attempting to generalize across all Christian experiences in the Middle East, this study uses a case-oriented approach that focuses on the Egyptian Coptic Church as a specific historical and institutional case (George & Bennett, 2005). This allows for deeper contextual insight and aligns with recommendations in minority studies and postcolonial research methodologies (Elshakry, 2022; Makdisi, 2020).

Historical Context

The Coptic Orthodox Church has been a cornerstone of Christian presence in Egypt for nearly two millennia. Its evolution from a marginalized religious institution under Islamic rule to a semi-political representative body in the modern Egyptian state is a complex story of resilience, adaptation, and negotiation. To understand the Church's present-day role, this section outlines its historical development from late antiquity through the post-2011 period, drawing on the latest scholarship and archival reassessments.

Apostolic and Late Antique Origins

According to Coptic tradition, St. Mark the Evangelist founded the Church in Alexandria around 42 CE. Alexandria quickly became a center of Christian theology, producing figures such as Clement, Origen, and Athanasius. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) marked a theological rupture, with the Copts rejecting the Chalcedonian definition in favor of Miaphysitism, leading to centuries of ecclesiastical isolation from both Eastern and Western Christianity (Meinardus, 2023; El-Khouly, 2024). Despite being sidelined by Byzantine rulers, the Coptic Church preserved its identity through monasticism, liturgical tradition, and vernacular Coptic language, which functioned as a marker of ethnoreligious distinctiveness well into the Islamic period (Sidarus, 2022; Gabra & van Loon, 2021).

Islamic Conquest and Medieval Survival

With the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 641 CE, the Church entered a new phase of life under the dhimmi system. While protected as "People of the Book," Copts were subjected to taxes, social restrictions, and periodic waves of persecution. Yet, they also served in important administrative roles under various Muslim dynasties (Papaconstantinou, 2020; El-Leithy, 2022). Crucially, the Church developed internal mechanisms to sustain identity and doctrine, including strong monastic networks (e.g., Wadi El Natrun) and an enduring martyrdom narrative, which framed suffering as theological perseverance (Rowe, 2021; El Shamsy, 2023).

19th Century Reform and Early Modern Activism

The modern institutional revival of the Church began in the 19th century, particularly under Pope Cyril IV (1854–1861), who promoted education and printing to modernize Church life. During the reign of Muhammad Ali, Copts gained new access to administrative roles and civic life, although sectarian incidents occasionally surfaced (Ibrahim, 2021). The 1919 Egyptian Revolution marked a high point of national unity between Muslims and Christians, with the Church endorsing the nationalist Wafd Party. However, this era also saw growing tensions between lay Coptic elites and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, foreshadowing the Church's later centralization under the papacy (Zaki, 2023; Rizk, 2021).

Post-1952 Republicanism and Church-State Compacts

After the 1952 Free Officers' coup, the Church's status shifted amid Arab nationalism and state socialism. While President Nasser proclaimed religious equality, he also centralized power and limited religious autonomy. The Church lost many endowments through land reforms, but retained symbolic value as a representative of the Christian minority (Hasan, 2024B). Under Sadat, the rise of political Islam and Islamic constitutional amendments (e.g., Article 2 making Islamic law the principal source of legislation) increased sectarian anxiety. The 1981 house arrest of Pope Shenouda III after his criticism of sectarian violence highlighted state control over ecclesiastical power (Tadros, 2023; Rowe, 2021). During the Mubarak era, Church-state relations evolved into a corporatist model. The Pope became the de facto spokesperson for Copts, while internal democratic structures weakened. Critics argued this created a patriarchal political theology, limiting broader civic representation (Barsoum & Tadros, 2022; El-Khouly, 2024).

Revolution, Violence, and the Sisi Era

The January 25, 2011 uprising brought Copts into Tahrir Square alongside Muslim protesters, demanding dignity and citizenship. Yet, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and a spike in anti-Coptic attacks, including the Maspero massacre (October, 2011), led to renewed fears and re-communalization of politics (Fahmy, 2022; Amnesty International, 2023). After the 2013 removal of Mohamed Morsi, Pope Tawadros II endorsed the military roadmap. The Church positioned itself as a defender of stability and religious coexistence, though critics argue that this alignment has come at the cost of institutional independence and robust advocacy (Hasan, 2024B; Tadros & Barsoum, 2022). Despite symbolic inclusion, such as President Sisi attending Christmas masses and authorizing church constructions, Copts continue to face challenges in equal representation, freedom of religious expression, and legal protections from mob violence, especially in Upper Egypt (HRW, 2023).

Church and Social Development

The Coptic Orthodox Church has historically served as a crucial provider of social services for its community, particularly in contexts where the state has failed to deliver equitable or inclusive welfare provisions. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, the Church has expanded its role in education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and community development, especially in marginalized rural and urban areas. This expansion reflects a broader trend in the Global South, where religious institutions often fill the gap left by weak or exclusionary state structures (Rowe, 2021; Tadros & Barsoum, 2022). For the Coptic Church, this role is not merely charitable but deeply entwined with identity, survival, and institutional legitimacy.

Education and the Promotion of Literacy

Since the 19th century, the Coptic Church has prioritized education as a means of communal uplift and resistance to marginalization. Under Pope Cyril IV, known as the “Father of Reform,” the Church founded several modern schools, including ones for girls—an unprecedented move at the time (Zaki, 2023; Gabra & van Loon, 2021). This legacy continued throughout the 20th century, with the Church expanding its network of parochial schools, particularly in Upper Egypt. In the post-1952 era, as state educational quality declined and Christian representation in public institutions stagnated, the Church began investing more heavily in Sunday Schools (*kuttab el-ahad*), a religious and moral education system that also addressed basic literacy and communal cohesion (Sidarus, 2022). Recent studies show that these schools continue to play a major role in forming religious consciousness, communal solidarity, and civic participation among Coptic youth (El-Khouly, 2024).

Healthcare and Charitable Institutions

The Church also operates a wide range of healthcare clinics, hospitals, and medical outreach programs, many of which serve both Christians and Muslims in underserved communities. Through its Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services (BLESS), established in 1962 and expanded under Pope Shenouda III, the Church has provided services in areas ranging from maternal health to malnutrition and HIV awareness (Tadros, 2023; Barsoum & Tadros, 2022). These efforts have been particularly impactful in rural regions, where state services are minimal. Church-run clinics often represent the only accessible source of affordable healthcare. In addition, BLESS has been praised by international development organizations for its gender-sensitive development work, such as economic empowerment projects for women (Hasan, 2024A).

Charity, Housing, and Poverty Relief

In tandem with healthcare, the Church has developed extensive programs in housing, microfinance, orphan care, elderly care, and emergency relief. These services often operate through lay-led charitable organizations, many of which are affiliated with specific dioceses or monasteries. In recent years, the Church has partnered with international NGOs and diaspora donors to expand its operations, including building shelters, schools, and vocational centers in impoverished neighborhoods (Gabra, 2023). These programs are not only humanitarian but also serve to reinforce ecclesiastical authority and community cohesion in a context of social precarity (El Shamsy, 2023). While such service provision enhances the Church’s social capital, some critics have noted the paternalistic dynamics involved, where aid is distributed hierarchically and recipients have limited agency (Barsoum & Tadros, 2022; El-Khouly, 2024).

Social Development and Religious Identity

The Church’s social work cannot be divorced from its religious mission. Social services are framed theologically as extensions of Christian love and sacrifice, echoing the Church’s historical memory of martyrdom and suffering. These acts reinforce Coptic identity not only through faith but through mutual aid, collective dignity, and visible presence in the public sphere (Sidarus, 2022; Makar, 2022). In the contemporary period, these programs also function as a protective strategy, insulating the community from discrimination and fostering a parallel system of care. In this sense, the Church’s social development work is both pastoral and political, a response to exclusion and a mechanism of institutional resilience.

Economic Contributions

The economic role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt extends beyond spiritual and social functions into domains of asset management, landholding, employment generation, and local development. Historically rooted in Waqf (endowment) structures and modernized through NGO networks, the Church has emerged as a significant economic actor, especially within Christian-majority areas of Upper Egypt. Its institutions, monasteries, dioceses, charitable societies, and educational centers, not only deliver services but also create jobs, distribute resources, and manage capital. In the absence of equal state access for many Christians, especially in the mid-20th century, the Church developed parallel economic infrastructures that served both survival and empowerment purposes (Ibrahim, 2021; Tadros & Barsoum, 2022).

Historical Roots of Economic Power: Waqf and Monastic Economies

Until the 1950s, the Church operated a significant number of waqf endowments, including agricultural lands, rental properties, and religious buildings. These assets were administered by lay and clerical trustees and were used to fund churches, schools, and hospitals (Meinardus, 2023; El-Leithy, 2022). Egypt's 1952 land reform laws under Gamal Abdel Nasser led to widespread nationalization of Church-owned land, significantly reducing its independent economic power. However, monasteries, especially in Wadi El-Natrun, Mount Qusqam, and Upper Egypt, retained substantial economic autonomy and evolved into self-sufficient economic hubs, involved in agriculture, livestock, beekeeping, and trade (Gabra & van Loon, 2021; Sidarus, 2022). Today, monastic production (e.g., olive oil, dairy products, handmade crafts) contributes to both community livelihoods and heritage tourism.

Employment and Service-Based Economies

The Church is one of the largest Christian employers in Egypt. Through its network of schools, clinics, orphanages, seminaries, and religious institutions, it provides formal employment for thousands of teachers, nurses, administrators, technicians, and clergy (Hasan, 2024A; Hanna & Abdalla, 2023). These jobs are especially vital in rural Upper Egypt, where state services are sparse and sectarian discrimination restricts opportunities for Christians in the public sector. Church-led employment thus contributes to:

- Economic empowerment of women, particularly through vocational training and hiring in Church-run schools and centers.
- Youth retention in villages, where diocesan initiatives offer alternatives to migration or unemployment (Rizk, 2022).
- Job security for disabled or elderly Christians, often excluded from the competitive labor market.

Recent studies estimate that in some villages, over 40% of Christian families rely directly or indirectly on Church-run employment or aid structures (Gabra, 2023; Tadros, 2023).

Charitable Economies and Financial Circulation

The Church manages extensive charitable networks, many of which function as informal economic redistribution systems. These include:

- Monthly food subsidies.
- Emergency cash assistance.
- Micro-loans and grants for small businesses.
- Home renovation funds.

- Welfare pensions for widows, orphans, and disabled persons.

These services are coordinated through diocesan offices or Church-affiliated NGOs, often financed by local tithes, diaspora donations, and international Christian partnerships (UNDP Egypt, 2023; WHO Egypt, 2022). In addition to providing immediate relief, this system supports intergenerational wealth stability within Coptic families, especially in communities facing repeated cycles of sectarian violence or displacement.

Church Assets, Real Estate, and Financial Challenges

The Church today owns thousands of properties across Egypt, including:

- Churches and adjoining halls.
- Retreat centers and monasteries.
- Apartments and real estate used for rental income.

However, legal restrictions on church construction and property registration, despite recent reforms like Law 80 of 2016, still complicate asset management and expansion (El-Khouly, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). Moreover, the Church remains financially dependent on:

- Congregational donations.
- Festive offerings (nahr, zakaya).
- Diaspora philanthropy, particularly from the U.S., Canada, and Australia.

The COVID-19 pandemic and inflationary pressures have strained Church budgets, forcing some dioceses to reduce services or merge institutions (Hanna & Abdalla, 2023). Financial transparency also remains a contested issue, with critics calling for better accounting standards and oversight within Church administration.

Political Role

The Coptic Orthodox Church has historically operated at the crossroads of religion and politics, balancing spiritual authority with a pragmatic strategy of political engagement. As the state increasingly withdrew from guaranteeing inclusive citizenship—particularly for religious minorities—the Church gradually assumed the unofficial role of communal representative. This role evolved from indirect lobbying in the early 20th century to active political alignment with state power in the post-2011 period. The Church's political influence reflects a dual mandate: defending the rights of its flock while preserving institutional autonomy in a context marked by authoritarianism and religious nationalism (Ibrahim, 2021; Hasan, 2024A).

Early 20th Century: Advocacy within Nationalism

In the early 1900s, the Coptic elite played a visible role in Egyptian nationalism. Copts were members of the Wafd Party, joined the 1919 revolution, and promoted the idea of a secular nation-state. During this period, Church leadership largely remained in the background, while lay leaders represented Christian concerns in the political arena (Zaki, 2023; Rizk, 2022). However, sectarian tensions and Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric in the interwar and post-colonial period shifted the dynamic. After the 1952 coup, Nasser's regime curtailed Coptic political influence, prompting the Church to step forward as the sole legitimate voice for the community (Mikhail, 2022).

Pope Shenouda III: Centralization and the Politics of Representation

Under Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012), the Church assumed an explicitly political role. In response to rising Islamism under Anwar Sadat and subsequent marginalization, Shenouda centralized authority, creating a model in which the Pope served not only as spiritual leader but also primary political negotiator with the state (Tadros, 2023; Sidarus, 2022). Shenouda's political theology emphasized communal unity, obedience, and Church-mediated citizenship. This model offered protection but also silenced dissenting voices. According to Barsoum and Tadros (2022), this "patriarchal corporatism" made the Church an indispensable political partner for the authoritarian state while restricting political pluralism within the Coptic community.

Post-2011: From Protest to Partnership

The 2011 revolution saw a revival of grassroots political activism among Copts, especially youth who rejected Church-led mediation. Many participated in the Tahrir Square protests, calling for citizenship rights, equality, and democratic reform. However, the subsequent rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, targeted violence, and the Maspero massacre (October 2011) led to disillusionment and a retreat to institutional protection (Fahmy, 2022). Following the 2013 ouster of Mohamed Morsi, Pope Tawadros II appeared alongside military and political leaders to endorse the transitional roadmap. This marked a strategic realignment with the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has since promoted symbolic inclusion of Christians through public gestures and legal reforms (Hasan, 2024A).

Limits of Advocacy in Authoritarian Contexts

Despite closer ties to the state, the Church's capacity for effective advocacy remains constrained. While Law 80/2016 simplified church-building procedures, attacks on Christians continue, particularly in Upper Egypt, and are often resolved through reconciliation sessions rather than criminal prosecution (Amnesty International, 2023; Tadros & Rizk, 2023). Moreover, the Church's monopoly over political representation has marginalized secular, feminist, and youth voices within the community. Some Copts have called for a shift toward civil society-based representation, arguing that religious leadership should not be conflated with political authority (Rowe, 2021; Hanna & Abdalla, 2023). The Church thus finds itself in a delicate position: it benefits from regime protection, yet its entanglement with the state risks eroding moral credibility, especially among a younger generation seeking civic engagement beyond religious boundaries.

Coptic Diaspora

The Coptic diaspora has grown substantially since the mid-20th century, transforming from a peripheral segment of Egyptian society into a transnational religious and political force. This global Coptic community now estimated at over 2 million across North America, Europe, Australia, and the Gulf has become integral to the Church's identity, funding, and political advocacy (Rowe, 2021; Tadros & Rizk, 2023). The Coptic Church has strategically adapted to the needs of its diaspora, establishing hundreds of parishes, monasteries, schools, and media outlets that both maintain spiritual continuity and cultivate new expressions of identity in pluralistic societies. At the same time, the diaspora has played a critical role in shaping discourses of religious freedom, human rights, and sectarian justice in Egypt, often advocating for Copts in international forums.

Migration Waves and Community Formation

The major waves of Coptic emigration occurred:

- After Egypt's 1952 revolution, as Christian elites faced nationalization and political exclusion.
- In the 1970s–1980s, during Anwar Sadat's Islamic policies and a spike in sectarian tensions.
- Post-2011, amid the uncertainty of the Arab Spring and anti-Christian violence.

Copts have established strong communities in Canada (Toronto, Mississauga), the US (California, New Jersey), Australia (Sydney, Melbourne), and parts of Europe and the Gulf (Zaki, 2023; Ibrahim, 2021). These communities maintain a strong connection to the Mother Church in Egypt, while also expressing localized identities shaped by their host contexts.

Institutional Expansion and Diaspora Engagement

Under Pope Shenouda III and more recently Pope Tawadros II, the Church invested heavily in diaspora infrastructure. Today, the Coptic Orthodox Church has over:

- 270 churches in North America.
- 50 in Australia.
- Multiple theological seminaries and media platforms (e.g., CYC, Logos TV).

These institutions preserve Coptic liturgy, language, and customs, while also offering services tailored to second-generation youth, such as English-language liturgies, interfaith programs, and cultural festivals (Gabra, 2023; Tadros, 2023). Diaspora clergy are trained in psychosocial support, counseling, and civic engagement, reflecting the realities of Copts living in democratic, multicultural societies (Hanna & Abdalla, 2023).

Transnational Advocacy and Political Activism

Diaspora Copts have increasingly become vocal actors in international human rights forums, especially in moments of crisis. Organizations like Coptic Solidarity (U.S.), The British Coptic Association, and Coptic Youth for Human Rights have:

- Campaigned at the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- Lobbied governments and parliaments for minority protections in Egypt.
- Funded reconstruction of churches destroyed in sectarian attacks.

This advocacy has at times diverged from the official Church position, especially when the Church prioritizes stability over confrontation with the Egyptian state. Some diaspora groups have criticized the Church's political alignment with authoritarian regimes, calling for a clearer stance on civil rights and state accountability (Hasan, 2024A; El-Khouly, 2024).

Identity, Autonomy, and Tensions

The diaspora has sparked internal debates about:

- Clerical authority and lay participation.
- Gender roles and inclusion.
- Cultural adaptation vs. liturgical orthodoxy.

In particular, second- and third-generation Copts in the West have called for more inclusive church governance, greater involvement of women, and contextual liturgical expression, such as local languages or interfaith initiatives (Sidarus, 2022; Tadros & Rizk, 2023). While these developments highlight the Church's capacity for flexibility, they also underscore intra-communal tensions between homeland and diaspora priorities, especially in political and pastoral strategies.

Discussion

The Coptic Orthodox Church's institutional evolution must be examined within the broader matrix of religious authority under authoritarian governance, postcolonial identity negotiation, and minority-state relations. While often portrayed as a refuge and moral bulwark for Egypt's Christian minority, the Church's expanding role across social, economic, and political domains also reveals critical tensions. These tensions arise from its dual function as a spiritual institution and a political interlocutor in a system where full civic inclusion remains elusive. Far from being a passive victim of state repression or a purely benevolent force for social welfare, the Church has emerged as a strategic actor—one that negotiates protection and relevance in exchange for loyalty, while managing internal dissent, navigating diaspora dynamics, and reinforcing its institutional survival. This discussion explores these contradictions by engaging with recent theoretical frameworks and updated empirical scholarship.

Religious Resilience or Political Co-optation?

The Church's relationship with the Egyptian state exemplifies what scholars have called "authoritarian inclusion", where religious institutions are tolerated and even empowered, but only under conditions of political subordination (Barsoum & Tadros, 2022; El-Khouly, 2024). Pope Shenouda III's strategy of centralization in the 1970s, and Pope Tawadros II's alignment with President Sisi's regime post-2013, exemplify a model of institutional survival through state partnership. While this has provided the Church with security and access to state platforms, it has also limited its prophetic voice, particularly when it comes to speaking out against sectarian violence, state negligence, or legal discrimination (Hasan, 2024A; Amnesty International, 2023). The Church's perceived silence, or selective critique, during incidents like the 2011 Maspero Massacre or attacks in Minya and Sohag reflects this constraint (Fahmy, 2022; Rowe, 2021).

Postcolonial Religious Identity and "Sacralized Citizenship"

The Church's growing authority has also contributed to a form of what Zaki (2023) and Ibrahim (2021) term "sacralized citizenship", where Copts are incorporated into the national project not as equal citizens, but as a religious collective managed through clerical intermediaries. This framework resonates with sectarian governance models across the Middle East (Makdisi, 2020), where religious identity is not privatized but institutionalized and regulated. In this system, rights are mediated through the Church rather than guaranteed by the state. Consequently, lay voices, feminist critiques, and youth activism are often suppressed or redirected through ecclesiastical structures that prioritize obedience, tradition, and top-down leadership (Sidaros, 2022; Tadros, 2023). This limits political plurality within the Coptic community and reinforces the narrative of Christian loyalty in exchange for protection, rather than one rooted in democratic entitlement.

Development as Control: Charity, Power, and Paternalism

The Church's dominance in social services, including education, healthcare, and welfare, has made it indispensable to the survival of many Christian families, particularly in Upper Egypt (Gabra, 2023; WHO Egypt, 2022). But while this developmental role is frequently framed as altruistic or pastoral, it also produces a moral economy of dependency—where access to aid may be shaped by religious conformity, personal networks, or clerical favor (El Shamsy, 2023; Tadros & Barsoum, 2022). This phenomenon parallels critiques of faith-based NGOs globally,

where development becomes a mechanism not just of empowerment but also of institutional control. The Church's ability to provide care thus becomes a source of soft power, reinforcing its authority within both spiritual and temporal spheres. Moreover, by absorbing welfare responsibilities, the Church unintentionally relieves the state of its constitutional duties, reinforcing neoliberal austerity and the privatization of social responsibility (Rowe, 2021; UNDP Egypt, 2023).

The Diaspora as Disruptive Voice

The global Coptic diaspora, while providing financial support and international advocacy, increasingly challenges the Church's authority, particularly on issues such as gender equity, youth engagement, secular rights discourse, and the Church's proximity to authoritarian regimes (Tadros & Rizk, 2023; Hanna & Abdalla, 2023). Diaspora communities, particularly in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, have created counter-publics that critique clerical hierarchy, promote human rights, and lobby foreign governments on Coptic issues. This transnational engagement exposes a rift: while the Church in Egypt prioritizes survival through diplomacy and strategic silence, diaspora activists often prioritize principle over pragmatism. The resulting tension reveals a deep cleavage in political theology, one that may widen as global Copts become more empowered and connected.

Theological Authority in an Authoritarian Age

Finally, the discussion must consider how theology itself is shaped under authoritarianism. Coptic teachings on obedience, martyrdom, and spiritual endurance have historically empowered believers through suffering. However, in contemporary Egypt, these discourses risk being instrumentalized to justify silence, discourage protest, and sanctify suffering rather than resist it (Makar, 2022; El Shamsy, 2023). The Church thus faces a theological challenge: can it reclaim the radicalism of its early martyrs while navigating political realities? Or will it remain, as some critics argue, a custodian of spiritual conformity, aligned with a regime that benefits from religious depoliticization?

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt across the 20th and early 21st centuries, tracing its transformation from a primarily spiritual institution into a multifaceted religious, social, political, and economic actor. Through a combination of historical resilience, theological continuity, and institutional adaptation, the Church has positioned itself as both a guardian of Coptic identity and a critical mediator between the state and a marginalized religious minority. Across multiple domains education, healthcare, poverty relief, landholding, political engagement, and diaspora outreach, the Church has filled gaps left by state failure and discrimination. It has provided not only services but a framework for belonging, self-protection, and continuity, especially in times of violence, displacement, or repression. Yet, this consolidation of power has not come without tension. The Church's monopoly over communal representation, its alignment with authoritarian regimes, and its limited responsiveness to internal dissent have all generated critiques from within and outside the community. Especially in the post-2011 period, a younger and more globally connected generation of Copts, both in Egypt and in the diaspora has called for a pluralistic, rights-based, and participatory vision of Christian civic life. The Coptic Church's role in Egypt will continue to evolve in response to sociopolitical changes, global diasporic ties, and internal

demands for reform. Its capacity to remain relevant and protective will depend not only on state dynamics, but on its ability to engage critically and inclusively with its own constituency.

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings, the following policy and institutional recommendations are offered:

1. Broaden Internal Representation

- Encourage lay participation in Church governance at both diocesan and national levels.
- Strengthen youth councils, women's networks, and advisory committees within Church structures to ensure more democratic consultation.

2. Clarify the Church's Political Role

- Separate pastoral leadership from political representation to allow for broader civic engagement among Copts as citizens rather than as a religious bloc.
- Support the development of Coptic civil society organizations independent of Church hierarchy, focused on rights advocacy and policy influence.

3. Invest in Professional Social Services

- Enhance accountability and transparency in Church-run welfare, education, and healthcare institutions by adopting modern standards of non-profit governance.
- Partner with academic researchers, NGOs, and international donors to scale up evidence-based development initiatives in health, education, and poverty alleviation.

4. Strengthen Diaspora Dialogue

- Establish formal forums for structured dialogue between Church leadership in Egypt and diaspora communities to address generational, theological, and cultural differences.
- Support initiatives for diaspora youth leadership, interfaith action, and advocacy training to ensure meaningful and globally relevant diaspora engagement.

5. Advocate for Structural Reform

- Support national efforts to end extrajudicial reconciliation sessions in cases of sectarian violence and push for full application of the rule of law.
- Encourage the Church to work with Egyptian civil society in advocating for equal citizenship, inclusive education, and anti-discrimination legislation.

Contribution of the Study

This article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that recognizes religious institutions not only as carriers of tradition but as active agents of negotiation, adaptation, and power in contexts of marginalization and authoritarianism. The Coptic Church remains a powerful case study of religious endurance, and of the tensions that come with wielding institutional authority in an uncertain political landscape.

Theoretical Contribution

This research improves our knowledge of religious institutions in authoritarian and postcolonial environments, especially minority religious agency. It expands José Casanova's idea of public religion by showing that religious groups like the Coptic Orthodox Church may act publicly in restricted political situations. Inclusionary measures may strengthen state legitimacy and provide minority populations institutional power, adding to the literature on authoritarian inclusion (Barsoum & Tadros, 2022). The research also shows the Church's dynamic position as a theological and political actor, reacting to state policies, societal

pressures, and internal community needs, challenging essentialist notions of religious authority. This complex theoretical approach adds richness to the analysis of religious institutions as flexible, strategic, and ethically disputed entities at the confluence of power, identity, and resistance.

Contextual Contribution

This work is important and topical for contemporary Egyptian history and the Coptic Orthodox Church's changing position. This study examines the Church's strategic institutional development in the 20th century, particularly in navigating postcolonial nationalism, state authoritarianism, and communal representation, while most previous research has focused on sectarian violence, marginalization, or theological history. The study shows how the Coptic Church adapted to and influenced national politics without sacrificing its spiritual mission by situating it within historical turning points like Nasserist socialism, Sadat's religio-political liberalization, and Mubarak's authoritarian consolidation. Underexplored topics include Church-led social assistance, education, diaspora diplomacy, and moral authority during national crises. These findings enhance knowledge of religious minority governance in the Arab world and provide a localized case study for religion and politics, Middle Eastern studies, and minority-state relations academics.

Significance to Existing Knowledge and Contextual Role

This study fills the gap between historical, political, and religious studies of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, which is generally described in fragmented or one-dimensional ways. This study sees the Church as a strategic player in Egypt's national fabric, unlike studies that concentrate only on persecution, theology, or sectarianism. It shows how a religious minority institution negotiates visibility, agency, and existence under an authoritarian state, adding to public religion theory. It contextualizes the Church's development as Egypt's political systems changed from monarchy to socialism to neoliberal authoritarianism, showing how religious organizations adjust to stay relevant, legitimate, and influential. The research enriches academic studies on authoritarian inclusion and religious nationalism and informs current debates on religious plurality, civic representation, and minority populations in state-building. Policymakers, researchers, and religious leaders dealing with church-state relations and minority agency in non-Western settings would benefit from its ideas.

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