

In Egypt, a Coptic Member of Parliament fights for the rights of Christians

“In 2012, I was a member of Foreign the Relations Committee in Parliament, which was then controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood. The committee was headed by Essam al-Erian, one of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders. I suffered from extreme marginalization during this period, and was not invited for discussion of important issues.

“On one occasion, Al-Arian contacted me to meet a visiting delegation from the Italian Parliament. At the beginning of the meeting, Al-Arian told the delegation: "We live in tolerance and love Muslims and Christians working together. The evidence is our colleague Emad Gad, an Egyptian Christian Copt." Then he left me the floor waiting for a courtesy statement, but I said explicitly: "I thank you very much Dr. Essam, but you give me a difficult task. I have to choose to stand by my principles and convictions, or flatter you and say what you expect me to say. I cannot but stand by my principles and convictions and say that [the Muslim Brotherhood] is extremist racist group that oppresses the Copts and attacks the churches." This was the last time I participated in the meetings of the Committee.

“The present period is particularly tense for me as a Christian politician; President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is seeking to instill this notion of equal citizenship; he is taking steps no Egyptian president has taken before. He is doing so, because he has seen—in the seven years since the 2011 uprising—how Copts love and support their country and repeatedly have rejected any foreign interference in Egyptian politics. However, his efforts are colliding with reactionary forces and parts of the state apparatus which operate in the old way. This includes the security apparatus, which deals with violence against Copts by way of customary reconciliation sessions and that results in impunity for perpetrators.

“For example, during the 2016 crisis of Karm el Lofy village, in Minya province—where a Muslim mobs assaulted an elderly woman, Souad Thabet, and stripped naked—there was great tension between me and Dr. Ali Abdel Aal, Speaker of the House of Representatives and other Members of Parliament. I wrote on my Facebook page that "there is a terrible scheme of hell to humiliate Copts—in which the state security apparatus is participating.”



Dr. Amed Gad

"I wanted to call attention to the injustice suffered by Mrs. Thabet, and the insistence by some security officials to resolve the matter in the customary way, with the victim losing her rights to get a fair hearing and have justice done.

"It was a very difficult period because of the defiance of MPs in Minya. A number of Minya deputies were police officers and some of the assailants of Souad Thabet were said to be related to one of those deputies—so these MPs did not want this issue to be discussed at all. I have to confess that a number of Coptic Members of Parliament were a thorn in our side more than anyone. Unfortunately, there are many Coptic politicians who believe their presence in Parliament and their rise to power depends on pleasing the state or local security apparatuses.

"I also wrote dozens of articles for the Egyptian daily newspaper *Al Watan*, criticizing the way in which the security apparatus deals with incidents of violence against Copts; some of these articles came under the heading "Little Security, Much Politics." My point is that the security component is important, but that politics should prevail over security concerns, not vice versa. In sectarian clashes, security-led politics brought catastrophic results. Churches have been shut down because of security concerns, a perspective that considers the opening of a new church to inevitably lead to sectarian conflict.

"Based on the positions I have taken, I have been subjected to various kinds of harassment and marginalization. One example is that they stopped publishing my articles in *Al Watan* newspaper. Last December a former police officer threatened me on government-run national television, saying: "The interior apparatus's knife is very sharp and you better be far away." I wondered, writing on Facebook, if that was a threat to assassinate me. It did not go any further and this campaign was stopped after the intervention of politicians and other government departments.

"Other kinds of harassment are in the form of me not being allowed to speak during parliamentary debates and being excluded when delegations of Egyptian MPs go on official visits abroad. Meanwhile, MPs with no political experience or understanding of political science and foreign relation—my areas of expertise—were allowed to take over the management of the Committee on Foreign Relations.

"I was a member of the Free Egyptians Party and won a seat in Parliament as a member of the political bureau of the party. But after security forces put pressure on the party to marginalize me, the party suddenly appointed Alaa Abed as the head of the party's bloc Parliament—even though this man is a former police officer who has been accused of torture and was fired. The move was meant to put pressure on me to change my political stance.

"Despite the severity of what is happening, this is still my country and we can achieve change only with resistance and the rejection of wrongful policies. In fact, there are many Muslim MPs who have been very courageous in supporting the Christian cause.

"Again, the problem in some areas is huge. For example, in Minya province many people consider Copts to be infidels and heretics and even accuse them of doing magic. I remember once incident when Muslim mobs attacked a church many years ago, and found writings in Coptic language; even though they did not know this language, they claimed that the church was performing magic preventing Muslim girls from getting married!"

"Unfortunately, there are many people who have been brainwashed since childhood by fanatics who preach intolerance. We need a process of changing the culture. A very important part of the battle is changing the text books that encourage violence against Christians."

Against the odds, Member of Parliament Dr. Emad Gad continues to fight for the rights of Egyptian Christians; he refuses to be silenced and accepts the risks that come with his courageous stance. However, he is not alone and even, as he tells it, receives support from some Muslim quarters. The future of the largest Christian community in the Middle East hangs in the balance.

—Engy Magdy