

## **Egypt's Coptic Christians live in fear of Islamic extremists**

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By Jeffrey Fleishman

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<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-egypt-worried-copts-20130413,0,4893173.story>

The Mass was celebrated as if from centuries past: A bearded priest veiled in incense chanted for grace in a church along the Nile, near the spot where Christians believe Jesus and his mother sought refuge in an earlier age of bloodshed and uncertainty.

Marianne Samir knelt and prayed for the Coptic Christians killed in a spasm of sectarian violence that has further shaken a nation engulfed in economic and political anxieties.

"I feel unsafe," said Samir, a high school philosophy teacher with a cross tattooed on her wrist. "The Islamists want war. They want strife. But this is our land too. It is a country blessed by God, and there's no way we'll leave it to them."

Wind gusted and whitecaps rose and fell on the river bending around the Church of the Virgin Mary.

"They set a Christian man on fire the other day," Samir added. "They threw a gasoline bomb at him and no one did anything."

Seven Copts and one Muslim have died in clashes in recent days. The latest violence began after Coptic youths in a village north of Cairo drew offensive images, including a swastika that was mistaken for a cross, on the wall of a Muslim institute. Gun battles broke out and a church was set aflame, a sign that President [Mohamed Morsi](#)'s Islamist-led government has failed to defuse religious enmity.

Scores of Copts have been killed in sectarian conflict since early 2011, including 24 worshipers who died in a church bombing in Alexandria and 27 who were attacked by soldiers and thugs at a rally to protest the burning of a church. Those incidents occurred before the political ascendancy of Islamists that same year. Since then, thousands of Christians have left [Egypt](#) and more are expected to follow.

"Copts are facing organized oppression and forced emigration," Azmi Wadie, a 28-year-old engineering student, said as he leaned on a railing at the river's edge. "Islamist radicals want to get rid of Christians across the Middle East. Preachers and sheiks on satellite channels say the Coptic Church wants to get involved in politics and they won't let that happen."

A popular ultraconservative Salafi preacher known as Abu Islam has chided Copts on his TV program:

"If you're sure of yourselves and you have a grain of self confidence, speak," he said. "I say that you are heathens, say we are not heathens; I say you are infidels, say we are not infidels.... I say your women are naked and that this is not fit for Islam or Christianity."

Copts make up about 10% of Egypt's population of 84 million. They have faced discrimination throughout history but have coexisted in relative peace with the Muslim majority. The 30-year rule of secular autocrat [Hosni Mubarak](#) offered limited protection amid growing violence and persecution. Since Mubarak's downfall in 2011, Copts have felt increasingly threatened by an array of Islamist voices.

"Mubarak painted a pretty picture but he didn't help us," said Wadie, who plans to leave Egypt after he receives a master's degree. "Today, things are more systematic against us. Copts are definitely arming themselves, but the problem is the weapons dealers are Muslims."

Egypt was startled Sunday when a funeral for four of the Copts killed in the village clashes was attacked at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo. One Copt died in bursts of tear gas, gunfire and gasoline bombs outside the cathedral; another was killed that day in fighting back in the village.

Morsi told Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, that he considered any "aggression against the cathedral an aggression against me personally." But the pope blamed Morsi for not providing enough security, which, he said, "comes under the category of negligence" that the church has not encountered even in the most oppressive times.

Egypt's Christians have long been suspicious of Morsi. The president and the Muslim Brotherhood backed a constitution that Copts say jeopardizes religious and civil freedoms. Copts complain of facing restrictions on church construction and school curriculums often tailored to Islam.

Salafi preachers accuse Copts of kidnapping Christians who want to convert to Islam. Sectarian hatred spills into violence on rare occasions when a Copt and a

Muslim start a romance. A video, reportedly recorded in 2009 and uploaded this week to YouTube, shows a mob of Muslim men yelling "God is great" while sexually assaulting two Coptic women.

The marginalization of Christians has been sharpened against the nation's economic and political turmoil. Morsi and the Brotherhood, which controls the government, have shut out opposition voices amid joblessness, inflation, gas shortages, widening public debt and plummeting foreign reserves. Protests and labor strikes erupt daily and Egyptians are balanced between bewilderment and rage.

"The country's general chaos is causing everything to escalate and allows a radical Muslim ideology to propagate violence," said biomedical engineer Karim Samuel, a Copt. "I sometimes sit on the Metro [subway] next to men reading the Koran. I wonder if they really understand what they're reading or do they blindly follow sheiks."

He paused and calculated the political math against his faith and other minorities.

"Morsi and the Brotherhood don't care about Copts, liberals or leftists," Samuel said. "I don't know what we can do as a Christian community."

Samir left the Mass, the scent of incense upon her, the priest's voice echoing from the altar into a breeze along the river, where fishermen gather nets and wooden boats drift in the sun beyond marshes and broken cliffs. She said Egypt needs a moderate voice and, unlike many these days, she opposes suggestions that the military might return to power.

"Copts died under army rule too," she said. "I want a civilian government."

She squinted into the sun; a few tourists lingered at the church's gift shop.

"I know a lot of Christians who have left. There are so many now in Australia and Canada," she said. "We are facing blind [Islamist] fundamentalism.... The Brotherhood wants to create conflict between all religions. They're trying to drum us out of the country, but we'll hold on even more to our faith."