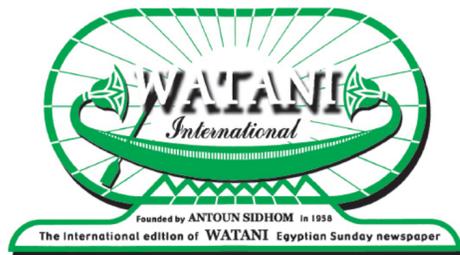


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Editorial

Problems on hold Tiran and Sanafir Insult to parliamentary performance

Youssef Sidhom

Egypt's parliamentary experience goes back in time some 150 years during which parliament gained a reputation for honourable, respectful performance. Different regimes came and went, various majority parties succeeded one another, representation and democratic practice went through ups and downs; the constant features, however, were reverence for freedom of opinion and the right to differ and argue with respect. Under parliament's famous dome there thrived a language of elegant, civil rhetoric; discussions were governed by decent behaviour and commitment to parliamentary tradition. All this under competent speakers who masterfully orchestrated the parliamentary experience to ensure it was an honourable one that fostered confidence in MPs.

I recall the above as I observe with sorrow and frustration our current parliament and the manner in which discussions are conducted these days. I do not especially mean the recent discussions on the issue of the Tiran and Sanafir islands even though I will be getting to that later. I mean the general performance of the current parliament, two years into its five-year round, which leaves a lot to be desired. I admit that I have time and again resisted the urge to criticise this performance in hopes that it would mature down the path. Then came the Tiran-Sanafir discussions, and they acted as the straw that broke the camel's back.

To those unfamiliar with the issue: Tiran and Sanafir are two barren islands in the Tiran Strait at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. They are, according to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, unarmed and uninhabited; only a small Egyptian police squad is there. The islands have been under Egyptian administration upon request of the Saudis since 1950, and have remained so to this day, interrupted only by brief spell of Israeli occupation following the Six Day War in 1967. An agreement signed in April 2016 by Egypt and Saudi Arabia to demarcate the maritime border between them returned the islands to the Saudis, but this gave rise to huge controversy among Egyptians. Some saw that the islands were being returned to their rightful owner after decades of Egyptian administration; others saw them as belonging to Egypt, and that the Egyptian administration was handing Egyptian soil to Saudi Arabia on a plate of gold in return for economic advantages.

The issue got mired in media clamour, misunderstanding, debate, accusations, insolence, and mistrust, with a general rush towards unsubstantiated, undocumented, unproved views on who the islands really belonged to. The lack of vision and objectivity left the public confused and divided. The experts apparently preferred to stay away from the absurd boisterous scene, possibly waiting for parliament to have its say. They probably thought parliament would investigate and study the matter seriously in order to have viable grounds on which to base a decision on the matter.

Last week, the agreement was referred to the House of Representatives for approval—or rejection. I was preparing myself for a rich discussion on the islands issue, but what actually took place in parliament's Legislative Affairs Committee was a disaster. Prejudice and antagonism on both sides were all too obvious, as were intentions to slay any 'other' opinion. The scandalous unruliness, screaming, interruption, threats, abuse, and verbal and physical fighting were televised live for Egypt and the whole world to see. Amid all that, there were desperate attempts to display and discuss relevant documents and views of experts who utterly failed to air these views owing to the avalanche of interruptions, offence, and accusations of treachery.

The facts were lost, and all reasonable discussion and serious investigation stood no chance in face of the hysterical screaming and violence. All through, Speaker of the House of Representatives Ali Abdel-Aal stopped short of controlling the unruliness; he even stoked the hysterical screaming. So it is with pain that I say that no matter what decision parliament reached regarding the islands, the manner in which this decision was reached will forever remain a blemish in the history of parliamentary life in Egypt, and a miserable sample of democratic practice.



Police raid de facto church in Beni Sweif



A recent incident in the village of Saft al-Kharsa in Beni Sweif, 100km south of Cairo, has brought to the surface Coptic bitterness vis-à-vis their deprivation of places of worship, and has thrown into question the ability of the September 2016 law for building churches to secure this right.

During the early hours of Friday 16 June, the police broke into a Church-owned three-storey building in Saft al-Kharsa, which Copts use as a de facto church and a community service centre. The villagers were surprised to find the furniture, rugs, icons, pictures, and worship utensils that had been in the building thrown outside, and the building closed down with seals and chains. They took the belongings into their homes. The behaviour by the police was inexplicable.

The day before had seen Anba Stephanos, Bishop of Biba, al-Fashn, and Smesta, visit Saft al-Kharsa to offer his condolences to the family of the boy Bishoi Ayad who had lost his life in the terrorist attack against a bus driving towards the desert monastery of St Samuel the Confessor, some 200km south of Cairo. The attack had claimed the lives of 28 Copts and injured 25 others. Ayad had been among the injured, but died later. Seven from among the Coptic victims came from Beni Sweif.

Membership in Beit al-Aila frozen

The Saft al-Kharsa de facto church is, like countless others throughout Egypt, unlicensed. This owes to the fact that, for centuries, it has been next to impossible for Copts to obtain licence to build a church so, in light of the growing population and the dire need of congregations for churches, the Copts have had to practise their religious rites in make-shift non-licensed places of worship. In July 2016, unrest erupted in the village when the Muslim villagers suspected the Copts were converting the building into a fully-fledged church [http://en.watani.net.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/sectarian/beni-sweif-copts-attacked-on-suspicion-of-building-church/16950/].

The security authorities of Biba would from time to time permit the Copts to use the Saft al-Kharsa building for worship, but it was never clear when or why such permits may be given. In November 2016, the Bishopric of Biba filed a request with Beni Sweif Governor to legalise the status of the building as a church, in accordance with the then newly passed law for the building of churches. To date, however, the Bishopric received no reply to its request.

The Coptic congregation and the Church officials in Biba were livid at the recent police raid against the Saft al-Kharsa church. Fr Thomas Bibawy, the church pastor, demanded of the Interior Minister an urgent investigation into the incident. The Bishopric also froze its membership in the quasi-State body of Beit al-Aila, literally the Family Home, formed of Muslim and Coptic clerics

Girgis Waheeb
Nader Shukry

and laity and headed by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar for the purpose better mutual understanding and aborting sectarian strife.

Copts; second-class citizens

On the evening of 17 June, 50 Beni Sweif clerics had a meeting with the governor, Sherif Habib. The meeting extended for two hours, and covered all the grievances of the Copts in the parish of Biba, al-Fashn, and Smesta. The clerics specifically demanded that the Coptic congregation should be allowed adequate places for worship since there was a severe shortage in churches compared to the needs of the congregation. They could not contain their anger as they detailed the oppression and indignity they were subject to day in day out at the hands of the security officials on account of the dire need to worship freely and in peace.

"We cannot so much as do the most minor repairs to a church or church-affiliated building without the police penalising us," the clerics said. One of the priests complained that his church was temporarily closed because he had installed an air conditioning unit.

Another priest said that a policeman had told him, regarding the recent police raid against the Saft al-Kharsa building, that the Bishop should have taken the police's permission to visit the village.

The result, the clerics insisted, was that the Copts are increasingly feeling they are second-class citizens in their own country.

Bombshell: law for building churches not in force

Fr Ghabrial Tawadros demanded that the Saft al-Kharsa building be licensed as a community centre where worship may be held, and reopened.

Governor Habib told his guests that the information he had about the building was that it was dilapidated and that a demolition order had been issued for it since it was life threatening. This brought on a wave of wrath from the clerics; they said it was not true and reminded the Governor of the November 2016 request filed by Biba Bishopric to legalise the status of the building as a church in accordance with the law for the building of churches. At this point the Governor dropped a bombshell by saying that the law was not yet in force since its executive bylaws have not been issued.

The meeting ended with Governor Habib ordering immediate reopening of the Saft al-Kharsa building as a community centre, but that no religious rites would be held there till a permit would be obtained from the Prime Minister. He said he would urgently address the PM in this regard, and promised a reply in 48 hours. The 48-hour-deadline expired Tuesday and, until *Watani* went to press, no permit had been issued.

Prominent clerics face disdain charges

Nader Shukry

The renowned Coptic Orthodox priest Fr Makary Younan and the Muslim scholar and cleric Sheikh Salem Abdel-Galiel are each facing charges of disdain of religion.

It started with Sheikh Abdel-Galiel, a former deputy minister for proselytisation at the Ministry of Religious Endowments, who also presented a daily religious programme "Muslims Ask" on *al-Mehwar* satellite channel since early 2016, saying that Christians are infidels and that Christianity is a 'corrupt' religion.

The following week, Fr Makary was asked during his weekly prayer meeting at St Mark's cathedral in Azbakiyah, Downtown Cairo, to comment on Sheikh Abdel-Galiel's remarks. The prayer meeting is televised live. Fr Makary replied that Christianity was a religion of love and forgiveness to all, even enemies. It was, he said, "a religion of purity of heart that did not embrace killing". He said that Christianity came first to Egypt, and that Islam came later and spread through the sword.

A few days later, the lawyer Samir Sabry announced he was



taking Fr Makary to court since his remark on Islam spreading through the sword was tantamount to an insult. Mr Sabry later said he had withdrawn his case but it turned out he had not; the Cairo Misdemeanour Court set the date 23 September for a trial.

As to Sheikh Abdel-Galiel, he had already been taken to court by lawyer Naguib Gabrail, for his remarks against Christianity. Mr Gabrail said that the Sheikh's remarks exposed disdain of

the Christian religion, threatened national unity, disrupted public peace, and incited the killing of Christians. Even though Sheikh Abdel-Galiel had apologised to Christians for any pain his remarks might have caused, he insisted that he had just quoted the Qur'an and was not inciting their killing.

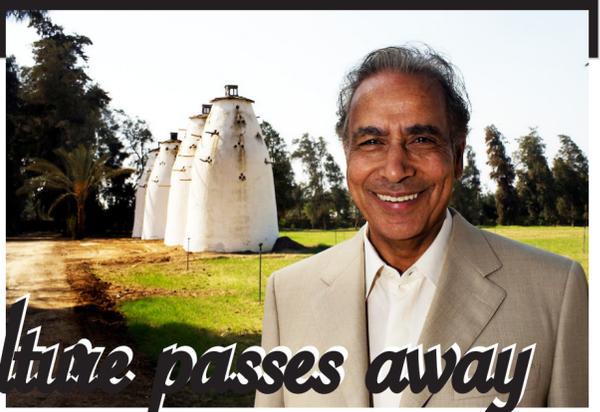
Hassan Rateb, the head of Mehwar, said that the cleric's contract with the channel would be cancelled. He apologised to all "Christian brothers" in an official statement.

The Cairo Misdemeanour court has set 24 June as the date for Sheikh Abdel-Galiel's trial.

Mr Gibrail has also filed another charge against Sheikh Abdullah Rushdi, Imam of al-Sayyida Nafisa Mosque, for insulting the Christian religion.

A number of prominent writers, journalists, and liberals have openly called for the lawyers to drop both cases, fearing that once a case is opened it would lead to arguments on the Christian and Muslim faiths, which is bound to deepen divides among Egyptians along religious lines.

Ibrahim Abul-Eish (1937 - 2017)



Pioneer of organic agriculture passes away

On Thursday 15 June, Egypt lost Ibrahim Abul-Eish, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development and SEKEM Group for Bio-agriculture. Dr Abul-Eish died at age 80. The funeral took place the following day at SEKEM farm in Belbeis, Sharqiya, 60km northeast Cairo; and condolences were received on Sunday 18 June at Omar Makram mosque in Downtown Cairo.

Mr Abul-Eish began undergraduate studies in chemistry and medicine at the age of 19 in Austria. In 1969 he earned a PhD in Pharmacology, after which he worked in pharmaceutical research. During this time he won patents for a number of new medicines, especially for osteoporosis and arteriosclerosis.

In 1977 Dr Abul-Eish returned to Egypt and founded the comprehensive development initiative SEKEM, an organisation which focuses on biodynamic farming methods in Egypt. SEKEM farm is located in Belbeis on an area of 140 feddans. The aim of the project was to build not only an agriculture business that would create livelihoods for thousands of people, but also to establish a new type of community around the farm where no industrial fertiliser or pesticide is used.

SEKEM provides health services for the workers, as well as schools based on modern education systems for their children. It promotes human development by investing in people.

Georgette Sadeq

SEKEM exported the first shipment of medicinal herbs to the US in 1981. By 2004, SEKEM was managing more than 800 farms that produce herbs, vegetables, fruits and bio-cotton in Egypt and Sudan. SEKEM's monumental success in bio-agriculture prompted Dr Abul-Eish to establish a factory under the name of ATOS for natural pharmaceutical products.

In 2003, Ibrahim Abul-Eish and SEKEM received the Right Livelihood Award for integrating commercial success with the promotion of social and cultural development of the community. He was selected as an "Outstanding Social Entrepreneur" by the Schwab Foundation in 2004. In 2006 he was appointed counselor at the World Future Council. In 2012, Dr Abul-Eish was appointed an Oslo Business for Peace Honouree, receiving his award at Oslo City Hall, from The Business for Peace Foundation. He received the Global Thinkers Forum 2013 Award for Excellence in Positive Change.

He wrote a book to explain the experience of SEKEM and how it participated in changing the face of a part of Egypt.

Dr Abul-Eish leaves behind a son and daughter; his son Helmy Abul-Eish handles the SEKEM project.