When Justice Means Just Us: Policy implications for non-Muslim minorities in post-Mubarak Egypt

When justice means "just us": a summary of the key policy messages for engaging with questions of non-Muslim minorities in Muslim majority contexts under transition in the Arab world, drawing from the case of Egypt, the country with the largest non-Muslim minority in the region.

- Progressive academics who wish to distance themselves from orientalism sometimes fall into the trap of confusing Islamophobia with being critical of political Islam. This leads to a discomfort with dealing with injustices that are committed in the name of religion whether by Islamist political forces or by local community leaders. This in turn inhibits their ability to address in a fair and nuanced manner issues of religious intolerance towards non-Muslim minorities in Muslim majority contexts. While it is critically important that western academics are aware of their positionality and its limitations in assuming particular standpoints, on the other hand, there is a need for a more nuanced representation of the power hierarchies and dynamics that influence social and religious relations on the ground.
- While the moment of uprisings in Egypt to oust Mubarak from power showed a high level of national unity between the 90% Muslim and 10% Christian population, one needs to take a historical perspective on this and recognize that consistently, where "a national Egyptian project" was championed, it has often been highly effective in creating an identity that surpasses religious difference. This is to be contrasted with the "Islamist project" which has consistently advocated for an Islamic nation that is tolerant towards non-Muslims and which often led to the "cacoonization" of non-Muslims. This will prove to be a key policy issue for Egypt and other countries with significant non-Muslim minorities in the region in terms of the kind of state and its identity that is advocated in the forthcoming state-building initiatives.
- Civilian rule is a NECESSARY but INSUFFICIENT condition for building an inclusive democracy because majoritarian democracy is intolerant towards diversity and pluralism where it clashes with the mainstream notions of cultural authenticity and identity. Hence it is important that policies and measures are integrated on several levels: the constitution, the systems of governance, the laws at this critical moment in Egypt's history and not assume that minorities will be automatically protected once/if the army relegates running the country to a civilian rule. Procedural democracy will not be sufficient to guarantee substantive rights or level the unequal playing field.
- One of the fundamental policy issues that needs to be addressed at this critical stage in Egypt's history is to incorporate the grievances of the Copts into the current transitional justice agenda. Otherwise, many Copts will feel excluded, and assume that when they talk about justice, they mean "just us". This will ultimately lead to the radicalization of the voices within the community who feel that there is no political will to establish the basis for building an inclusive and representative democracy.
- The administration of rule of law and vertical and horizontal mechanisms of accountability need to be applied to cases of violent assaults on non-Muslims. This must be the course of action taken instead of the informal reconciliation

committees which have capitalized on inequitable power relations to prevent perpetrators of violence from being held accountable.

- At a time when political society is extremely vibrant in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, one of the most practical and effective policies that can be adopted is the creation of an enabling environment for stronger civil society organizations advocating for the rights of non-Muslims from within these very communities. This will require skills in liaising with international civil society organizations, skills in documentation of human rights abuses, campaigning, and protecting human rights defenders who broach non-Muslim minority rights from various sources of oppressive authority. The significance of such a policy is that it would create a calibre of local activists who can give voice to the perspectives from within the community rather than having it consistently mediated by someone else. It is a sustainable form of support because the level of ownership is high and because it is embedded within the actual community.