

Coptic Community Councils
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COMMUNITY COUNCIL, COPTIC, council made up of laymen to take part in the administration of community affairs. With the emergence of the Coptic church from its declining circumstances under the successive waves of persecution in the Middle Ages, its reawakening in modern times was associated with various attempts at reform. The first and most serious attempts at regeneration took place under CYRIL IV (1854-1861) who deservedly earned the title of Father of Reform. Besides reforms for the enlightenment of the clergy, he concentrated on educational and cultural projects, such as opening numerous schools, introducing Coptic and foreign languages into the curriculum, and establishing a printing press.

The development of community councils passed through various stages, following the issuance of the Sultan's *Khatt hamayuni* (official decree) in 1856. This was a form of charter of liberties for the Christian minorities throughout the vast Ottoman empire. It authorized the establishment of special councils within the patriarchates to deal with problems of "personal status," such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as well as the administration of the *waqfs*, property donated to the church and the monasteries and held in trust, to be administered for ecclesiastical and charitable purposes. Such properties had been accumulating throughout the ages, and were considerably increased during the patriarchate of Demetrius II (1862-1870). On the occasion of the sultan's visit to Egypt, the sultan bestowed 1,000 *feddans* (acres) of arable land to the church, and this was supplemented by 500 *feddans* by Khedive Isma'il (1863-1882).

With the death of Pope Demetrius in 1870, Mark (Murqus), bishop of the province of al-Beheirah, was appointed locum tenens until a new patriarch was consecrated. Bishop Mark chose a number of notables to assist him in the administration of the financial affairs of the church. This may be considered the first nucleus of the community council. The Copts welcomed the project and decided to submit a formal application to the authorities for the foundation of a similar council to take charge of the *waqfs*, schools, benevolent societies, affairs of personal status, and other secular functions,

which would relieve the clergy of such worldly concerns. The application was presented by BOUTROS GHALI to the khedive, who on 5 February 1874 approved the establishment of a council to consist of twelve members and twelve adjuncts elected by general suffrage, to meet under the chairmanship of the patriarch.

The relationship between Pope CYRIL V (1874-1927) and the elected council was not harmonious, and consequently the council was dissolved. Two councils in succession were elected, but neither could hold a profitable meeting. The first of these was again dissolved, and the second was denied access and found the doors of the patriarchate locked in 1892. When the situation was reported to the government, with Boutros Ghali as minister of finance, it was decided that both the patriarch and Bishop Yu'annis of al-Beheirah had to be removed to the Monastery of al-Baramus, a measure without precedent in contemporary ecclesiastical history. Khedive 'Abbas II (1892-1914) ordered the return of the patriarch on 30 January 1893, and on 1 February he arrived in Cairo amid enthusiastic public acclaim. Those who were responsible for his exile were pardoned, and two amendments to the constitution of the council were enacted. One was bylaw no. 8 of December 1908, by which the patriarch was solely responsible for the appointment of his clerical substitute in the council, and the administration of the *waqfs* would be entrusted to the patriarch and four monastic abbots. The second was bylaw no. 3 of February 1912, restricting the number of the council membership to a total of twelve, eight laymen to be elected by general suffrage and four clerics to be nominated by the patriarch. These amendments remained in abeyance for twelve years, as they were resisted by the community and consequently abolished by parliament, and the original constitution of May 1883 remained in force. In 1927, after fifty-two years as patriarch, the death of Cyril V at the age of ninety-six paved the way for the next stage.

This stage was inaugurated by Yu'annis, bishop of al-Beheirah, first as locum tenens and in 1928 as Patriarch JOHN XIX. In November 1928 the pope accepted the nomination of a committee consisting of four members of the council and two bishops under his presidency, to supervise the vast *waqf* estates. But the system

faltered, and the case had to be referred to the court when the patriarch died in 1942. He was succeeded by MACARIUS III (1944-1945) after an interregnum of two years. The new pope issued a favorable letter on 22 February 1944 nominating a committee of five members of the council to be entrusted with the administration of the *waqfs*, a measure that was refused by the Holy Synod. The brokenhearted patriarch retired to the monastery of Saint Antony (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS). He died in the following year.

Anba YUSAB II (1946-1956), metropolitan of Jirja, became pope on the specific condition of his acceding to entrust the administration of the *waqfs* to the community council. This promise was circumvented after Yusab's consecration by his raising the abbots of monasteries to the episcopate and entrusting them with the financial administration of the *waqfs*. At this juncture, the Egyptian revolution of July 1952 broke out, and a new council was nominated. Later, in September 1955, the ailing patriarch, who had been widely criticized for personal reasons, was relieved of his powers. A triumvirate of three bishops took charge of the conduct of patriarchal authority. On 13 November 1956, Yusab II died, thus closing one of the controversial chapters in the contemporary history of the Coptic church.

An interregnum of two and a half years followed his death, and the powers of the community council were drastically reduced by law, which stripped the council of its jurisdiction over personal status cases (marriage, divorce, alimony), referring them to civil courts of the state. The Coptic schools were put under the supervision of the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and all benevolent societies under the Ministry of Social Affairs. Nothing was left for the council save the solution of the material problem of the *waqfs*. This became the responsibility of the patriarchal successor, CYRIL VI (1959-1971), a solitary monk, who became the 116th patriarch on 10 May 1959.

After three-quarters of a century of strife, Cyril VI was able to find a practical solution. On 19 July 1960, the pope secured a presidential decree promulgating a law that provided for a new system to control all the Coptic *waqfs*. A joint board called the Council of Coptic *Waqfs* was formed under the chairmanship of the

patriarch and comprising six bishops and six secular Coptic notables, with full authority to appoint the *waqf* trustees and supervise their administration. On 12 July 1961 Cyril VI seized the opportunity of the expiration of the five-year period of the then existing council to inform the government that he did not favor holding a new election, and the authorities approved his proposal. This led to the extension of the council elected in 1956 for the time being.

However, in 1967 the community council faced serious financial problems in funding the Theological Institutes and the administrative offices of the patriarchate. Again the solution to this problem was found by Cyril VI outside the council by his providing a committee of twelve members appointed by virtue of presidential decree, issued on 6 December 1967.

This arrangement was maintained until Cyril's death on 9 March 1971, and the succession of Pope SHENOUDA III on 14 November 1971.

After a twelve-year suspension, elections for a new council took place in August 1973. At the expiration of its five-year term in 1978, it was succeeded by another. A new round of elections was due in 1983, but this had to be canceled in the wake of the events surrounding the internal exile by President Sadat of Pope Shenouda to the Monastery of Anba Bishoi in September 1981. Following the pope's restoration early in 1985, a new council was elected in March 1985.

The councils, however, still maintain the important role of participating in the papal elections, in their capacity as official representatives of the Coptic population. Under the church rules as recognized by the state (presidential decree of 3 November 1957), the general council has the following powers: (1) in conjunction with the Holy Church Synod, it appoints the *locum tenens* bishop, following the death of the pope; (2) a committee consisting of eighteen members, nine of whom are to be chosen from the general council, is authorized to select candidates for the patriarchate; (3) an electoral committee consisting of the *locum tenens* bishop, three clergymen, and three eminent members of the community conducts the voting process.

According to the 1883 constitution providing for the establishment of community councils, the powers they exercised were extensive. Subsequently many functions were eliminated. The council had jurisdiction of personal status cases, when the parties concerned were all of the Coptic Orthodox denomination, otherwise the case would fall within the Muslim court jurisdiction. Such cases are now to be settled by civil courts. The management of Coptic schools was originally entrusted to community councils. These schools are now under the full supervision of the Ministry of Education. The administration of the *waqfs* passed to the joint Patriarchal Laical Waqf Organization in 1960.

The 1883 constitution, slightly amended in 1927, also provided for the establishment of provincial councils in cathedral cities of Egypt, under the presidency of their local bishops. These councils assume their responsibilities within their own eparchies, and are subject to the supervision of the general council in respect to matters of particular importance. Each council consists of four members, with the exception of the council of Alexandria, which is made up of seven members under the presidency of the vicar-general.

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