



Written by [James Heiser](#) on April 6, 2012

Christians Withdraw from Egypt's Constitutional Commission

The Islamist Muslim Brotherhood has been steadily gaining political might in Egypt ever since last year's "Arab Spring" swept aside the old regime. Mubarak's government had ruled Egypt for nearly 30 years, and thus the speed with which Islamists are consolidating their power has surprised some observers. Among those who are the least surprised are members of Egypt's long-suffering Coptic Christian minority. The Copts have endured savage persecution at the hands of Egypt's Muslim majority for generations; what has changed in the past year is that their plight often [receives even less international attention than previously](#), perhaps because it does not conform to the prevailing presumption of the beneficent intentions of the Islamist architects of the revolution in Egypt.



With parliament firmly in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the even more extremist Salafist Al-Nour Party, the steps that Islamists have taken to solidify their role in shaping the "new Egypt" are hardly surprising. Recently, an Islamist was placed in charge of the commission that has been tasked with writing a new constitution for Egypt, and even before the commission's work can begin, the Freedom and Justice Party has broken its promise regarding the selection of a new Egyptian President.

The latest move taken by the Muslim Brotherhood to consolidate its power was its decision to break its word to the Egyptian people and enter the presidential race. If the Freedom and Justice Party wins that election in May, it will have firm control of the entire government. [As the Washington Post reported](#):

Egypt's most powerful Islamist organization on Saturday nominated one of its members for president, breaking a promise that it would not enter the race and angering critics who called the decision an attempt to control the country.

The Muslim Brotherhood announced at a news conference that Khairat el-Shater, the group's top financier and arguably its most influential member, would be the candidate of its political wing, as a rift grows between the Islamist group and the country's ruling military leaders. ...

"Everything is risky for them now," said Issandr El Amrani, a prominent Cairo-based blogger and analyst. "I suspect they decided to do this because they want to maximize their ability to govern and were unable to find either a consensus candidate or a trusted proxy."

For Copts who have thus far attempted to fulfill a role in the new government, the most recent steps by the Freedom and Justice Party have gone too far. An article for Bloomberg (["Egyptian Constitutional](#)



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[Committee Moves Ahead Amid Boycotts](#)") documents the declining public credibility of the Muslim Brotherhood:

Egypt's constitution-drafting committee decided to push ahead with its work amid a boycott by many of its secular members who say Islamists are trying to monopolize the political process.

"We won't delay the work of the committee," Parliament Speaker Saad el-Katatni, the panel's chief and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, said during the televised session last night on Nile News. El-Katatni said 11 members have confirmed their withdrawal and they have until early next week to decide on a proposal to replace them with members from a list of alternates. More than 20 people and groups have released statements saying they were pulling out from the 100-member committee. ...

Those boycotting the panel, including representatives of Al-Azhar, the Sunni Muslim world's pre-eminent religious institution, and the Coptic Church, have rejected the suggestion that members be replaced. Secular parties have demanded that the committee is scrapped and that the process begin anew.

With reports that the Muslim Brotherhood is interested in [spreading their influence through proxies in neighboring nations](#), it seems unlikely that they will back away from using a process they have worked hard to dominate. With Sunni Muslims and Coptic Christians apparently concluding that their presence on the constitutional committee was little more than "window dressing," they perceived withdrawal from the process to be their only remaining option for protest. As Aya Batrawy recently wrote for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*:

Out of 100 members of the committee originally selected, there were six Christians, six women and a handful of liberals — disproportionately low numbers.

Yousef Sidhom, editor of the weekly *Watani* newspaper and a Coptic Church official, said the church never officially put forth any members for the panel selected last week.

"How can we withdraw from something we have not been a part of," he said. "We are calling on people to withdraw along with other groups that have pulled out," Mr. Sidhom added. ...

A former member of the church's administrative affairs body, Nabil Mirhom, and the Coptic Pope's lawyer, Magdy Shenouda, were both nominated as symbolic representatives to the panel and both have withdrawn, according to Mr. Sidhom. They were among the six Christians originally appointed to the panel.

Given the Obama administration's support for the changes currently underway in Egypt, it seems unlikely that the State Department's support for the results of that nation's "Arab Spring" will change any time soon. In fact, the State Department is [seeking hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to help expand the revolutionary changes throughout the region. For those who have to live in the Egypt which American foreign policy has helped to create, the situation seems unlikely to improve any time soon. An ill-conceived series of attempts at "nation building" in the region — including Iraq and Afghanistan — have resulted in outcomes which critics have argued are deleterious to the interests of the United States, and many wonder whether U.S. involvement in Egypt, Libya, and Syria will yield results which are markedly different from the failures elsewhere.

At present, those Egyptians who are concerned with the course of their nation may now have to rely on the very military that they once feared to restore some measure of balance to their government. In late



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March, Marwa Awad wrote an article for the *Chicago Tribune* which documented the role-reversal that has taken place between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian military. Where once the military strove for control, now it is pressing for a more even distribution of power in the government, against the protestations of the Brotherhood that helped lead a revolt which was supposedly going to give the rule of Egypt to its people:

While the Brotherhood is maneuvering for a stronger role for parliament, the army wants to retain a key role for itself and ensure executive powers are more evenly spread.

“There must be a decentralization of power. The constitution must divide powers amongst the president, the government and parliament,” said the army official, who has asked not to be identified as he was not authorized to make public statements.

It wants the new constitution to set up a National Security Council that would include the president, key foreign, defense and interior ministers, and military personnel.

According to the *Globe and Mail* report, liberals want more from the Egyptian military than checks and balances; they want intervention:

Some of those who have pulled out are planning to return to street protests. But some liberals are also calling on the country’s ruling military to intervene.

The head of the ruling military council, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, met with representatives of political parties, including the Brotherhood’s political arm, to discuss the standoff before the panel met last week.

A recent statement by the military council said “there will not be a specific constitution for a specific faction.”

Related article: [Muslim Brotherhood Breaks Promise, Seeks Egyptian Presidency](#)



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