

## Global Governance and the Challenges of Transnational Advocacy: The Coptic Minority in Diaspora

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**Abstract:** As a diaspora community, Copts in Canada and the US have seized political opportunities and engaged in vigorous activism, resulting in the establishment of a plethora of organizations. However, despite their efforts, most Coptic organizations have experienced limited influence. This article, focusing on Copts as a previously overlooked immigrant minority, aims to explain the disparity in their transnational mobilization efforts. The article contributes to the scholarly understanding of how social movement theories SMT can be applied to indigenous persecuted religious minorities and their mobilization in the diaspora. Through the incorporation of various methodologies and diverse approaches rooted in SMT, the article seeks to present the fundamental advocacy challenges encountered by the Coptic diaspora.

**Keywords:** Minority Diasporas, Copts, Transnational Mobilization, Diaspora Activism, Advocacy, Social Movement Theory

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Since the 1970s, the Coptic Christian community in Egypt has consistently advocated for equality, religious freedom, and protection from violence, and these demands remain unchanged to this day. Despite the passage of over 50 years, the Copts in Egypt continue to confront persistent issues that have not been sufficiently resolved. Discrimination, marginalization, and restricted access to fundamental rights and opportunities remain core concerns. Coptic demands have remained rooted in the pursuit of full citizenship rights, equal treatment under the law, and the recognition and protection of their cultural and religious heritage. However, the Egyptian regime's non-democratic nature and adherence to Sharia law has curtailed freedom of expression, suppressed civil society, and limited the state's ability to address the challenges faced by the Coptic Christian community. Further complicating matters is the exclusive role of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the sole political and social representative of the Coptic community since the 1950s (Lukasik, 2016). Therefore, the church's stance towards any form of oppositional political activity within the Coptic community remained consistently negative and constraining for years (Guindy, 2020; Rowe, 2007,

2009; Tadros, 2009). In this restrictive environment, it becomes challenging for Copts to mobilize independently and establish independent human rights advocacy groups in Egypt, groups that could effectively advocate for their rights and raise awareness of their concerns.

The freedoms provided in Western democratic countries, along with their associated liberties, have provided an opportunity for numerous secular movements in Canada and the US to seize political opportunities to engage in activism and establish a plethora of organizations. Moreover, to a considerable extent, the uprising in 2011 broke the long-standing pattern of political restrictions faced by the Copts, enabling noticeable active participation by Copts beyond the formal directives of the church (Doorn-Harde, 2017).

However, despite their best efforts, most Coptic organizations have remained informal, with limited influence, and the Coptic diaspora has been struggling to mobilize. Internal divisions within its

leadership, lack of collaboration, the absence of an ideological compact and vision, and limited access to resources, to name a few, have resulted in a multitude of organizations that do not necessarily work in unison (Hanna, 2013; Saad, 2010). These limitations highlight the need for a deeper examination of the obstacles to sustaining effective transnational mobilization. Against this backdrop, I ask: What factors shape the forms of Coptic activism and influence the degree of solidarity and sustainability within their organizations? In raising this question, the study also engages broader theoretical debates on social movements, global governance, transnationalism, and diaspora politics.

Research on social movements draws on both structural and constructivist approaches within social movement theory (SMT), each offering distinct analytical tools. These approaches generally align with a schema encompassing resource mobilization, opportunity structures, and framing, as outlined in foundational works by Jenkins (1983), Koopmans (1999), McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996), Mueller (1992), and Tilly (1978). Building on these insights, this paper uses SMT literature to argue that the Coptic diaspora has faced increasingly significant obstacles

to mobilization over time. These obstacles stem not only from resource shortages and the framing of traumatic experiences but also from broader opportunity structures that cut across both domestic and international contexts—dynamics that resonate with questions of global governance. In particular, the complex relationship between Copts, the church, and the state—both in the homeland and in the countries of residence—helps explain the factors that shape cohesion and sustainability in diaspora advocacy. Internal disputes, including tensions between laity and clergy, first- and second-generation members, newer and older immigrants, and within the church hierarchy, have further limited the capacity of Coptic mobilization to reach its full potential.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of Coptic mobilization efforts, this study employs a mixed-methods design combining semi-structured interviews, content analysis of secondary sources, and historical analysis. The interview guide included both closed and open-ended questions, as well as follow-up prompts that encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses. A total of twenty-three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were

conducted, each covering 15 to 20 questions on topics such as homeland and host-country opportunities and resources, organizational challenges, the role of religious leadership, the importance of religious observance, and perspectives on how traumatic memories shape diaspora politics across generations.

The sample encompassed a diverse range of participants, including current and former leaders and members of Coptic human rights advocacy organizations, volunteers from philanthropic organizations, independent Coptic politicians, activists with a prominent media presence, Coptic scholars, priests and bishops in Canada and the United States, as well as second-generation Copts. Interviews provided an especially effective means of capturing the perspectives of individual diaspora activists and revealed information not available through secondary sources. For confidentiality, all names mentioned during interviews were replaced with alphanumeric pseudonyms (e.g., “A6”). In a few cases, participants requested that their real names remain visible, and these requests were honored. This approach ensured both the protection of participants’ privacy and respect for their preferences.

Content analysis have been employed to investigate Coptic diaspora activism and organizations. Secondary sources including books and peer-reviewed journal articles, websites affiliated with Coptic organizations, and electronic media articles contributed to the foundation of this research. Additionally, documents and articles from Coptic lobbies, conference proceedings, and insights gathered from noteworthy conferences attended, such as the 24th St. Shenouda-UCLA Conference of Coptic Studies in UCLA, Los Angeles (July 14-15, 2023), and the 16th Annual Symposium of Coptic Studies in partnership with the Coptic Museum of Canada (CMOC) at The St. Vladimir Institute, Toronto, Ontario (May 6, 2023), enriched the study. Furthermore, being added to the email list of major associations, particularly Coptic Solidarity, ROOTA, Coptic Orphans, Logos TV Coptic Civilization program, and St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society, allowed me to receive the latest updates on their activities, conferences, and the latest articles.

Lastly, historical serves to illuminate the background and experiences of the Copts. Access to hard copies

of publications from Coptic organizations and old volumes of various Coptic journals and newspapers, received in person from Coptic activists interviewed in Canada, such as *The Truth Journal* Vol. 1,2, 4, 5, 1983, *Coptica* Vol. 20, 2021, *Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies* Vol. 2, 1993, Vol. 10 of *The Orthodox Church Journal*, 1983, *Le Monde*, 1981, *The Copts* Vol. 1&2, 1980, *Peace News* Vol. 5, 1983, *The American Coptic Association Fact File* September, 1979, *The World* 1981, the American and Canadian Coptic Association and Australian Coptic Commission newsletters Vol. 26, 1983, and Arabic publications from the Canadian Coptic associations dating back to 1972, have contributed to a thorough exploration of the evolution of Coptic advocacy in North America. Finally, privileged access to hard copies of activists' letters received by hand from Coptic activists interviewed in Kingston and Toronto further enhances the depth of this study.

To demonstrate the validity of my argument and to clarify how the dynamics of Coptic mobilization in the diaspora are shaped, the paper is divided into three main parts. Together, these sections explain the factors that influence mobilization patterns and the sustainability of Coptic diaspora organizations, while



also outlining the challenges and opportunities of their activism in North America. The first section offers an overview of the fundamental dynamics among the church, the regime, and the Copts in Egypt. The second section analyzes the challenges linked to the opportunity structure in Egypt, including the relationships between diaspora activists, the Coptic church, and the Egyptian government. Finally, the third section turns to the host-country context in North America, examining the opportunity structures that shape relations between diaspora activists and the church, diaspora organizations and policymakers, as well as disagreements within the diaspora itself.

### The Schism Among the Church, the Regime, and the Copts

Viewed from a social movement perspective, the church, as an influential institution, creates opportunities for Coptic activism by establishing platforms for dialogue, community organizing, and the attraction of financial resources and volunteers. The church also has the potential to reframe Coptic

claims by promoting a discourse centered on equal citizenship and the protection of minority rights. Through sermons, educational programs, and public statements, it can raise awareness among its members and society at large about the injustices faced by Copts, thus legitimizing their claims and garnering attention.

The extent by which the church is able to aid mobilization depends on its relationship with the Coptic community, as well as its relationship with the Egyptian regime. The relationship between the Copts and their church is complex, as their interests and visions do not always align. Likewise, the relationship between the church and the Egyptian regime is volatile: at times it is highly cooperative yet at others highly conflictual.

Since the 1950s, the Coptic Orthodox Church has served as the sole political and social representative of the Coptic community through its alliance with the Egyptian government (Lukasik, 2016). Following Pope Shenouda's release on January 3, 1985, from forced

exile at the Monastery of St. Bishoy, ordered by Egyptian President Sadat, the Pope chose to encourage Coptic loyalty to the regime in order to ensure community security (Yefet, 2017). This system facilitated the establishment of parallel institutions for religious minorities, as long as they cooperated with the regime, engaged in behind-the-scenes negotiations with the government, espoused the rhetoric of national unity, avoided public confrontations at all costs, and contributed to maintaining the state's sovereignty (Ibrahim, 2015; Leirvik, 2006; Sedra, 1999).

The church's stance towards any form of oppositional political activity within the Coptic community remained consistently negative and restrictive for years. Tadros describes the state's treatment of Copts as a patron–client relationship, where limited services, such as church permits, are provided to secure the political loyalty of the Coptic community (Tadros, 2009). Similarly, Rowe refers to this church policy as a mutually reinforcing neo-millet partnership, wherein the church supports the state, and the state grants legitimacy to the church (Rowe,

2007, 2009). However, despite these arrangements, none of these services address the unjust legal and institutional policies targeting Copts in the country. Guindy also points out that having the church as the “main interlocutor” between the state and the Copts appears to be a strategy to exert pressure indirectly on the Copts by pressuring them into silence in order to avoid disturbing the already-unstable relationship between the church and the Egyptian government, thus worsening the Copts’ situation in Egypt (Guindy, 2020, 325).

During the 2011 Egyptian revolution, when the masses took to the streets demanding regime change, Copts displayed a range of attitudes towards the revolution. While some Copts actively participated, others adhered to the guidance provided by the church and opposed the revolution, and still others remained hesitant and fearful, simply observing from the sidelines. Such attitudes were not exclusive to Copts but were exhibited by all Egyptians. However, assessing Coptic attitudes posed unique challenges due to the association of the term “Copt” with the Coptic Orthodox Church,

which publicly declared its opposition to the revolution (Jirjis, 2012).

On February 15, 2011, Pope Shenouda III released a statement expressing unequivocal support for the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, while simultaneously denouncing ongoing protests and urging Copts to refrain from participating in the demonstrations (Jirjis, 2012). Even after President Mubarak's resignation, none of the Coptic clergy appeared in public squares or the media during the revolution. Generally, hierarchical institutions such as the church prioritize obedience to the ruling authority as a fundamental principle. By encouraging Copts to rely on the church as a conduit for their political demands, many Copts in Egypt found themselves isolated and discouraged from engaging with political parties or civil movements aimed at defending their rights. However, the church's resistance towards involvement in the revolution can be viewed from different perspectives. One possible interpretation may stem from apprehension regarding the emergence of an Islamist regime, which could have been perceived as an unpredictable and

potentially dangerous path for the Coptic community. Another could be that the church considered the Mubarak regime, or stable regimes in general, as being in the Copts' best interest, guaranteeing their safety and protecting their security.

Simultaneously, there was observable active participation by Copts beyond the formal directives of the church. One notable example is the Maspero Youth Union (MYU), which emerged as one of the prominent Coptic youth activist groups during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The MYU, mobilized in October 2011, demonstrated the engagement and involvement of Coptic youth in the revolutionary movement. The group contested the hegemony of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egyptian national politics and invited the church to withdraw from the political sphere. The group decided to resist and rebel against the traditional leadership of the church that, as they saw it, is not bringing their political claims to the fore. Therefore, the group encouraged young Copts to express their grievances and advocate for themselves by joining political parties and movements (Fahmi, 2014; Mogib, 2012; Tadros, 2013a).

The situation reached its peak when the MYU orchestrated a demonstration in front of the Maspero television headquarters in Cairo as a response to the September 30 assault on the Mar Girgis (St. George) Church in Marinab, Aswan. Disconcertingly, the police and public prosecutors failed to investigate the incident and instead suggested resolving the inter-communal conflict through informal reconciliation committees (Lukasik, 2016). The youth protests ultimately led to the tragic event known as the Maspero Massacre on October 9, 2011. The confrontation among the military, unidentified assailants, and the protesting youth lasted throughout the night, resulting in a shocking loss of 27 lives and leaving over 300 individuals injured. It is worth noting that nearly all those affected were Christian protestors who were marching from Shoubra, a district in Cairo, towards the Maspero state television building (Lukasik, 2016). In the aftermath of this horrifying incident, Coptic activists and certain Muslim intellectuals accused the military and police of gravely violating their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. However, no legal actions were taken against the perpetrators, and

the authorities' passive response, which had become all too familiar and predictable, only escalated tensions within Egyptian society and further deteriorated the relationship between Copts and Muslims.

Despite presenting itself as a secular movement and advocating for liberal secular ideals, the Mapero movement did not shy away from embracing its distinct Coptic identity. The MYU sought to address intra-communal conflicts surrounding the role of the Coptic Orthodox Church by advocating for political secularism. Simultaneously, the group emphasized its Coptic identity by including religious symbols during protest events. By asserting their unique Coptic cultural identity in the public sphere, beyond the confines of the church, the MYU challenged the boundaries imposed by state and church regulations on religious expression, resisting the church's demands (Lukasik, 2016). To a certain extent, the church's leadership began distancing itself from the corporatist approach taken by Pope Shenouda. For instance, Bishop Musa, who was responsible for youth affairs, emphasized the rights of Copts as



citizens to engage in peaceful demonstrations without resorting to violence or offensive slogans (Doorn-Harder, 2015).

The opportunity structure approach has become a dominant paradigm for studying collective action and social movements, and comprises contingent external factors that impact a group's mobilization. Scholars have noted that the structure of opportunities plays a significant role in shaping the extent to which a particular political system is receptive to the perspectives of a specific group, thereby influencing the incentives to and constraints of political activism (Eisinger, 1973; Esman, 1994; Paul, 2000; Tarrow, 1991). The following subsections scrutinize the complex interactions and transnational relationships among the diaspora, the homeland, and the country of residence. The goal is to provide insights into how the available opportunities and limitations influence the mobilization efforts of the Coptic community and their transnational engagements.

## Challenges Related to the Opportunity Structure in Homeland

The configuration of opportunities within the homeland significantly influences the level of activism within the diaspora, while the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland plays a crucial role in either constraining or enabling the activities of diaspora groups. One pivotal aspect that influences the diaspora's inclination to engage in homeland affairs is the homeland's ideological stance towards its external nationals (Clifford, 1994; De la Garza, 2001; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Sökefeld, 2006). Externalizing the Copts' protests against discrimination in Egypt has the potential to raise global awareness about the minority status of the Coptic community and spark public discourse about Christian-Muslim relations within Egypt. However, scholars such as Shain and Barth (2003) suggest that while diasporic activities can have positive effects on the homeland's development, they can also incite domestic or international conflicts. Supporting this assertion, Haddad and Donovan (2013), Østergaard-Nielsen (2003), Rowe (2001), and

Zaki (2010) illustrate that limitations within the homeland's opportunity structure make it challenging for the pressure exerted by transnational political networks to have a significant positive impact.

The subsections below examine the relationship between Coptic diaspora activists in North America and two key entities: 1) the Coptic church and lay Copts in Egypt, and 2) the Egyptian government.

The relationship between diaspora activists and the Coptic church in Egypt

The local community provides a channel of collaboration that acts as an opportunity structure for diasporas to flourish. The absence of these channels reduces the diaspora's opportunities to mobilize. More specifically, diasporas' roles are likely to vary depending on their ties to their co-religious community working on the ground. When they gain and maintain these ties, both sides enter into an effective relationship where they can rely on each

other and work together towards the same goal. However, when these ties are absent, diaspora activists are unlikely to have a direct impact, and their sense of disconnection from the home-country may, over time, lead to demobilization. The mother church considers the political situation of the Copts in Egypt highly sensitive, and the concern is that the meddling of immigrant Copts might have negative consequences. Pope Shenouda and the popes who followed him consistently opposed Coptic political opposition, firmly rejecting any foreign interference in Egypt's internal matters. Moreover, they expressed skepticism towards allegations of widespread persecution of Copts and specifically criticized the efforts of diaspora activists in North America who sought foreign support for the perceived plight of the Copts (Al Banna, 1998; Haddad & Donovan, 2013). Labib (2000) asserts that the Pope's stance aligns with the longstanding position of the Coptic Orthodox Church, prioritizing its autonomy from Western churches and any form of foreign interference.

Similar to the church's stance, a significant majority of lay Copts in Egypt vehemently oppose any foreign

interference. Journalist Labib Hany strongly criticized foreign initiatives, particularly the United States's religious protection initiative, viewing these as a type of cultural aggression that undermines the distinctiveness of Egypt and imposes universal solutions (Labib, 2000). This sentiment was echoed by George Issac, an Egyptian activist and co-founder of the Kefaya opposition movement. He harboured concerns about foreign government involvement, fearing potential risks to the status of Copts and the possibility of provoking a backlash from Muslims. In an interview with the author, activist and writer Saad Michael Saad revealed that most Copts in Egypt do not welcome diaspora intervention, due primarily to the support they receive from President EL-Sisi's government (Saad, 2022). According to 3A, an activist and politician, many Copts are not grateful for such contributions, believing they do more harm than good (3A, 2022). However, other activists, like 13R, an executive at Coptic Solidarity, note that some Copts in Egypt view diaspora activism positively, appreciating the organization's advocacy for their needs (13R, 2022).

Additionally, the fragmented relationship and inadequate communication between Coptic activists in Egypt and North America significantly contribute to a lack of mutual understanding concerning the challenges faced by the Copts. For instance, the Coptic diaspora often emphasizes the notions of “minority” or “persecution” when portraying the Coptic community, employing language that can resonate with the international community and attract foreign attention. For Egyptian Copts, the struggle of the Copts cannot be resolved in isolation and must be an inseparable part of the overall struggle for the rights and aspirations of all Egyptian citizens. Therefore, the narrow demands, which primarily focus on the sectarian aspects of Egyptian society, fail to encompass the broader national concerns like equal citizenship, democratic governance, religious freedoms, personal liberties, education, and employment opportunities that impact the entire Egyptian society.

These views provide insights into the diverse perspectives within the Coptic community in Egypt regarding foreign interference and diaspora

intervention. They highlight a general resistance to external involvement, driven by concerns about cultural aggression, potential risks, and a perceived lack of gratitude for diaspora contributions. However, they also acknowledge that there are differing opinions within the community, with some viewing diaspora activism positively for its advocacy on behalf of Coptic needs. These contrasting viewpoints highlight the complexity and nuance of the relationship between diaspora activists and the Coptic community in Egypt.

### The relationship between diaspora activists and the Egyptian government

The government's lack of support and intense opposition to outside nationals has presented a limited opportunity for the diaspora to engage in homeland politics and compromised the diaspora's overall lobbying abilities. Interviewees noted that the lack of Egyptian government support makes Copt activism more challenging, explaining that Greek,

Lebanese, and Armenian diasporas have experienced more solidarity and standability in their activism as a result of government support. In his 1999 work “Aqbāt al-Mahjar” (Migrant Copts), Magdi Khalil asserts that the Egyptian government’s perception of the Coptic diaspora as a threat stems from two key factors: a lack of understanding of the dynamics of living abroad and its accompanying freedoms, and a strategic inclination to suppress the Coptic diaspora’s voice in order to divert public attention within Egypt, rather than directly addressing the concerns raised by the diaspora (Khalil, 1999).

Up to the early 1970s, the Egyptian government perceived the Coptic diaspora as a potential contributor to the country’s economic growth. However, this perception shifted over time, and the government began viewing the diaspora as a threat to national unity rather than as a partner. Subsequent governments in Egypt framed diaspora activism as an ideological threat aimed at destabilizing Egyptian society and its economy (Elsässer, 2014). Consequently, Egypt’s intelligence apparatus has invested in influencing clergy members and the



diaspora elites to discredit and suppress outspoken Copts and their advocacy initiatives (Botros, 2023).

Conversely, numerous Copts in Egypt advocate for the international claims made by the Coptic diaspora, asserting that diaspora activists have made efforts to engage with Egyptian government officials before resorting to raising concerns with international human rights organizations. Regrettably, these attempts are often unreciprocated, as well as one-sided. The primary issue lies in the government's denial of a substantial national crisis and in minimizing the challenges the Copts have been facing. Consequently, the experience of the Coptic diaspora with the Egyptian government has been discouraging, as the latter's discriminatory policies further exacerbate the problem. In "Aqbāt al-Mahjar," Khalil notes that diaspora activists have consistently sent letters and held meetings with officials and ambassadors for three decades in an attempt to convey their demands to the Egyptian government. However, their efforts have resulted only in verbal promises communicated through diplomats or public figures, with no substantive responses provided.

Khalil further argues the Egyptian government does not engage in meaningful dialogue with the Coptic diaspora but instead expects complete obedience, as engaging in dialogue would necessitate granting the Copts their rights, which the government is not prepared to do (Khalil, 1999, 55).

The government's perception of diaspora activism can be highly unfavourable due to activists presenting a narrative that runs counter to the government's foreign relations objectives. In an interview with the author, 13R, an executive member at Coptic Solidarity, highlighted that Egyptian governments are concerned with their public image and expend significant efforts in cultivating relationships with members of Congress and the State Department, facilitating trips to Egypt to showcase their perspective and bolster their reputation (13R, 2022).

Retaliation poses a significant challenge for diaspora activists in their dealings with the Egyptian government. The relationship between the government and the diaspora appears intricate and is

characterized by suspicion and resentment. Various successive governments have consistently labeled diaspora activism as hostile towards Egypt. They have seen it as an unnecessary and overly politicized form of pressure, viewing it as a potential threat to Egypt's sovereignty. Some have deemed it illegitimate external interference in Egypt's internal affairs, seeing it as a factor that worsens conflicts rather than promoting unity. In extreme cases, it has been portrayed as a conspiracy against Egypt, allegedly orchestrated by its archenemies, Israel and Zionist Christianity (Elnaggar et al., 2019; Labib, 2000; Shain, 1995; Shain & Barth, 2003; Yefet, 2017). Egyptian regimes have employed various mechanisms of transnational repression to undermine, silence, and punish opposition from diasporas, many of them still in use today. These mechanisms include citizenship revocation, imposing limitations on visits to the homeland with potential harassment upon arrival, confiscation of property, and persecution of immediate family members residing in Egypt (Botros, 2023).

The interviews in this study offer perspectives on how the Egyptian government hinders mobilization. For instance, 7G, a lawyer and activist, emphasized the Egyptian political leadership's unfavourable view of external groups dictating how internal challenges should be addressed, particularly when these groups do not reside within the country (7G, 2022). This sentiment reflects the government's resistance to external interference in their domestic affairs. Meanwhile, 13R, an executive member at Coptic Solidarity, pointed out that Coptic mobilization has struggled due to the government's pressure and tactics to silence diaspora activists. Even a seemingly innocent act such as posting on social media can invite increased threats against activism (13R, 2022).

Similarly, 6F, an activist and university professor, stressed the importance of caution and selectivity in representing the Coptic case in the diaspora. This caution stems from the desire to avoid placing their families or fellow Copts in Egypt at a disadvantage (6F, 2022). Echoing similar concerns, 5D, a lawyer and politician, expressed worries about the safety of activists and their families. The release of a list of

Coptic activists worldwide by ISIS in 2012, with a significant number of names originating from Canada, evinces the presence of extremists disseminating such information. Consequently, the fear of retaliation exists both in the diaspora and Egypt, prompting individuals to carefully consider the impact of their actions on their kin in Egypt (5D, 2022).

The threats posed by transnational repression represented a case of the government trying to close down opportunity structures. The fear of retaliation, originating from both domestic and international sources, coupled with the imperative to safeguard their families and deftly navigate professional obligations, creates a complex environment for those seeking opportunities to advocate for the rights and well-being of the Coptic community. The tactics of transnational repression employed by the government serve to stifle any avenues of opportunity. These measures significantly curtail activists' ability to discuss political matters related to their home country with fellow compatriots, whether in person or online. Moreover, the government

deliberately fosters an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, thereby marginalizing minority mobilization and confining it to peripheral exile groups.

Consequently, the diaspora's capacity to engage in homeland politics is curtailed, exerting a negative influence on the nature and character of Coptic advocacy organizations established abroad.

### Challenges Related to the Opportunity Structure in the Country of Residence

The opportunity structure provided by the country of residence also plays a substantial role in determining the diaspora's ability to engage in political activities (Kuşcu, 2012). Democratic states, for example, often foster a climate that supports political mobilization, in contrast to autocratic regimes that typically exhibit skepticism towards civil society engagement (Shain & Barth, 2003). Diaspora activists residing in North America operate in a liberal environment and are more politically empowered than their counterparts in Egypt. They speak about their experiences with

discrimination in ways that Copts in Egypt cannot or simply will not.

However, while Copts have freedom of expression in North America, challenges persist. Can Copts activists build independent Coptic human rights advocacy organizations with levels of solidarity and sustainability that advance their mobilization beyond grievances? In what follows, I examine the factors that hinder or facilitate Copts' efforts to build momentum in the diaspora by scrutinizing the relationship between Coptic diaspora activists in North America and each of the following: 1) the church in North America, 2) policymakers in North America, and 3) other Copt activists in North America.

The relationship between diaspora Copt activists and the church in North America

In the context of diaspora activism and the church, the opportunity structure theory suggests that

collaboration is influenced by the broader social, political, and institutional environment. As an established institution, the church provides a platform and resources for Coptic activists to mobilize and advocate for their community's rights and concerns. The church's networks, infrastructure, and influence can provide opportunities for activists to engage with politicians, government officials, and other relevant stakeholders.

Nonetheless, in parallel to the church's stance in Egypt, the church in North America is reluctant to support diaspora activism. This hesitation on the part of these diaspora churches can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, it stems from the church's aspiration to maintain a distance from independent Coptic organizations that operate beyond its influence. This is driven by the church's desire to uphold a monopoly and exclusive authority over community representation. Secondly, the church actively dissuades diaspora advocacy initiatives that function autonomously, particularly when these organizations adopt political orientations that could potentially disrupt the church's connections with the



Egyptian government. Lastly, diaspora churches exercise caution when it comes to endorsing Coptic advocacy endeavours due to concerns with potential repercussions that might impact any progress benefiting the Coptic community in Egypt. For instance, the individual responsible for the killing of a priest in Alexandria in April 2022 received a life sentence within a notably brief period, something that had never occurred previously. Additionally, there are concerns that vocal criticism directed towards the Egyptian government could potentially jeopardize the granting of permissions for recent church construction initiatives.

The period leading up to President Hosni Mubarak's visit to Washington in August 2009 was marked by significant dynamics within the Coptic community, both in Egypt and in the diaspora. Pope Shenouda, the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, played a pivotal role in shaping the response of Coptic organizations during this time. According to reports, Pope Shenouda had made an earlier trip to the US to discourage Coptic organizations from demonstrating outside the White House upon President Mubarak's

arrival. He later sent Bishop Yoannes, his secretary, and an official delegation to Washington to welcome President Mubarak, presenting an image of church-state cooperation and national unity (Zaki, 2010). This practice has been standard since Pope Shenouda's return from exile in 1985. By discouraging protests, Pope Shenouda aimed to present an image of unity and cooperation between the Coptic community and the Egyptian government.

Pope Shenouda's approach garnered different perspectives within the Coptic community, reflecting the complexity and diversity of the Coptic community's views and aspirations. Some Copts viewed his approach as a pragmatic attempt to maintain stability and protect the interests of the Coptic community within the Egyptian political context. They saw cooperation with the government as a means of securing their rights and protecting their community from further violence. On the other hand, critics believed that the Pope's actions compromised the true concerns and struggles of the Coptic community. They argued that by discouraging demonstrations and potentially downplaying the

Copts' plight, the Pope failed to address the systemic issues faced by Copts, including discrimination and escalating violence. However, a third group perceived that he indirectly supported a subtle activism. Many suggest that Pope Shenouda acknowledged the potential of the Coptic diaspora as a substantial source of support for the Coptic community in Egypt, especially considering the tense relationship between himself and President Sadat in the late 1970s (Haddad & Donovan, 2013). It is reported that he discreetly encouraged diaspora activism through coded messages, instructing priests to participate in demonstrations in cities like Los Angeles and New York.

Similarly, there is a cooperative relationship between Pope Tawadros II and President El-Sisi. Pope Tawadros does not encourage diaspora complaints against the Egyptian government that can misrepresent the Egyptian government, indicating that the government under El-Sisi is dealing with the incidents of sectarian violence in a serious manner. During Pope Tawadros's papacy, the state-church coalition enraged many Copts abroad, as incidents of

violence declined but did not end. Consequently, overseas Copts have begun to release publicity against such violence and against Pope Tawadros II, whom they view as having withdrawn from the fray. Guindy introduced the term “neo-dhimmitude” to characterize the existing counter-culture, which signifies the church’s sanctioned authority to stifle diaspora activism occurring beyond the church’s oversight (Guindy, 2020, 347).

The aforementioned perspectives imply a delicate balancing act for diaspora churches as they navigate between supporting the rights and safety of Copts and avoiding actions that could strain their relationship with the Egyptian government. These viewpoints, in line with opportunity structure theory, propose that while the church can potentially impose constraints and limit activism opportunities for diaspora activists, gaining the support of the Church can provide activists with additional resources and opportunities.

## The relationship between diaspora activists and policymakers in North America

The interaction between diaspora activists and policymakers in North America has had an impact on the mobilization of the Coptic diaspora. However, determining the precise extent of influence that transnational political networks can exert on their host governments is challenging (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). This section focuses on the dynamics between policymakers in North America and the Coptic diaspora in order to dissect the factors contributing to the lack of adequate responsiveness from North American policymakers towards the mobilization efforts of the Coptic diaspora.

Starting with an assessment of strategic alliances and geopolitical considerations, the notion that the US would willingly compromise its relationship with a significant regional ally to address the grievances of the Copts appears improbable. This alliance inherently curtails the influence of the Coptic lobby within North America. For instance, the US is unlikely

to compromise its partnership with oil-producing nations for the sake of advancing Coptic interests.

Furthermore, Egypt occupies a pivotal position as a formidable ally of the US within the Middle East, a role derived from its strategic significance (Durac, 2009). Akladios highlights this stance by pointing out that the Egyptian government rigorously upholds the terms of the Camp David peace treaty with Israel, signed on September 17, 1978. while simultaneously benefiting from substantial economic and military assistance from the US on an annual basis.

Additionally, he explained that the Suez Canal functions as a critical maritime pathway for American warships, and the US is granted essential overflight rights for its military aircraft over Egyptian territory (Akladios, 2020a). This justifies the Egyptian government's allocation of significant financial resources to establish a counter-lobby aimed at countering Coptic activism in Washington.

Another constraint in garnering support from politicians and the general public arises from the

country of residence's lack of recognition of the Coptic plight. Policymakers prioritize issues that hold greater prominence in the media or have more immediate implications for national interests. Additionally, the fact that matters regarding the Coptic diaspora often do not garner extensive media coverage diminishes the likelihood of policymakers dedicating attention or enacting measures in response.

Furthermore, the escalating frequency of violent incidents targeting Copts in Egypt presents a significant obstacle to Coptic activism in North America. 11M, an activist and politician in Canada, organized an event to raise awareness of the situation of Copts in Egypt following the killing of 21 Copts in Libya in 2016. However, fewer participants attended the event due to the increasing frequency of incidents, which made it challenging to gather support. She noted the following: "Organizing events became embarrassing, as we came to realize that politicians in Canada were not inclined to go the extra mile for the sake of the Copts" (11M, 2022). Additionally, maintaining credibility became a

pertinent issue, as activists often concentrate on relatively minor incidents, neglecting to prioritize and strategically address the most egregious violations of Coptic rights. 7G, a lawyer and activist, emphasized the concept of personal capital, suggesting that individuals involved in advocacy work have limited personal resources and must carefully choose which battles to prioritize (7G, 2022). Consequently, it becomes necessity for Coptic activists within the diaspora to adopt a strategic approach, effectively employing their influence and connections.

### Disagreements among Copt activists in the diaspora

Another factor influencing the pattern of diaspora activism is the internal disagreements within the Coptic diaspora regarding the manner in which they choose to reframe and present their claims. Activists strategically assign frames to relevant events to induce a shared consciousness for collective action (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012; Lee, 2017; Pullum, 2014; Tremblay, 2017). Although the vast majority of Copts agree on the need to advocate for religious



freedom in Egypt, they hold different views on several issues, such as 1) how Copt activists should frame their claims, which present the dilemma of equal citizenship over the notion of minority rights; 2) the extent to which foreign external governments should intervene in Egyptian politics; 3) and the strategy and vision of approaching the Egyptian government. These views comprise a significant source of disagreement among Copt activists and intellectuals in the diaspora.

The post-Arab Spring uncertainty in the Middle East and the deteriorating situation of minorities have led many diaspora activists to present Copts as a minority requiring special protection. Advocates claim that religious minorities are in danger of extermination in the Middle East, especially when ISIS was growing stronger. Consequently, it was suggested that the Copts define themselves as a minority to benefit from the opportunity structures and claim special protection from the international community (Mahmood, 2012).

In “Aqbāt al-Mahjar,” Magdi Khalil, an executive committee member of Coptic Solidarity, political analyst, and executive editor of Watani International, argues that the involvement of the international community is crucial. Khalil distinguishes between international intervention and foreign interference, acknowledging the concerns associated with Western interference in Egypt’s internal affairs. Foreign interference relates to historical colonization and resource exploitation, often reflecting a bilateral relationship. In contrast, international intervention is linked to the liberation of colonized nations and involves various actors, such as international organizations, civil society, and international public opinion. Khalil emphasizes that international intervention operates within a pluralistic framework, adhering to international law and UN treaties. He asserts that defending human rights does not undermine Egypt’s position and highlights the alignment between the aspirations of the Coptic diaspora and the liberal factions within Egypt (Khalil, 1999).

Other Coptic activists in the diaspora strongly contest these views and argue, on the contrary, that Copts should advocate for full equality and claim recognition not as a particular minority but only as equal citizens (Ibrahim, 1998). According to 1B, a Coptic priest in Canada, “as Copts, we have a different mentality because Persecution is part of our historical narrative. We are not using the minority and persecution card. Throughout history, our Patriarch never asked for any protection. We ask protection from God only” (1B, 2022). He suggested that Copts should exclusively present their challenges to foreign governments with the aim of raising awareness of the realities they face. 16Y, another Coptic priest in Canada, also noted that Copts have more freedom of expression in North America than in Egypt; as a result, they seek to highlight the Copts’ concerns freely, without asking for foreign protection (16Y, 2022).

The other disagreement among Coptic diaspora activists concerns to the extent of foreign governments’ intervention in Egyptian politics and its potential ramifications. For instance, Michael

Meunier, president of the US Copts Association, actively campaigned in the 1990s to raise awareness among US politicians and decision-makers about the plight of the Copts, seeking their support in pressuring President Mubarak's government (Brinkerhoff, 2005). However, other diaspora activists criticized Meunier's approach and expressed concerns about the implications of congressional pressure. After their 27-day mission to the US, the three representatives of Egypt's Coptic community met with American reporters on June 26, 1998, at the Arab American Institute in Washington. The delegation comprised Youssef Sidhom, executive editor of the *Watani* newspaper, Mounir A. Fakhry Abdel Nour, managing director of the French-Egyptian Society for Food and Agricultural Industries, and Mourad Stino, president of the Tex Consult company. They expressed their community's concern that Congress's passage of the Freedom of Religious Persecution Act could provoke a backlash against the long-established Christian community in Egypt. *Watani's* editor-in-chief Youssef Sidhom, among others, noted that the interference of a foreign power is not required or called for, and that the Christian community would be blamed for permitting the US

government to interfere in Egyptian domestic affairs (Curtiss, 1998).

In an interview with the author, 8I, a politician, stated that, “when we address the Copts’ issue outside Egypt, we have to be careful not to demolish the image of Egypt” (8I, 2022). Saad further highlighted that Coptic advocacy organizations often criticize the government without considering the potential consequences. Additionally, many diaspora activists tend to overlook progress and focus solely on negative aspects. Saad emphasized that President El-Sisi is making efforts towards the inclusion and equality of Copts. He cautioned against generalizations about El-Sisi’s government, in particular accusations of inciting sectarian violence. Saad suggested that it would be more accurate to identify the responsible parties for such incidents, such as ISIS, extremists, the Muslim Brotherhood, or certain elements within the government. He argued that damaging the international standing of the Egyptian government has adverse effects on all Egyptians (Saad, 2022).

According to 11M, an activist and politician, there has been a shift in Coptic advocacy since President El-Sisi took office. The focus has changed from criticizing the military for the Maspero Massacre and raising concerns to accepting the representation of the military by El-Sisi. As a result, the clarity of Copts' advocacy stance has been compromised, leading to a loss of cause and mission for many organizations (11M, 2022).

The third source of discord concerns the strategies and visions for dealing with the Egyptian government. This tension is best exemplified by the split between Michael Meunier, the president of the US Copts Association, and Magdi Khalil, an activist and co-founder of Coptic Solidarity. The two organizations combine a critique of Islamists with calls for full citizenship for Copts. The tension began in December 2005 when Meunier met with Omar Soleiman, the head of the Egyptian intelligence service in Egypt. Meunier's meeting sparked significant criticism from prominent Coptic activists in North America, including Khalil. The meeting was criticized on two main grounds. Firstly, Meunier's engagement with the

head of the Egyptian intelligence service was seen as endorsing the government's perception of Copts as a security concern. Secondly, many activists viewed the meeting as a form of cooptation, suggesting that it indicated alignment with the Egyptian authorities, which had failed to acknowledge their problematic treatment of Copts and remained unresponsive to diaspora activists' efforts to initiate a dialogue (Marzouki, 2016). Khalil emphasizes the importance of transparent and collective interactions and dialogues between Coptic activists and the government in order to foster a consensual agenda (Yefet, 2017). In this context, Khalil, along with other activists, viewed Meunier's involvement as a sign that he had abandoned the diaspora's struggle against the Egyptian government's policies (Yefet, 2017).

To summarize, the mobilization of Copts in North America carries far-reaching implications. It reveals the persistent constraints faced by Copts within Egypt, particularly the entrenched influence of both church and state on political activism, while also pointing to the pivotal role of diaspora communities in advancing the rights and concerns of their

compatriots abroad. By placing local struggles within transnational arenas, the Coptic diaspora conveys the dual reality of authoritarian restriction in the homeland and democratic opportunity in host societies.

A central conclusion of this study is the necessity of establishing independent Coptic human rights advocacy organizations—institutions structurally and operationally autonomous from both ecclesiastical authority and the Egyptian state. Coptic Solidarity provides a striking example of this model of independence. As emphasized in an interview with 13R, an executive of the organization, the group deliberately maintains autonomy in order to hold both religious and political leaderships to account. Its work is firmly anchored in internationally recognized human rights frameworks, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights, thereby placing Coptic advocacy within broader global norms. This commitment to independence from ecclesiastical and state interference secures the organization's impartiality and enables accountability across all actors. By grounding its mission in human rights standards rather than sectarian or political alliances, Coptic Solidarity illustrates the capacity of diaspora-



led initiatives to advance community concerns in consistent, credible, and impactful ways.

Finally, the Coptic experience in North America resonates beyond its immediate context, offering a critical vantage point for examining indigenous and immigrant minority mobilization more broadly. Comparative perspectives reveal how diasporic activism both shapes and is shaped by global governance structures, transnational networks, and shifting opportunity environments. In this sense, the mobilization of the Copts not only reveals the enduring complexities of religious and political life in Egypt but also contributes to wider debates on the ability of marginalized diasporas—including those of indigenous minorities—to influence policy, reframe rights discourses, and assert visibility on the global stage. Conclusively, the trajectory of the Coptic diaspora sheds light on the challenges and possibilities of transnational mobilization and offers insights into the broader dynamics of indigenous minority diasporas in a global context.

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