

Priests fear Egyptian youth will turn away from Church



Two priests with strong ties to Egypt have said they fear young Egyptian Catholics will turn away from the Church because it did not back the protests that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak.

Fr Makarios Isaac, an Egyptian-born priest currently based in Kenya, said: “If we lose the youth in the Church, then we are done.”

Fr Isaac, originally ordained for the Coptic Catholic Diocese of Minya, Egypt, and the former diocesan development director there, said the main Muslim and Orthodox leaders forbade participation in the protests. He said the Coptic Catholic patriarch of Alexandria, Cardinal Antonios Naguib, told protesters to go home.

The priest said he feared young people will “turn their backs on the Church”, and say: “You never stood with us ... you never taught us to stand up for our rights.”

Maryknoll Fr Douglas May, who worked in Egypt for 18 years of Mubarak’s nearly 30-year rule, said he thought “the Christian leaders in Egypt played it safe”.

Fr May, now stationed in Nairobi, said: “I’m afraid that the Church leadership has lost its credibility with the Christian youth over this.” Both priests, who have indults to minister to Coptic- and Latin-rite Catholics, spoke of discrimination that Christians faced under Mubarak’s rule and that of his predecessor, Anwar Sadat.

In interviews with the American Catholic News Service in the days following Mubarak’s February 11 resignation, they said that any permit to do with a Church building – even repainting it – had to be signed by the former president. “We had to wait 21 years to get a permit,” said Fr Isaac. Even after the permit was granted, he said, state or local officials could stop construction for “security issues”.

Fr May, who left Egypt in 2007 but still visits at least twice a year, said that in the town of Dalga, Coptic Orthodox literally worship underground because they have not had a permit for a church for 20 years. In the

same town, a mosque was built next to a Catholic church, and local authorities closed down the church because Muslims complained that the long Sunday liturgies were interfering with their noon call to prayer. He said that, as a foreign priest, he was often called in by the Egyptian secret police, which he said had spies at the Coptic Catholic seminary where he taught. He said police would mention that the bishop was not going to attend a meeting – when no one else knew that – and even repeated back to him things he had said in confidence to four seminarians.

Both priests also spoke of discrimination against Christians.

In the Egyptian army, said Fr May, discrimination against Christians was constant. “There’s a fair amount of conversion” to Islam in the military because of the pressure, he said. Christians are called “mushrik”, which means someone who believes in many gods or is an idol worshipper. He compared it to calling an American “the n-word”.

He said he knew of one army officer who was refused a pen by a colleague when the colleague saw the cross on the Christian’s wrist.

Fr Isaac said that, in the 1970s, two of his brothers were kidnapped by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in an effort to get Muslim prisoners released. His brothers were later freed in a prisoner exchange. He said when he attended two different universities in the 1970s and early 1980s, he was asked if he were Christian or Muslim, because professors could not tell by his name.

“If you were Christian, you would feel it right away,” he said, adding that Christians never got the top grades, even if they were most intelligent.

He said that everyone in Egypt was expecting some sort of explosion, not a fairly peaceful revolution, because there are “not enough jobs, everything’s so expensive”.

He added there is “great hope” about the country’s future – including that whoever leads Egypt will be concerned not to make the same mistakes as Mubarak, “because they can see the power of the people”.

Fr May said he thought it was too early to tell how things would turn out for Egypt’s Christians. “If Muslims and Christians can see that their destinies are linked as Egyptians ... there’s a chance that this could get better,” he said.

Barb Frazee - Catholic Herald