

Mubarak may have planned attack on Christians, Catholic leader says

by John L. Allen Jr, National Catholic Reporter, 23 Feb 2011

A Jan. 1 first bomb attack against Coptic Christians in Egypt which left 23 dead and almost a hundred wounded, widely blamed on Islamic fundamentalists, may have been orchestrated by an official in the former Mubarak regime in order to justify strengthening police controls, according to the head of the country's Coptic Catholic church.

Cardinal Antonios Naguib, the Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria, floats that hypothesis in a new interview with the prestigious Italian Catholic publication *30 Giorni*.

In the same interview, Naguib also warns that “diplomatic pressures, punitive initiatives or economic sanctions” from Western governments against Egypt in the name of defending the country's Christians would constitute “the greatest harm that can be done to the Christians themselves.”

In general, Naguib says the anti-Mubarak protest movement was marked by tremendous solidarity between Muslims and Christians, and is hopeful about the prospects for building “a civil and democratic country based on laws.”

The Jan. 1 attack occurred just a few minutes into New Year's Day, as Coptic Orthodox worshippers were participating in a midnight service at the Alexandria church of Saint Mark and Peter. Two weeks before the bombing an Islamist web site had called for attacks against Christian churches in Egypt, including the church that was struck on Jan. 1, and the Interior Ministry quickly blamed the Gaza-based “Army of Islam.”

President Hosni Mubarak delivered a nationally televised address in the wake of the bombing blaming “foreign fingers” for the attack.

Naguib, however, says there's a long history of a connection between domestic anti-Mubarak agitation in Egypt and violence directed at Christians. In the 1980s and 1990s, he says, Christians were targeted by forces that wanted to bring down the regime, and when that failed, they began to attack the police and government officials.

In light of that history, Naguib suggests, security forces grew accustomed to using attacks on Christians as a pretext to clamp down on opposition movements – an Egyptian version of the “strategy of tension” long associated with police states.

“This has given weight to the hypothesis,” the Coptic Catholic leader says, “in circulation particularly among Christians, that the Minister of the Interior had planned the massacre of Alexandria to justify a strengthening of police controls.”

Naguib suggests that Mubarak's Minister of the Interior, at the time Habib Ibrahim el-Adly, encouraged the attack as a way of proving that “his person was essential for the president and the regime.”

After Mubarak resigned, El-Adly was arrested and is reportedly facing charges of fraud, money laundering and for ordering that security forces fire on demonstrators during the early days of the protests.

The Jan. 1 attack triggered wide international protest, including remarks from Pope Benedict XVI calling for greater protection of religious minorities. That led the Mubarak regime to recall its ambassador to the Vatican, and Al-Azhar University, Egypt's most prestigious Islamic institution, to suspend dialogue with the Vatican.

Naguib blamed "distorted" reporting of Benedict's comments for those actions, saying that Al-Jazeera and other outlets suggested that the pope had called on Western governments to intervene in Egyptian affairs.

Asked about political efforts in the West to suspend economic and military aid to Egypt, as well as other countries where Christians are at risk, Naguib says "this attitude is wrong."

"As Christians in Egypt – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, without differences – we see that any appeal to diplomatic pressures, punitive initiatives or to economic sanctions directed against Egypt, because of events that concern Egyptian Christians, is the greatest harm that can be done to the Christians themselves," Naguib says.

In general, Naguib says the experience of the Egyptian uprising has offered hope for overcoming sectarian divisions.

"I am reassured by the fact of having seen something take place in these days that has not been seen for a long time: a concrete unity among the citizens, young and old, Christians and Muslims without distinction or discrimination," he says.

"Now everyone sees that those who foment divisions and conflicts with other Egyptians on the basis of religious differences actually aim to destroy this unity and to destabilize Egypt."