

## Christian minorities vulnerable as revolution spreads

Country/Region: Middle East and North Africa, Egypt, Tunisia

The overthrow of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak has set pulses racing throughout the world with the revolutionary spirit spreading across Africa and the Middle East. But while the Western media is delighting in this "power to the people" movement, Barnabas Fund is concerned about what the future may hold for Christian minorities in this troubled region.

### Mubarak: "the best of the worst"?



[Protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt](#)  
(Peta-de-Aztlan) / CC BY 2.0

Elections for a new Egyptian government are not expected to take place for at least six months, and until then the country will be ruled by the military council. There are fears that Egypt's largest opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, which this week announced plans to form a political party once restrictions on its activities are lifted, will use its influence to impose a stricter Islamic character on the country.

Though Egypt's revolution has not been Islamic in nature, a poll published by the US-based Pew Research Center a month before the protests broke out revealed that there would be some support for the Brotherhood's agenda. Some 95 per cent of Egyptian Muslims said that it is "good that Islam plays a large role in politics". Worryingly for Christian converts from Islam, 84 per cent said apostates should face the death penalty, although 61 per cent said they were "very concerned" or "concerned" about Islamist extremism in Egypt.

On Tuesday, an Islamist judge was appointed to head the committee drawing up Egypt's new constitution. The military council's choice of Tarek al-Bishry, who has been associated with Al-Wasat, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, has angered those who fear a takeover by the Islamist group. Christians want to see the removal of Article 2, which makes sharia the main source of law and them second-class citizens; this now seems unlikely.

Under Mubarak, Egyptian Christians endured years of suffering, including violence at the hands of Islamists and serious discrimination in public life. But many Christians expect that his overthrow will lead to worse conditions for them - how much worse depending on the extent of Islamist influence. Sameh Joseph, a church worker in Alexandria, said: "He's (Mubarak) the best of the worst. Whoever comes after him might want to destroy us."

### Tunisia's Ayatollah Khomeini?

The Tunisian revolution has been widely credited as the spark for the Egyptian uprising and similar protests in other Muslim-majority states. Although the Tunisians, like the Egyptians, were motivated by economic, political and social concerns rather than religion, an Islamist group is emerging there too as a powerful force as the country looks ahead to elections.

Rachid Ghannouchi, the exiled leader of Tunisia's main Islamist group, Ennahda, returned to the country earlier this month, prompting fears that he may be trying to transform a popular revolt into an Islamic revolution, on the pattern of Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran in 1979.

The revolution that ousted President Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali last month comes amid a growing Islamic fervency among many Tunisians. Christianity is already very restricted in Tunisia, both in terms of the number of Christians and the limitations placed upon them, especially converts. In the event of increased Islamist influence in government, the Church's future in the North African country, which is 99 per cent Muslim, would be even more precarious.

However, Tunisia is currently among the most secular of Muslim states and there is resistance to the imposition of sharia law and the wider Islamist agenda. Because the revolution was not of the Islamists' making, any attempts to Islamise Tunisian society may be frustrated.

Protests have also been breaking out elsewhere in the Muslim world. This week Iran and Bahrain joined the ever-growing list of unsettled countries, which already includes Algeria, Jordan and Yemen. Christians across the region are awaiting the outcome of the current unrest with a mixture of hope and trepidation.