

## Is it Winter or Spring for Christians in Syria?

By **Doreen Khoury**

*In recent months, there has been much debate on the future of minority Christians sects in the Arab world following the popular uprisings. The Maspéro tragedy in Egypt, during which Coptic Christians were attacked and killed by the army, and the resurgence of Islamic parties in the region has led many Christians, especially in Syria and Lebanon, to question whether they will survive the Arab Spring. Many have also questioned the wisdom of regime change in Syria, arguing that the downfall of the Assad regime, long perceived as a protector of minorities, threatens the existence of Christians. But the question is to what extent is the Arab world hostile to Christians? And how wise is it for them to support the Assad regime?*



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Many headlines in the Western press have recently dubbed the Arab Spring as the Christian “Winter”, focusing on the plight of minority Christian sects in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, following the tragic outcome of the Maspéro demonstrations on 9 October 2011. Lebanese Maronite Christian Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai had already begun the debate with controversial remarks on the future of Christians in the region during an official trip to Paris in early September 2011. Rai focused on the Syrian uprising, warning that the downfall of the Assad regime would either lead to sectarian civil war, disintegration of Syria into sectarian mini-states or a fundamentalist Sunni regime. All three scenarios, according to Rai, would be detrimental for the future existence of Christians.<sup>1</sup> The Maspéro tragedy, as well as the apparent Islamisation of the Arab Spring, with the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the strong showing by the Islamist Nahda Party in the Tunisian elections, seemed to confirm his fears.

Rai’s concerns are certainly legitimate, especially since it is natural for minorities to feel insecure during times of upheaval when outcomes are unclear and the nature of future political systems is still unknown. There is always a sense within Christian minority groups that mainstream Muslim cultural and religious norms will be imposed on them. The events leading up to the Maspéro tragedy certainly embody this fear: Coptic Christians were protesting against the destruction of a church in Aswan by Salafists, and were attacked, with up to 27 protesters killed by the Egyptian army.

The Maspéro incident focused attention on Christians elsewhere in the Middle East, especially the Christian sects in Syria who roughly make up about ten percent of the total population. But relations between minorities and the regime are not the same in all Arab countries. While Coptic Christians, as integral to Egypt as Muslims, have been discriminated against by the Mubarak regime, Syrian Christians historically have not experienced sectarian attacks, neither from society or the regime. This has led many Christians, particularly in neighbouring Lebanon, to support the Assad regime against the popular uprising.

<sup>1</sup> See Nicolas Nassif, “What the Patriarch said, and what the French President said,” *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, 17 September 2011, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/21478>

But four main assumptions have to be examined closely and where necessary, debunked: first that Rai’s fears of the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising are shared by all Christians; second, that the uprisings will lead to repressive Islamic regimes; third that the Assad regime has protected Christians from sectarianism; and thus four, that it is a wise strategic choice to support the Assad regime.

### **Do all Christians share Rai’s views?**

In Lebanon, Christians are divided on Rai’s depiction of the Syrian uprising as harmful to the presence of Christians in the region. While Christian leaders in the March 8 coalition, particularly Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, have been vocal in their support of the Assad regime, the March 14 coalition Christians have been highly critical of the regime’s violence against the protesters. These positions reflect each camp’s geopolitical considerations.

Aoun’s alliance with Hezbollah through the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding, is based among other things, on his belief that existence of Christians is guaranteed by a coalition of minorities (between Shiites, Sunnis and Allawites) against the Sunni majority in the region, hence his support for Shiite Iran and the “Allawite” Assad regime.<sup>2</sup> Aoun has been much more direct that Rai in his pessimism towards the Arab Spring and his support for the Assad regime. During one interview with the Iranian Press TV he described the changes and revolutions in the Middle East as a threat to “all non-Muslim minorities, as the existence of Salafists challenges remaining freedom”, and that the fall of Assad will be dangerous for Christians, because the Muslim Brotherhood, believes that “democracy is against Shari’a Law, and that this is worrying for non-Muslim minorities.”<sup>3</sup>

Christian politicians of the March 14 coalition, aligned to the United States and Saudi Arabia, have been wary

<sup>2</sup> For more background on Michel Aoun and the Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah, see the International Crisis Group’s report “The New Lebanese Equation: The Christian’s Central Role.” 15 July 2008 Middle East Report No. 78, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/e\\_new\\_lebanese\\_equation\\_\\_the\\_christians\\_\\_central\\_role\\_english\\_web.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/e_new_lebanese_equation__the_christians__central_role_english_web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “Aoun: Changes in the region threaten Non-Muslim minorities” 23 September 2011 Lebanon Files [http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news\\_desc.php?id=265712](http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news_desc.php?id=265712)

of criticizing Rai directly, largely because attacking the Patriarch remains a taboo. But the leader of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea has frequently condemned the Assad regime's violent reaction to the popular uprising. A recent conference, for example, organized by the Lady of the Mountain Gathering, an NGO comprised of mostly March 14 personalities and other leading independent Christians, addressed the role of the Christians in the Arab Spring, and concluded that Christians should not be passive bystanders in recent regional events, nor should they ally themselves with „fading authoritarian regimes.”

Understanding where Syrian Christians stand vis-à-vis the regime and the uprising is more complex. The regime's ban on foreign journalists entering the country makes it difficult to gauge to what extent Christians genuinely support the regime, or do so out of fear.

On the ecclesiastical level, recent statements by Patriarch Hazim of the Greek Orthodox Church (which represents the biggest Syrian Christian community) indicate that he does not share Rai's outlook on possible scenarios if the Assad regime falls nor his fear for Christians. Because of his base in Damascus, Hazim's political statements are usually ambiguous and open to interpretation, but two statements are noteworthy. On 21 October, during a radio interview, he said that although he shared Rai's fears of fundamentalists taking power in Syria, he also refuted the argument that minorities supported dictatorships, criticizing the notion that „Christians defend their existence at the expense of freedom and human rights.”<sup>4</sup> Following the Orthodox Antioch Conclave on 27 October 2011, he said that „the Church cannot stand helplessly by amid oppression and discrimination from which the peoples and groups are suffering.”<sup>5</sup> Mount Lebanon Greek Orthodox Bishop George Khodr has said that although Christian Copts in Egypt have recently experienced sectarian violence, the same cannot be said for Christians in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Interestingly, he notes that the Church is in constant contact with Christians in Syria, who have not been

subject to sectarian pressure, even in cities like Homs and Hama which have witnessed mass protests.<sup>6</sup>

Syrian Christian activists have also criticised Rai's linking of the fate of Christians to the Assad regime. Intellectual and dissident Michel Kilo, has criticized the Maronite Patriarch for his statements, calling for the use of calm language, despite legitimate fears over the current situation. On 17 September a statement by Syrian Christian activists and intellectuals condemned Rai's interference in internal Syrian affairs, and „stirring up sensitivities between citizens of all sects”. Affirming that Christians are an integral part of the Syrian nation and do not need protection, they also rejected the Assad regime's ploy in branding itself as the protector of Christians, as the Syrian crisis is political and not sectarian, and that the protests are a popular civil revolution.<sup>7</sup> Supporting the popular uprising or not is also a generational issue. While the older generation seems to be wary of the protests, the Local Coordination Committees (grass-roots organisations of the uprising) contain many young Christian activists who are frustrated with the conservative stance of the church leaders.<sup>8</sup>

### **Has the Arab Spring been Islamised?**

Claims that the Arab Spring has been Islamised and that democratic gains have been reversed have to be put in perspective. First of all, the Muslim Brotherhood is by no means the biggest component of the Syrian opposition, and as its leadership has been outside Syria for 30 years it is difficult to assess its popularity on the ground. Secondly, the uprisings are overturning not only political systems but also old mindsets and imposed ideologies. While many Arabs are religiously devout, it does not necessarily mean that new Arab generations will accept ideological repression, especially as the re-

<sup>4</sup> „Hazim: Syria unlikely to witness a civil war.” 22 October 2011, The Daily Star <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Oct-22/151948-hazim-syria-unlikely-to-witness-a-civil-war.ashx#axzz1bUQ2iSui>

<sup>5</sup> „Hazim stressed importance of Orthodox Antioch unity.” 28 October 2011, The Daily Star <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Oct-28/152450-hazim-stresses-importance-of-orthodox-antioch-unity.ashx#axzz1cNPbMhy9>

<sup>6</sup> „We are not afraid for the Syrian Christians and there is no pressure in them even in cities like Homs.” 27 September 2011, Al Rai newspaper, <http://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=300045&date=27092011>

<sup>7</sup> Paula Asteeh, „Rai is the head of Christian minority in the East and his words are not logical or acceptable.” 17 September 2011 Asharq Al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11981&article=640776&search=%E3%ED%D4%C7%E1%20%DF%ED%E1%E6&state=true>

<sup>8</sup> See „Christian activists impatient with the religious leaders defending the regime & call for organizing a meeting against the official church positions”, 9 September 2011 Asharq Al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11973&article=639530>

volution opened the public sphere to free expression and mobilization.

The Assad regime, like most Arab dictatorships, also quashed any religious or cultural identities, primarily to establish tight control over society. So it is not surprising that when repression is lifted, these identities seek to openly express themselves, culturally and politically. These manifestations include Islamism.<sup>9</sup> Burhan Ghalyoun, leader of the Syrian National Council, has noted that Muslims are essentially Syrian citizens and have the right to be fully represented; „the new Syria cannot be ‘new’ if it discriminates between Muslims and non-Muslim and in any case, during elections the Syrian people will decide who rules them.“<sup>10</sup>

And Islamic parties performing well in elections (like the Tunisian Nahda party) does not automatically mean that Islamic repression will dominate post-transition Arab countries. According to Lebanese political analyst Ziad Majed, achieving power through elections means that Islamists become part of the political system, open to criticism and protest if they do not perform well in office or attempt to reverse newly acquired freedoms as „people have discovered the power of the street and of mobilization.“<sup>11</sup> Quoted in a recent Alarabiya.net report, Egyptian activist George Ishak says: “The current climate in the region and worldwide is not favorable to extremist currents... I don’t see any problem if the Islamists gain power through free and fair elections... “People will then judge them by their action.”<sup>12</sup>

### Has the Assad regime protected Christians from sectarianism?

In the current uprising, the Assad regime has succeeded in convincing some Syrians, especially minorities, that it is the only alternative to chaos, by highlighting the risk of civil war and stressing society’s fundamentalist and sectarian elements. This rhetoric has worked with three

groups who fear Islamist rule: minorities, the business class and the urban middle-class.

The Baath regime, as all repressive ideological political systems, constructed a top-down ordering of society, creating divisions by fostering direct bilateral ties of loyalty with these groups and convincing them that their survival is dependent on it. As Damascus-based Syrian cultural researcher Hassan Abbas writes, the regime manufactured these social groups “as a support base and an intermediary through which to protect the regime.”<sup>13</sup> Because of the continued support of these groups, the regime has been able to claim that it has not lost legitimacy. During the uprising, the regime heavily relies on the *shabiha*<sup>14</sup> and the state media to portray the uprising as dominated by two feared entities: foreign conspiracy and Salafists.<sup>15</sup> This not only intimidates people, but isolates these social groups from mainstream Syrian society.

Moreover, the regime’s main line of defense, that it installed a secular state which protects minorities and does not distinguish between sects, is also open to scrutiny.

Syrian civil activist Maan Abdul Salam says that the regime organized annual conferences on ‘brotherhood’ between Muslims and Christians. By propagating the idea that the two sects should tolerate each other it deliberately enhanced feelings and fears of sectarianism. If the regime was genuinely concerned with eliminating sectarianism, it could have instead passed a civil personal status law<sup>16</sup> which would link citizenship and belonging to the state and not to sect or religion.<sup>17</sup>

Thus even as the Assad regime presented itself as a protector of the Christians, it also succeeded in instilling a sense of their isolation from mainstream society. The argument propagated by the Assad regime, and supported by some Christian leaders, that the regime should be maintained because it guarantees social cohesion must be seen clearly for what it is: Blackmailing religious

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Grenier, “the price of democracy in the Middle East” AlJazeera.net 17 October 2011 <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/10/20111017122127469546.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Ghalyoun: We understand Rai’s fears but the solution is in democracy and not a coalition of minorities.” 10 September 2011 El Nashra <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/393872>

<sup>11</sup> “The Term Islamist doesn’t mean anything anymore” Interview with Ziad Majed DW-World.de Deutsche Welle 27 October 2011 <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15491387,00.html>

<sup>12</sup> With Arab revolts, region’s Christians mull fate, 03 October 2011 Al-Arabiya <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/03/169930.html>

<sup>13</sup> Hassan Abbas, “The dynamics of the uprising in Syria” 19 October 2011 Jadaliyya <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2906/the-dynamics-of-the-uprising-in-syria>

<sup>14</sup> State sponsored thugs, much like the Egyptian *baltagiyya*.

<sup>15</sup> Hassan Abbas, “The dynamics of the uprising in Syria” 19 October 2011 Jadaliyya <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2906/the-dynamics-of-the-uprising-in-syria>

<sup>16</sup> i.e. family issues, like marriage, divorce and inheritance are administered by the state, and not by religious courts

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Maan Abdul Salam, Syrian civil activist on 26 October 2011.

minorities into supporting the regime. As Abbas writes, Syrian Christians are the original inhabitants in the country and not a foreign entity in need of protection, and a repressive Islamic rule is not the only alternative to the Assad regime.<sup>18</sup> And the irony, notes Nasser Weddady of the American Islamic Council, is that „when the Assad regime says it is protecting Christians, this sets up a false equivalency: because at the end of the day, this is a dictatorship, and the Baath regime is an equal opportunity torturer: if you oppose them, they will attack you.“<sup>19</sup> The regime has been brutal to any form of Kurdish opposition for decades, and it has imprisoned Christian and Alawite dissidents, such as Michel Kilo, and recently Louay Hussein.

Here the Maspero incident can be tied in, because it showed that just as regimes can protect minorities, they can also choose to discriminate against them, as it was state authorities, namely the army, who were responsible for the attack on the Copts, using “mob sentiments to stave off pressures from liberal and Islamist tendencies.”

<sup>20</sup> And there is always the danger that if the regime becomes increasingly cornered, both regionally and international, it could resort to instigating sectarian violence itself, and pinning the blame on Islamists or foreign conspirators.

### **Finally, can Christians, on a strategic level, afford to side with a dictator and adopt a negative view of the Arab Spring?**

Several analysts have warned of the negative repercussions if Rai appearing to send a message to Syrian protestors that Christians back a dictator against their demands, and thus committing them to such a controversial stance. While the Assad regime is not targeting Christians, and basic religious rights are respected, if Christians are perceived to identify too much with the regime, there is a possibility of a backlash against the community if the regime falls.<sup>21</sup> On the regional and in-

ternational levels, supporting an increasingly isolated regime might also have negative consequences.

Christians also cannot limit their view of the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising in particular to a primarily narrow sectarian perspective based on Christian existential fears, whereby the only outcomes they can conceive of are conservative Islamic states hostile to religious minorities. Although a sectarian civil war in Syria cannot at all be dismissed, it is not inevitable that the Lebanon and Iraq scenarios of sectarian strife will unfold in Syria. A recent report by the International Crisis Group on the Syrian uprising, for example mentions in its conclusion, „Syrian society has proved remarkably able to resist the temptation of sectarian strife. Sectarian feelings have surfaced strongly during the crisis, but so have kinship ties, local identities and an unprecedented sense of national unity.“<sup>22</sup>

Thus Rai ignored another probable scenario in which Syria could transition to a freer, democratic and just system, which is fair towards minorities. Syrian opposition leader Bourhan Ghalyoun has constantly reiterated the opposition’s guarantees of a civil state, a national pact between representatives of sects and religions and his belief that the success of the revolution depends on the involvement of all segments of the Syrian population so that all are represented.<sup>23</sup>

Fear of repressive Islamists does not only apply to Christians, as moderate Muslims and secular liberals, both who are by no means a small minority in the region, also feel threatened and have an equal stake in opposing the rise of more extreme forms of Islamism. Thus, Christians as an integral part of Syrian society cannot afford not to support Syrian uprising. Ultimately they have to look forward, because by isolating themselves from the uprising, they risk losing out on playing a leading role in a future Syria.

<sup>18</sup> Hassan Abbas, “The dynamics of the uprising in Syria”, 19 October 2011, Jadaliyya.com <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2906/the-dynamics-of-the-uprising-in-syria>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Nasser Weddady, outreach director at the American Islamic Congress on 25 October, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> “A Rant in Exasperation”, The Moor Next Door Blog, 24 October 2011, <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2011/10/24/a-rant-in-exasperation/>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Antoine Haddad on 19 October, 2011. See also: Michael Young, “Patriach Rai, you’re wrong.” NowLebanon.

com, 9 September 2011, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=309727>

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide” Middle East/North Africa Report N°109 – 13 July 2011, p. 31. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VI%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> “Ghalyoun: We understand Rai’s fears but the solution is in democracy and not a coalition of minorities.” 10 September 2011 El Nashra <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/393872>