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**COPTIC CONGRESS OF ASYUT (6-8 March 1911)**

Meeting attended by 1,150 delegates acting on behalf of 10,500 Copts, with Bushra Hanna as chairman, and Tawfiq Doss as secretary.

The congress was convened against a background of controversy and contrary to the wishes of Patriarch CYRIL V (1874-1927), as well as the moderate elements in the community. The government reluctantly granted permission for the meeting to be held, providing that members refrained from any action that might lead to a breach of the peace.

Cyril V expressed his concern in a statement on 2 March, “Whilst it gives us pleasure to see that a number of Copts have agreed to work together for the welfare of the community at large, we would ask our beloved children to refrain from building up a huge gathering in Asyut, which could result in agitation and render them liable to criticism. We would, therefore, urge everybody to exercise extreme prudence, wisdom and circumspection.”

The metropolitan of Asyut, Bishop Macarius, held a different view. “With all respect and obedience to Your Holiness,” he said in a telegram to the patriarch, “I would assure you that there is no cause for concern. No personal or public damage is likely to result, the main objective of the Congress being the forging of stronger ties among all Egyptians through the safeguarding of the legitimate rights of Copts. I do not feel the slightest apprehension of its being held in Asyut.”

This anxiety was also reflected by the choice of the congress chairman and its speakers. Bushra Hanna was chosen in preference to the extremist Akhnukh Fanus; and the speakers were mostly nationalist figures such as Murqus Hanna, Sinot Hanna, and Fakhri ‘Abdelnour. Even Akhnukh Fanus, known for his inflammatory articles in the Misr and al-Watan newspapers, showed remarkable restraint in his speech. To emphasize this sense of nationalism, the inaugural session started with...
the national anthem, and the Egyptian flag flew on the top of the building.

Article 10 of the statute drawn by the General Assembly stated that “speakers may not raise political or religious issues. Should they do, they shall first be cautioned, and, if they persist, shall be dismissed from the Assembly.”

This fear for unrest was due partly to the sectarian character of the meeting and partly to the state of tension prevalent in the wake of the assassination on 21 February 1910 of BOUTROS GHALI, the only Christian prime minister to date. With such sensitive topics eliminated, the congress proceeded to discuss matters of mainly social and financial character.

This found apt expression in the words of Murqus Hanna: “Members of the Coptic community have gathered here in as much as members of the medical or legal profession would gather together—because they have something in common to discuss, and a desire to strengthen their bonds and deepen their sense of nationalism.”

The main questions discussed by the Congress were:

1. Allowing Coptic students and civil servants a holiday on Sunday. Akhnukh Fanus suggested that if government employees worked an additional 45 minutes each day, offices could be closed on Sunday. Equally if students stayed a full day on Thursday, schools could be closed on Sunday.
2. That ability should be the only criterion in filling posts. Tawfiq Doss asked for the removal of restrictions banning or limiting the number of Coptic employees in certain government posts. (Al-Mu’ayyad, a Muslim newspaper, of 12 March 1911, argued that although Copts formed only 6 percent of the population, the number of Muslim employees in the Post Office, the Railways, and the Ministry of Finance did not exceed 10 to 20 percent, and that Copts had an
overwhelming majority in key positions in the provinces.)

3. Murqus Hanna called for proportionate representation in parliament, referring to the Belgian system that enhanced the rights of minorities by allowing two votes to citizens paying higher taxes and three votes to holders of higher qualifications. Religious considerations, he argued, should be totally disregarded in the election of parliamentary candidates.

4. Habib Doss recommended that village schools be open to all Egyptians, Muslims, Copts, and Jews alike, without discrimination, or alternately, that the 5 percent tax levied for this purpose on Copts be used in financing private schools for Copts. The latter recommendation was opposed by Murqus Fahmi, as it would lead to a split in national unity.

5. Murqus Fahmi called for equal financial treatment by the treasury for Coptic and Muslim amenities, and urged for the establishment of personal status courts for the Copts.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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