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Violence in a nation facing change; Analysis

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TO OUTSIDERS, Egyptian Muslims and Copts are more or less indistinguishable, but they are easily identified to one another, by their names and by such modern motifs as bumper stickers and mobile phone ringtones.

Before the 1952 revolution led by Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Copts comprised some 20 per cent of the population and controlled nearly half its wealth, but many left for the West after Nasser's socialist policies saw much of their assets taken into state hands.

Today they are still the largest Christian community in the Middle East, but hold just three of the 508 seats in Egypt's parliament.

Despite accounting for some of the country's most prominent businessmen and ministers, including Egypt's richest man, Neguib Sawiris, and the minister of finance, Youssef Boutros Ghali, sectarian relations are poor.

Within lower and middleclass areas, deep tensions can often be found just below the surface. The Coptic community is intermittently exposed to low-level violence, but yesterday's bombing was the deadliest attack since 1999, when dozens died in clashes in southern Egypt.

But an Iraq-style sectarian war is unlikely in Egypt as the vast security forces have an iron grip, enjoy the full support of the West and have ended a violent insurgency by Islamic extremists in the past, albeit by fairly brutal methods.

Faced with terrorist attacks, the security forces typically crack down with dragnet arrests of dozens or hundreds of suspects, amid accusations of human rights abuses.

From the rulers' point of view, the biggest danger of rising tensions is a drop in tourism, one of the bulwarks of Egypt's economy. This may be why the interior ministry has, as usual, quickly blamed "foreign elements" without any apparent evidence.

This could yet prove correct, as historically al-Qaeda has not had a strong presence in Egypt. Yet with social deprivation so widespread, it is not hard to imagine a local person prepared to commit such acts. The other danger is that in such a repressive country, the kind of protests that followed this attack could dovetail with anti-government feeling, leading to civil unrest, especially as after 30 years of rule by President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt faces

a change at the top and no one yet knows who the new ruler will be.

Generally, the West has viewed Egypt as manageable. Because the country has been so stable for so long, and so dependent on Western aid and trade, it is assumed any government will have to toe a pro-Western line. With a population more than double that of any other Arab country, Egypt is viewed as too big to fail, and the US could never countenance the principal opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, coming to power. But as in Iran in 1979, sometimes political will trumps economic wisdom. Though the risk during the expected transfer of power later this year remains small, attacks such as this one only add to it.

Hugh Miles is an author and journalist specialising in Egypt. He is the author of *Playing Cards in Cairo*. "The security forces typically crack down with dragnet arrests

