

Electing Coptic Patriarchs: A Diversity of Traditions

Saad Michael Saad* and Nardine Miranda Saad**

The method of electing the Patriarchs of the Coptic Orthodox Church derives its importance from the great honor and responsibility of the Pope of Alexandria. He is the successor of St. Mark the Evangelist, the spiritual leader of the largest Christian minority in the Middle East, and the overseer of a church that is becoming universal by its spread worldwide.

Did the elections of the 116 patriarchs succeeding St. Mark adhere to one particular tradition, or were diverse and evolutionary? As this study will show, the elections were straightforward and simple at times. A popular departing patriarch, for example, would name his successor and consensus was achieved overnight. At the other extreme, contestants and their supporters could prolong the process for years, manipulating every piece of tradition that could support their claim, and employing connections with rulers to promote their candidate. The worst of such maneuverings occurred in the process of electing Anba Kyrillos III (1235-1243), which took 19 years to complete.¹

* Saad Michael Saad works for the aerospace industry in Los Angeles and has been Adjunct Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago since 1985. Earlier, he taught at Ain Shams University and the Military Technical College, both in Cairo, Egypt. President, Society for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California. Visiting Committee, University of Chicago Divinity School, 1993-99. M.A. in Religious Studies, 1987. Fellow IEEE, 1997. Frequent contributor to newspapers and magazines in USA and Egypt.

** Nardine Miranda Saad is a Microbiology and Molecular Genetics student at the University of California, Los Angeles.

¹ Subhi Y. Labib. "Cyril III Ibn Laqlaq," in Aziz S. Atiya ed. *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 3:677.

This study is, therefore, of immense importance. It primarily examines all election methods of the past, categorizes them, and identifies principles and traditions that guided them. Besides shedding light on the past two thousand years and learning the lessons of history, a principal goal of this paper is to examine the origins and justifications of the present election law enacted in 1957, and test their validity by criteria derived from biblical, apostolic, patristic and historical traditions.

Methodology of Research and Categorization

By reviewing the records available on the 117 Patriarchs, we were able to group the types of election methods into nine separate categories. Table 1 shows a summary of the categorization results including the list of patriarchs elected by each method. The methods employed ten times or more are: Election by general consensus, election by the presbyters of Alexandria, and casting of lots among final nominees. Six other methods were sporadically employed between three and seven times each. Evidently, these six methods do not represent a tradition, but as will be shown, a pragmatic response to circumstances. In addition, there were patriarchal elections that combined two methods. We listed those under the method that was more decisive than the other. For example, Anba Peter I was initially named by his predecessor, but more decisively confirmed by the presbyters of Alexandria.²

We could not find convincing indication of the election methods of twenty-seven patriarchs, either because of our limited resources or because such records do not exist. The chief sources we consulted were the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, the Coptic Book of Saints, known as the *Synaxarion*, and *History of the Patriarchs* by Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa'. Often, biographies of the patriarchs did not mention how each was elected, and if mentioned the story was commonly simplified.

Election by General Consensus

² Donald B. Spanel and Tim Vivian, "Peter I" *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 6: 1944.

Of the ninety patriarchs with known method of election, thirty-five were ordained after a general consensus was achieved. In the sources, we find those elections described using the following generic statement: “the bishops, presbyters, and lay leaders unanimously chose (name).” The details of the process were not usually recorded, and as expected, they varied from one patriarch to another.

For the contemporary patriarchs Yoannes XIX, the 113th patriarch (1928-1942), Macarius III, the 114th patriarch (1944-1945), and Yusab II, the 115th patriarch (1946-56), consensus was formalized by an electoral college composed of prescribed categories of voters, including bishops, priests and lay leaders. The chosen patriarch won by a landslide in all three cases.

Election by the Presbyters of Alexandria

The presbyters of Alexandria played the decisive role in the elections of at least sixteen patriarchs, most of which occurred in the earlier part of the church’s history. Until Demetrius I, twelfth patriarch (189-231), the bishop of Alexandria was the only bishop in the whole of Egypt. He presided over a council of twelve presbyters, and when he died, the twelve elected a successor from among themselves, and the other eleven laid hands on him.³

Although Peter I, the seventeenth patriarch (300-311), was recommended by his predecessor Theonas (282-300) while on his deathbed to the clergy and laity present, the assembled presbyters approved the choice by a laying on of hands.⁴ This passage has been cited as evidence for papal election by the presbyters of Alexandria up to the election of Alexander, the nineteenth patriarch (312-326), whom the bishops chose.⁵

For centuries after that, even in the presence of Egyptian bishops who “laid hands” and ordained the bishop of

³ Mounir Shoucri, “Patriarchal Election,” *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 6: 1911.

⁴ B. Evetts ed. “History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria” *Patrologia Orientalis* I.4 (Paris, 1948), 383.

⁵ Spanel and Vivian, 6: 1944.

Alexandria, the priests of Alexandria still played a major role in electing the patriarch. That role gradually lessened after the patriarchal residence was transferred to Cairo during the eleventh century.

Casting Lots among final nominees

When the eleven apostles cast a lot to determine whether Matthias or Joseph should be numbered with them,⁶ they set a precedent for some Coptic patriarchal elections. There were ten incidents in which a lot was used. The earliest use of casting lots was for the third patriarch, Anba Abilius (85-98), who was ordained only some fifty years after the apostles cast their lot for Matthias.

In the case of Anba Yoannes IV, forty-eighth patriarch (775-799), it is mentioned that a casting of lots followed exasperation after the supporters of three candidates would not budge. For Anba Mikhail V, seventy-first patriarch (1145-1146), the casting of lots was conducted in the absence of a clear choice. For all the patriarchs of the period 1660-1745, numbered 102 through 105, (Matthew IV, Yoannes XVI, Peter VI, Yoannes XVII) a lot was cast among final candidates after placing the names on the altar during a liturgy.

Most canon law scholars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including Awlad al-‘Assal and Ibn Kabar, recorded the casting of lots as a matter of accepted tradition especially when finalists are of equal stature. The current law, discussed later in detail, formalizes the casting of lots after a complex selection process that mandates three names in the drawing.

Appointment by predecessor

There are seven cases of definite appointment by a predecessor. In addition, there are seven other cases in which the predecessor’s recommendation had a degree of influence on the election, as with Anba Peter I mentioned earlier. Often, the

⁶ Acts 1:26.

patriarch at his deathbed would recommend his seat to the person he thought was best fit. Anba Peter II, the twenty-first patriarch (373-380), was designated by his formidable predecessor Anba Athanasius (326-373) to succeed him on the throne of Alexandria.⁷ In a one-of-a-kind case, Anba Anianus, the second patriarch (68-85), was ordained by his predecessor, St. Mark himself.

In other cases, a deathbed wish by the patriarch would bring a candidate forward, who would then be considered among other nominees. Also, many candidates were the disciples of the previous patriarch. Because of their close relationship, they gained high visibility and experience in papal affairs. Such circumstances gave them an advantage over other candidates and helped a general consensus to be made. For example, Anba Benjamin I, the thirty-eighth patriarch (622-661) served Anba Andronicus (616-622) during his papacy, which paved the way for his election and succession to the patriarchate.⁸

Strong Intervention by government

Since the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and continuing after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640 AD, confirmation of the election of the patriarch by the ruler of Egypt has been a matter of official formality.⁹ Although the government usually left the church to have its own autonomy, it frequently extended its authority in the matter of election to a variable degree.

There are six elections of patriarchs in which the government or a ruler had a definite influence on the outcome of the election, if not outright imposition. For example, Anba Dioscorus II, the thirty-first patriarch (515-517), was first installed under the auspices of the government authorities, and

⁷ Aziz S. Atiya, "Peter II," *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 6: 1947.

⁸ C. Detlef G. Müller, "Benjamin I," *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 2: 375.

⁹ Shoucri, 6: 1911.

then had a more proper ecclesiastical enthronement.¹⁰ The worst of all scenarios was that of Anba Kyrillos III, the seventy-fifth patriarch (1235-1243) known as Ibn Laqlaq. Because his candidacy was rejected by almost all bishops, clergy, and archons, he resorted to political maneuvering, gift giving in the caliph's court, and to his connections with Ibn al-Miqat, the Coptic chief scribe of the sultan. Eventually he prevailed, but the process took nineteen years, during which the patriarchal seat remained vacant.¹¹

Election by Laity Acting Alone

In five cases, the archons of the church elected the patriarch. Not surprisingly, they often chose a layman or deacon, rather than a monk or priest.

Election by Bishops Acting Alone

There were only four cases in which the sources mentioned that the bishops elected the patriarch with no indication of participation by clergy or laity. The details of these elections, however, were not described. Possibly, the participation of clergy and laity was overlooked by the primary or secondary sources. The elections under this category are those of Anba Alexander, the nineteenth patriarch (312-326), Anba Damian, the thirty-fifth patriarch (569-605), Anba Yusab II, the fifty-second patriarch (830-849), and Anba Kyrillos V, the 112th patriarch (1874-1927). While this method is certainly a rare occurrence in the Coptic Church, it has become the dominant tradition in the Roman Catholic Church where the College of Cardinals meets in isolation to choose the next pope.

Divine Appointment or Vision

The Coptic Church considers St. Mark the Evangelist as her first patriarch. He is, therefore, the perfect example of divine

¹⁰ E. R. Hardy, "Dioscorus II," *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 3: 915.

¹¹ Subhi Y. Labib, "Cyril III," 3: 677.

appointment. There were three other cases in which a kind of divine vision was the determining factor in electing the new patriarch. The most famous example is of Demetrius I, the twelfth patriarch (189-231). The story is that Patriarch Julian (180-189), toward the end of his reign, had a dream in which an angel of the Lord told him that the man who would bring him a bunch of grapes the next morning would be his predecessor. When Demetrius, a farmer, found some grapes out of season, he took them to Julian on his deathbed and soon after was consecrated.

The nomination of Anba Kha'il I, the forty-sixth patriarch (744-767), was made following a dream by a deacon. The deliberating bishops, clergy and archons in Alexandria considered his candidacy because their earlier deliberations on other names could not procure unanimity.¹²

In the case of Anba Benjamin II, the eighty-second patriarch (1327-1339), a prophecy by St. Barsum al-Eryan (died 1317) supported his nomination. Thus, there was no opposition from the clergy or the laity.¹³

Coincidence!

Some elections just seemed to be determined by chance. In two cases, after the electing council interviewed a candidate and found him unsuitable, they chose his disciple instead. In a third case, during the election of the sixty-fourth patriarch, news reached the still undecided electing council in Alexandria that a rich merchant donated money to the ruler, al-Hakim bi Amr Allah, to secure a decree appointing him as patriarch. A poor priest, acting as a servant to the electing council, walked into their meeting room carrying an urn, then stumbled down the stairs. When the urn did not break, the bishops saw in this a miracle and a sign for them to elect him. The bishops hastened to consecrate this priest, who became Anba Zacharias (1004-

¹² *ibid.*, p. 1410.

¹³ Subhi Y. Labib, "Benjamin II," *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 2: 377.

1032), before the merchant arrived from Cairo with the caliphal decree.¹⁴

Discussion of the Current Law

The current law was decreed by the Presidential Act of 3 November 1957 after formulation by the Holy Synod and the General Community Council (*Majlis Milli*). It is a sophisticated combination of several of the above traditions including consensus formalized by an electoral college and the casting of lots. The candidates are democratically nominated and elected throughout the process. The law was used in the elections of Pope Kyrillos VI (1959-1971) and Pope Shenouda III (1971). Complete translation of the law is given by Otto Meinardus,¹⁵ and the highlights are summarized here.

In the nominations, a candidate receives initial consideration only if endorsed in writing by a minimum of six members of the Holy Synod or twelve members or past members of the General Community Council [Art. 4]. Then, a nomination committee determines a semi-finalist list of a minimum of five and a maximum of seven candidates, after reviewing their qualifications and any objections made by a member of the electoral college against them [Art.6]. An electoral college consisting of approximately 1000 Copts ranks the semi-finalists. The electors are selected from among the priests of Alexandria and Cairo, members of the Community Councils in all dioceses, former and present Coptic ministers and members of parliament, and a similar constituency from Ethiopia [Art. 9]. Finally, after a special Eucharist, a lot is cast among the top three finalists. A random young child chooses one of three papers in an envelope that was placed under the paten during the liturgy [Art. 18].

Since its inception, the law was met by strong resistance specially from the Sunday School movement, so strong that its

¹⁴ Subhi Y. Labib, "Zacharias," *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 7: 2367.

¹⁵ O.F.A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1970), 128-138.

implementation took about 18 months while the patriarchal seat was vacant. Objections were made to the requirements of candidates' age to be above forty, their monastic life greater than 15 years, and for allowing bishops to be nominated.¹⁶ Treating these objections is outside the scope of this paper because they are not related to the method of election.

Some also argued against the casting of lots and its use in elections. However, even in a secular context, that is, without prayer or God's direct intervention, the casting of lots mitigates dispute among parties, and soothes the bitterness that comes with election. In Proverbs 18:18, it says that, "Casting lots causes contentions to cease, and keeps the mighty apart." Imagine only using a popular vote, and there is a winner by only a few votes. The recounting of the votes would continue, challenges in civil courts would stall the election, and the legitimacy of the winner would always be questioned.

It is noteworthy that about half way through the 1971 patriarchal election, a group of Coptic lawyers filed a lawsuit in civil courts charging that the letters of the law have not been accurately followed. The judge ordered the election committee to repeat the process. After repeating the process, the same group once again filed a second lawsuit challenging the process. They withdrew their case only after the casting of lots was made and public sentiment overwhelmingly supported the winning nominee, then Bishop Shenouda.

Conclusions

We have examined the elections of the 117 patriarchs of the Coptic Orthodox Church during her history of almost 2000 years. We identified and categorized the methods of election, and sought to discover the principles that guided them and the traditions that evolved. We found that 27 cases are not known, but further research may resolve some of those cases. We welcome input from readers for the benefit of making the findings more complete.

¹⁶ Shoucri, 6: 1911.

We have found that patriarchal elections followed a diversity of traditions, and presented that diversity in its theological, historical and political contexts. We attempted to reflect on the positive and negative impacts of this diversity, then critique the current law decreed in 1957.

We have shown how these methods changed with time, how some followed or formed a historical trend, how certain methods merged together to respond to emerging crisis, and how some methods came and went then came back during 2000 years.

One of the benefits of this study is to demythologize the election process. Many authors have supported one tradition over the others, or claimed that a particular tradition is the only truth, or was predominant in “the glorious ages of the church.” But we have shown the dimensions and varieties of traditions and how far each has established itself, positively or negatively, in the conscience and the practice of the Coptic Church.

The high recurrence of a particular method is clearly evidence of an established tradition that was carried through many generations. A low recurrence indicates that a tradition could not take root, the method was a temporary reaction to the circumstances of the time, or was a bad practice that did not survive the scrutiny of history.

Remarkably, consensus in some form or another is a common thread among most of the 90 known patriarchal elections and is therefore an important and legitimate principle-based tradition. This affirms the democracy of the Coptic Church. Casting of lots, in contrast, occurred only ten times. But because it is grounded on biblical and apostolic traditions, confirms legitimacy in closely contested elections, mitigates partisanship, and follows a well-balanced consensus, it has become an accepted, even revered tradition. In our opinion, therefore, the current law is the most appropriate and advantageous for our time and age.

No laws, however, are perfect. Continuous improvement and adaptation, guided by the Holy Spirit, should always be

sought. Some improvement, e.g., may happen if each local church or diocese elects a layman delegate and a priest delegate to the electoral college. This may not require a change in the Presidential Act, only the guidelines of selecting certain categories of the electoral college. The benefit of this proposal is to broaden consensus in the church and give the general population the opportunity to participate in the election of their pope. In fact, we all can influence the process to some extent by our prayers and open dialogue.

Table 1 – Tally of Patriarchal Elections

	Category of Election Method	Sequence	Patriarchal Order
1	General Consensus	35	20, 22, 24, 28, 36, 37, 43, 45, 47, 51, 53, 54, 55, 61, 62, 67, 68, 69, 72, 73, 76, 80, 81, 83, 87, 95, 100, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 115
2	Presbyters of Alexandria	16	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 34
3	Casting of Lots	10	3, 48, 71, 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 116, 117
4	Predecessor Appointed	7	2, 21, 38, 39, 49, 50, 88
5	Strong Intervention by Government	6	27, 31, 33, 41, 75, 78
6	Laity Acting Alone	5	44, 70, 74, 77, 101
7	Bishops Acting Alone	4	19, 35, 52, 112
8	Divine Appointment or Vision	4	1, 12, 46, 82
9	Chance	3	42, 63, 64
	Unknown to Authors	27	
	Total	117	

Bibliography

- Atiya, Aziz S., ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia*. 8 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1991.
- el-Masri, Iris Habib. *The Story of the Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt*. Cairo: Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, 1987.
- Haas, Christopher. *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Meinardus, O. F. A. *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1970.
- Evetts, B. ed. "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria" *Patrologia Orientalis* I.4. Paris, 1948.
- Synexarium* (Coptic Book of Saints).