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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1310)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, May 1, 2012, is our 34th meeting.

[English]

Today we are discussing the persecution of the Copt community in Egypt. We have Mohamed Lotfy with us as a witness. He is a researcher with the Middle East and North Africa program in the international secretariat of Amnesty International. As well, of course, our good friend Alex Neve is back, safe and sound, from South Sudan.

In order to give ourselves enough time—they are on a very tight schedule—we'll go right to the presentation, followed by questions. When the presentation and the questions are over, I'm going to dismiss our witnesses and ask members to stay while we deal with a little bit of committee business.

So without further ado, let's ask our witnesses to begin.

Thank you.

Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon, subcommittee members. It's always a pleasure to be in front of you. I'm certainly delighted to be able to bring such an esteemed and valued colleague as Mohamed Lotfy with me today.

As you know, he is here from our international office, where he leads Amnesty International's work on Egypt, which, as you can well imagine, especially over this last year and a half, has been no easy task. But he has, along with colleagues at our international office, spearheaded some remarkable human rights research and advocacy and campaigning efforts that have marked our response to Egypt's unimagined and remarkable year of human rights change.

I know you'll enjoy hearing his insights and experiences. He was on the ground in Egypt itself for about six months last year at various points. He's also been on the ground again already quite a bit this year, and he'll be heading back to Egypt in about two weeks' time in advance of the presidential elections.

He has both a good sense of how things have been unfolding over the last year and a half and certainly a view and assessment to share

with you with respect to current conditions in Egypt. I will hand things over to him to share some reflections of thoughts with you.

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy (Researcher, Middle East and North Africa Programme, International Secretariat, Amnesty International): Thank you very much for inviting me to come to the Parliament of Canada to speak on human rights in Egypt and to give you my assessment and Amnesty International's views on the current situation in Egypt.

In the last year and a half, the country has witnessed some historical events, leading to a lot of expectations for development and improvement of the human rights record of Egypt, which has been grim under Mubarak, and continues to be grim under the military council that is ruling Egypt currently and since Mubarak stepped down in February 2011.

During the uprising, along with a number of other colleagues, we were trying to identify whether police and riot police have been using lethal and excessive force against the Egyptian protesters in the squares and near police stations where they have been protesting across Egypt. We were also looking at the violations by the military itself during those 18 days that changed the face of Egypt. We have come to conclusions around lethal use of force by the police and riot police that was illegitimate and unjustified and where there was no immediate need to safeguard life. It is important to point to that element.

As you know, Mubarak is on trial. The ruling in the Mubarak trial is expected on June 2. This is one of the very hot issues where victims and the families of the victims are going to want to see justice. So far they haven't seen the truth coming out of that trial. We don't want to jump to conclusions as yet, and we'll be able to comment on the trial after it has ended.

Other violations have continued during the past year and a half: torture by the military forces themselves, by the military police, but also by the Ministry of Interior and in prisons. We have been documenting torture under Mubarak for a very long time. I am sad to say that during the last year and a half there are levels of severe pain inflicted by the military on detainees known to be protesters. There are some new phenomena, like virginity testing of female protesters and degrees of sexual harassment against female protesters, witnessed in December last year that we were not documenting in the past.

The level of violence against protesters has remained similar to the pattern that existed under Mubarak's time. Riot police continue to use excessive force, using U.S.-made tear gas canisters to fire in a disproportionate way on protesters who don't represent a danger, requiring such an amount of tear gas, and shot at with shotgun ammunition, mostly produced in the U.S. and shipped to Egypt after the uprising and after Mubarak left power.

This is on the policing side. You might also be interested, as I understand, in the violence that occurred on October 9 in front of the Maspero state television building. This was one of the largest protests that the Coptic community has organized to ask for the end of discrimination and for equal treatment of all Egyptians. This protest was crushed, as you know, by killing 27 protesters. Most of them, 26, were Coptic, one was Muslim, and one soldier was also killed. Most of those killed were killed by bullets. A number of them were killed by being run over by armoured vehicles, driven, we believe, by the military.

● (1315)

The process of the investigation has been just as non-transparent as many other investigations of many protests in the past. The victims of those protests continue to await justice. They cannot see it coming from a military court.

I have to say that the process of investigation has been very complicated. The case was initially referred to the military judiciary. Today there are three officers from the military who are on trial for involuntary homicide for driving those armoured vehicles in the crowds. That's the charge they are facing, but nobody is charged for the killings with live ammunition. Those who were actually investigated in that respect were protesters themselves, and they were initially investigated by the military judiciary and then referred to an emergency prosecution, a civilian judicial power with exceptional powers under emergency law. Later on, that civilian process was referred to an investigative judge, and the process has pretty much stopped so far.

All defendants have been released. We're in the situation where we have two processes in parallel, a trial of three officers in the military judiciary and an investigation that continues until now at the level of the civilian judiciary.

I have to tell you that the lawyers of the victims have withdrawn from the military judicial process, from the military trial itself. They cannot see justice coming out of such a process. The military have proven that they cannot punish or hold to account people among their ranks. They have no access to old case files; the lawyers can only see the testimonies of the defendants themselves, and they can see no justice coming out of a case that is looked at by two parallel judicial investigations.

They have put in a number of demands as lawyers and representatives of the victims who were killed in the Maspero protest. Their main call is for a new, impartial civilian investigation into what happened in Maspero. They are asking for this investigation to be conducted by an impartial body that would have the power to summon officers and military men and military leadership to come and testify about their role in the orders given to those armoured vehicles and army to disperse that protest with lethal force. They have also asked for investigation into the involvement of

state TV in inciting public opinion against the Coptic population. Indeed, during the killings, a state TV presenter made a live call to the public to interfere to save the Egyptian army, which is a way of inciting the general population to attack the Coptic protesters, and indeed, many Coptic protesters were attacked by extremists around Tahrir Square. Thank God, nobody was killed, but there were a lot of injuries.

● (1320)

This is one of the incidents where protesters were killed. There were many that followed that one. In Mohamed Mahmoud Street, over 40 people were killed in November. In the December protests in front of the Prime Minister's cabinet, 17 people were also killed. In February of this year, at least 16 people were killed near the Ministry of Interior, and in Suez near the police directorate in the city of Suez. There is a pattern of killing of protesters and excessive use of force that doesn't just apply to the Copts.

A real change in the human rights record of Egypt requires some drastic reforms of the security sector and some courageous decisions from countries that support the Egyptian police, such as the U.S., which continues to send tear gas and shotgun ammunition to the Egyptian authorities. Amnesty called for an embargo on those shipments, those ships of shame, as we call them, that have continued to provide the Egyptian authorities with the tools to repress the calls for non-discrimination and the calls for real, genuine change.

At the level of the current political situation, presidential elections are to start on May 23, in the first round. A number of political parties that we had approached before the parliamentary elections in November have made pledges to respect human rights.

I was able to meet a number of political parties, and the major ones, to get their commitments to what Amnesty sees as the main human rights issues in Egypt. These are: lifting the state of emergency; ending secret detention and torture; upholding the right to freedom of expression and association; providing fair trials to everybody; holding to account people who are suspected of having committed grave crimes under the rule of Mubarak, including torture; realizing economic and social rights for the most poor; ending forced evictions in Egyptian slums and ensuring genuine participation of the local communities in putting forth plans of development for slums; non-discrimination as a principle applied on the basis of religion, race, language, or gender; protection of women's rights; and abolishing the death penalty.

These were the ten points contained in our Amnesty manifesto, which I lobbied to political parties participating in the elections in November. Lots of them have committed to those points. Nine political parties have actually signed our manifesto, only two unreservedly. A few of the more liberal parties have agreed to all the points, except the abolition of the death penalty. And a couple of parties with Islamic backgrounds, including the Salafist Al-Nour party, which came second in the elections, have agreed to all the points except protection of women's rights and abolition of the death penalty.

The Freedom and Justice Party, which is the largest party in Egypt, has not signed the manifesto and has not given us any feedback, despite repeated demands to obtain pledges from them about their organization. We can see from their performance in parliament that they have been progressive on some civil and political rights, limiting the powers of the military tribunals to try civilians, for example, and trying to introduce a definition of torture that would encompass all forms of ill treatment. But on the other side, there is more to do in terms of rights of association and protection of women's rights. Some statements have been particularly worrying, for example, reducing the age of marriage to 14 years for girls and allowing female genital mutilation.

Now the presidential race has started with thirteen candidates, and some of the candidates belong to that political current of political Islam, where we have some worries around non-discrimination, especially on the basis of gender.

• (1325)

Other candidates have represented parties that we have approached who have been supportive of our manifesto for human rights changes. Amnesty met a number of the candidates previously, before they were presidential candidates, and has an open dialogue with a number of them.

Just to end on the presidential elections, there is a mounting fear of violence and attacks against protesters. Indeed, some protesters were attacked in the last couple of days near the Ministry of Defence. With the political situation, we foresee that there could be some questioning around the results of the elections, especially given that the electoral committee itself is immune from actually appealing the results of the elections, legally speaking and according to the constitutional declaration. There is a fear around questioning the results and losing trust and credibility in that committee.

The electoral committee itself is headed by the same people who have spearheaded the attack on the U.S. NGOs in Egypt, and were blamed, for the wrong reasons, for interfering in judicial matters by allowing foreign workers to leave Egypt. So there is a lack of credibility and trust in that body from the general public—for the wrong reasons, but it exists and threatens the integrity of the presidential elections.

I have to come back to the attacks on the Copts again. I mentioned the protests. There were a number of attacks on the Coptic community and churches. The most recent ones were the reason behind the attack in Maspero. A church was demolished in the south of Egypt. The Copts tried to seek repairs and a change of that policy and were not able to obtain it by peaceful means. They were actually attacked by the military police for asking for non-discrimination, not only in life in general in Egypt, but also in allowing them to build and repair churches with rights equal to those of the rest of the citizens of Egypt, namely by amending the presidential decree number 291/2705, which limits the chances for Christians to actually repair old churches and also puts as a condition for building new churches the approval of the president, which is not a condition for building mosques.

There were attacks that happened in 2010. A drive-by shooting on January 6, 2010, at a church south of Egypt led to the death of about 20 people during the sermon. After the Maspero protest in 2011, the

government tried to contain the anger of the Copts by sentencing to death the man who was on trial for that first drive-by killing of 2010, and he was executed last year. So the death penalty, which Amnesty opposes, has been used as a way to appease, in a way, the Coptic community. This is not a solution that we can accept.

There are some root causes for discrimination and a lack of protection for the Copts during their sermons on several occasions, which has led to violent clashes in some neighbourhoods—

• (1330)

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Lotfy, but we intended you to have a 10-minute presentation, and we're now at 21 minutes. I'm going to ask you to please summarize in about a minute or so, and then we'll go to questions.

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: I'm done.

The Chair: Excellent.

All right. Given the amount of time we have left, we're going to have five-minute question and response periods. We'll start with Mr. Hiebert and then go to Mr. Marston.

Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you.

I appreciate your being here, and I look forward to hearing some up-to-date and more recent information about what's been happening there.

I'll start with a big question. Overall, do you think the human rights situation in Egypt has improved or gotten worse since the fall of the Mubarak regime?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: We have the tendency to make comparisons between what happened...or the human rights record of Mubarak's 30 years of rule and after Mubarak left. In our public statements we have often compared the two periods. We either say it has been worse or it has been more of the same. We have rarely said that it was better. So my answer would be, at best, that it has remained similar.

Mubarak did not try 12,000 civilians over such a short period of time before military courts. Military courts are unfair by nature because they are not independent and impartial and cannot provide a fair trial as a tribunal. Judges are actually officers from the military and are under the influence and the structure of the hierarchy of the Ministry of Defence, which is also ruling the country. That number of unfair trials did not happen under Mubarak over 30 years, but it happened under the military council over less than a year and a half.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Okay.

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: Torture has continued. Mass arrests have continued against protesters. Killings of protesters have continued, as I have described. The same techniques by the central security forces, the riot police, have been.... It's more of the same, and therefore we assess that at best the situation has remained the same.

The political ground has been opened to more inclusion of other political forces, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, and open to political parties to register and to compete in parliamentary elections and presidential elections. So the political scene might look more plural and open; however, in terms of the track record of the ruling military council, it has been, as I said, more of the same at best.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Since the recent parliamentary elections, has there been a change, not in the regime but in the elected officials, the parties, and their presence? Has there been a change? Are they upholding the rights of minorities and Coptic Christians?

There was talk about amendments to the constitution.

Can you give us an update on where the Parliament is heading in terms of these issues, and are they going to be taking a stand to protect these minorities or are they letting this continue?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: The short answer is no, there hasn't been improvement on that side. The parliament is itself on strike at the moment because it is in a sort of wrestling situation with the military council. The parliament wants to blame the government for not fulfilling the demands of the public, and the government sees itself as an interim government that is going to leave very soon anyway.

You are in this situation where there is a political struggle between the ruling military council supporting the actual current government, and the parliament, which tries to put all the blame for failing people's expectations on that government, asking for the government to leave.

We haven't seen many changes from parliament. Parliament started functioning on January 23. It has tried to establish a constitutional committee to write the Egyptian constitution. However, this committee hasn't been inclusive. It doesn't include all of the political sections of society and the political spectrum. Therefore, it lost credibility very quickly in the streets in general, and eventually as a constitutional committee it was disbanded by an administrative court decision.

The main function of the parliament was to establish the committee that was going to draft the constitution, and it has failed in doing so. It has also failed to meet some of the expectations that you mentioned, like equality between all Egyptians, non-discrimination, protection of minorities, but also economic and social rights for the ordinary Egyptian. All of those expectations are still unmet, until now.

•(1335)

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have for that question.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Lotfy, I appreciate your testimony. Having firsthand information like this is very, very valuable to this committee.

It strikes me that the world community was somewhat naive. We had a situation where the removal of a leader was called a regime

change, and they left all the other folks who did the dirty work pretty much in place.

I was in Saudi Arabia 33 years ago when I first came across conversations about female mutilation. It's shocking that it is still.... I guess we were deceived into believing that Egypt was more progressive than it actually was.

In your testimony you talked about the fact that there was dialogue with all political parties. Did you have a sense coming from that dialogue that they were prepared to abide by international law and uphold it?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: I think most parties I have met or have feedback from on the manifesto for change have accepted international law as an obligation that has to be fulfilled, whatever form of government comes next.

One of the Islamic parties has put in question this whole framework of human rights and international obligations and has questioned the credibility and legitimacy of treaties adopted or signed under the rule of Mubarak. Indeed, one of the conventions most attacked in that respect is a convention on the elimination of discrimination against women. A number of parties I have met from an Islamic background have questioned Egypt's adherence to this convention, and they have actually suggested they would try to withdraw from the convention.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Is there a rise in actual fundamentalism compared to what was there before?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: It's difficult to say, to be honest. In my view, the democratic processes that started after Mubarak left, in terms of opening the political system to include all political factions, have diminished the tension that existed between the different spectrum of political Islam and the political system itself.

A lot of the formerly detained political prisoners were released, and some of them had belonged to jihadi and Islamist groups, armed groups. Those have been able to form political parties now and run in the parliamentary elections, and they are represented—

•(1340)

Mr. Wayne Marston: If I could jump in just for a second, would you have any particular recommendations as to what Canada and our Parliament could do to aid the cause in Egypt, to help it become more progressive?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: One of the recommendations that we think is important for Canada to pursue is the freedom of expression and association. We think this is one of the spheres that may be affected by military rule, but also by the mounting force of conservative views of Islam that would forbid some ways of talking or broadcasting or speaking by everybody.

Most recently, there was a ruling of three months in prison against one of the famous Egyptian actors, Adel Imam, for movies that he actually did in the nineties and in the beginning of the year 2000.

It is important to amend the penal code to actually remove all articles that criminalize freedom of expression.

I mentioned association as well. There is a new association law being discussed in parliament. The government proposed a law that would basically nationalize non-governmental organizations, meaning kill them all by making all employees in such NGOs actually in the state, as if they were state employees, and putting in place impossible requirements to operate freely from government interference.

This law has fortunately been fought in parliament by civil society and also by the Muslim Brotherhood, and it was eventually withdrawn.

There are two drafts at the moment. One draft is proposed by civil society itself and one is proposed by the Muslim Brotherhood. It's important that both of them feed into a discussion that would guarantee freedom of association and independent NGOs operating in the country, without banning foreign funding to such NGOs and without interference from the government over registration or allowing the government to dissolve such NGOs. That's whether it's on the basis of security grounds, as the current military likes to call it, or on the basis of moral grounds, as some political parties from political Islam would like to call it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sweet, you're next.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the spirit of what Mr. Marston started with, certainly it's easy to feel a little bit discouraged when there was so much hope. Thank you very much for your testimony, Mr. Lotfy.

Can you tell me if the Freedom and Justice Party is essentially the Muslim Brotherhood?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: The Freedom and Justice Party is a political party that was established and is in a way the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Mr. David Sweet: They were the party that did not sign a manifesto?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: They have not given us any feedback on the manifesto.

Mr. David Sweet: Does the Freedom and Justice Party intend to run...are they running a presidential candidate?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: There is a presidential candidate running in the election on behalf of the Freedom and Justice Party and he has a very decent chance of winning.

Mr. David Sweet: Could you tell me if the military is still using state TV to target minorities like they did with the protest you mentioned in your opening comments?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: I have to say that we, as Amnesty, haven't been assessing the performance of the state TV all the way through, but I'm sure many Egyptian NGOs have been watching carefully the performance of state TV. They are calling for this body to be completely independent so that such incidents as in Maspero don't repeat.

It has to be said that private channels also did broadcast incitements against the Coptic minority, but they also spread a sort

of smear campaign against human rights NGOs in general and U.S.-based NGOs. Human rights NGOs in general were stabbed in the back in many ways by being called plotters against the country, trying to divide Egypt or menace its sovereignty, divide the country.

Some commentators have even spoken of weapons and drugs being found in some NGO locals. There is a real smear campaign that has been ongoing for a long time against civil society, and that's not just state TV; it's also some private channels.

● (1345)

Mr. David Sweet: We see this repeated so often in tyrannous regimes: whenever the heat gets too hot for them, they just find another enemy outside the sphere of the argument at play, and they deflect all the pressure that the general populace, the average civilian, has with the regime.

In all of this, then—and I know I'm asking for your opinion—after the presidential elections, what is the likelihood that the military is going to step away and allow parliament and the president to operate? It sounds like every aspect of administration and judiciary and policing is basically run by the military. Is there any hope that they're finally going to let parliament work, let the elected president work?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: It's obviously a political analysis that I need to give that might not be an Amnesty comment as such, but there are very serious doubts about the military handing genuine power to a civilian-elected parliament or president. It is assumed among analysts in Egypt that the military would remain a key political actor, if not an actor with a veto power almost over the government and the president's power. There might be a handover of power to a civilian rule in form, but in substance it is to be expected that the military council will still have a strong say over many aspects of political life in Egypt.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, I don't have any more questions, but certainly the international community should have really grave concerns about the fact that nothing is changing. In fact, if anything, the military seems to be frozen onto power, and even those parties that are represented are not wanting to say that they're going to stand by human rights, and specifically women's rights. I'm terribly concerned.

The Chair: I agree.

Mr. Cotler, go ahead.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to welcome the witness. It's a pleasure to have somebody with your experience and expertise before us. I want to take up an issue that arose from some of the answers to the questions.

You referred to the 12,000 prisoners in the post-Mubarak era, actually more prisoners in the post-Mubarak era than in all the years of Mubarak. I don't want to sanitize Mubarak on this issue. One of the first political prisoners was Maikel Nabil, whom Amnesty adopted as a prisoner of conscience. This relates to your other comment about the importance of freedom of expression, because basically his freedom of expression was criminalized. Having said that the army and the people are no longer of one hand after first referring to them being of one hand, he was tried and convicted before the military tribunal of insulting the Egyptian military. Happily, after 120 days of a hunger strike, which he survived, he was released.

It so happens that Maikel Nabil is a Christian Copt. He's not a practising Christian Copt, but I have two questions, the first to which I think I know the answer but I'd rather get it from you. Was the fact that he was a Christian Copt part of the reason why he may have been targeted by the Egyptian authorities? I don't think so, but it's a question I would ask.

The second question is, did the fact that he was a Christian Copt account for the less than what might have been widespread support for his release? I did not sense that within the Egyptian populace there was the kind of support system for his case and cause as there might have been.

Those are my questions on that issue. If there's time, I'll put another question to you.

• (1350)

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: To answer your first question, we agree with the fact that he is a Copt, although perhaps not practising, but I don't think that played into getting him arrested for what he said or wrote and then being tried militarily.

Indeed, he is not the only prisoner of conscience. There were other people arrested before he was and also after that. For example, earlier I mentioned the actor. He's not in prison because he still can appeal the decision; he's out on bail.

But that is just to say that the system is there to crush dissenting views and opinions. Without a change and without serious amendments to the penal code, Copts and Muslims—and anybody—can indeed find themselves in prison for expressing their views against human rights violations, but also for generally expressing their views about social, religious, and economic phenomena in Egypt in general.

To answer your second question about the sympathy towards Maikel Nabil, I think Maikel Nabil was sentenced very early on when a lot of people still believed that the military were indeed one hand of the people. It took a long time to demystify the simplistic view of the position of the military council. This might account for some of the lack of sympathy towards Maikel's case in the very beginning. That's my view of it.

I think Maikel has gained a lot of confidence and is coming out stronger from this case. He is currently pursuing his work to actually end forced conscription into the Egyptian army, to allow conscientious objectors not to be recruited into the army. He has come out of prison stronger than before and remains a noticeable activist in Egypt.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Do I have more time?

The Chair: Actually, you're out of time.

Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for your time and your presentations.

The treatment of Coptic Christians in Egypt has been an issue of particular concern to many residents in my riding for some time now. In December, the subcommittee heard from Alex Neve, the secretary general of Amnesty International Canada, on the persecution of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt.

I understand that the Egyptian military and the security forces have killed more than 100 protesters in the past five months. These protesters were, for the most part, peaceful. They were demonstrating and chanting. In particular, of course, there was the gruesome Maspero incident, where the Egyptian security forces used military vehicles to literally run over Coptic Christian protesters.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called for reform of the security forces and an end to the impunity they enjoy in dealing with protesters. Has any progress been made in the security forces upholding the right to peaceful assembly and in policing demonstrations in line with international standards? In your view, how will recent political developments in Egypt impact the religious minority communities?

My other question is about testimony the subcommittee has heard relating to forced conversions of Christian children in Egypt. Do you believe such practices occur? If so, could you explain why forced conversions would occur? That is something that is really very disturbing.

• (1355)

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: On the first question, whether there have been changes in the way the police and the riot police operate, I think it's fair to say that there hasn't been genuine will, whether from the military council or certainly from the government, to drastically reform the tool of repression that Mubarak has been using against political opponents and against the people in general.

Torture continues in some police stations, but also there are some cases of death in custody in prisons. Protesters have been tortured and ill-treated in prisons by the military, by the police. To give you an anecdote, one of the protesters from the 6 April movement, one of the pro-democracy movements, was detained in February after protests in Cairo in February 2012. When he was transferred to the prison south of Cairo, he said he was told, "Welcome to Guantanamo". That's just to tell you how the impunity and the immunity that the security sector is benefiting from so far, from the violations that continue to occur, is not going to push security agents or workers to respect human rights.

On your second question, about development in the region, I understand this as the mounting forces of political Islam, perhaps, and if this is affecting Copts or...?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Are the political developments in Egypt impacting the religious minorities there? That's what I want to know.

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: Yes, it is definitely worrying to the Coptic community in Egypt, although I don't want to speak on behalf of that community. It's a large and diverse community that has many ways of putting forward their own cause and demands. Some of them would prefer to remain campaigning at the local level because they would obtain better results this way. Some of them would like to internationalize their case and put peer pressure, government pressure, on them. So we have to bear this in mind when speaking globally of the Coptic community.

I think it's fair for Amnesty to say that the Coptic community feels threatened, or at least some members of it feel threatened, from the mounting discourse against them, against their freedoms: their freedom to worship, to meet, to assemble at mass on Christmas Eve and New Year's. The track record of the security forces shows that they are not providing protection. I think it's the obligation of the state to protect a community from attacks by individuals and non-state actors. That responsibility is the state's.

On forced conversions of Christian children, I haven't personally heard of that. Amnesty has not researched the matter, so I don't want to say yes or no on whether it's happening or not. It may be happening in individual cases, but the question is how much of a system—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): I'm going to have to ask you to wrap that up. We're a minute over on Ms. Grewal's time.

Monsieur Jacob.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here this afternoon.

Mr. Lotfy, if I understand correctly, the army has near-total control over Egypt's Coptic community. Do the rest of Egyptians stand behind the aspirations of the Coptic community, and acknowledge that it is a community that is part of Egypt's history and culture?

• (1400)

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: First of all, I think the army has control, has power over the whole country and all Egyptians, not only Copts. Regarding the second part of your question, whether Copts have sympathy from the rest of the people, I would say that there have been a number of attempts to divide Muslims and Copts in Egypt. There have been several sectarian attacks in certain neighbourhoods, poor ones in general. There is tension between communities in some villages. That being said, we are far from reaching a point where the two communities no longer tolerate each other. There is a great deal of respect between the two communities. They understand that they share the same fate and the same destiny. They demonstrate together,

in fact, and some political parties... The Freedom and Justice Party even included members from other parties who are Copts on its voters lists. It is state repression that pushes things to such a point that communities feel threatened and turn inward to protect themselves from others. The 18 days during which we saw national unity against repression were the best demonstration that this country is united and lives in the spirit of the people.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: I have a question related to the one I just asked. Given that control, what position should Canada take toward the Egyptian army? What can Canada do to encourage Egypt, to urge it to respect and protect the rights of the Coptic minority?

Mr. Mohamed Lotfy: Canada, like several other countries that have a very respectable human rights record, is seen as such in the world, but doesn't necessarily have the political authority to impose an immediate economic change. However, Canada has the authority, the moral credibility so to speak, to be able to talk about human rights and teach lessons to other countries on them. There is a lot to say to and discuss with Egyptian diplomacy within that framework. I invite you to read the *Agenda for Change* for Egypt that we published immediately after Mubarak left power. The document has a large number of recommendations concerning human rights in Egypt, including the end of discrimination, and allowing the construction of churches for Copts. It also recommends the end of discrimination against officials within the Egyptian state structure where, in general, Copts are underrepresented, as is the case in some sectors of security, for example.

We think it is very important, for reasons of faith in human rights and for diplomatic reasons, that the interlocutor of Egyptians be on solid ground if it is to teach them about human rights. We have seen how difficult it is to address the issue of human rights with the Egyptian government, to prove to it that there are violations and to get it to recognize them. One of the methods the Egyptian government uses to avoid that is to tell us that other countries do the same thing or something similar. It just looks for excuses by using what is done in other countries to justify its own violations.

• (1405)

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Jacob.

We want to thank both our witnesses today. This completes the questions from the committee. We are very grateful to you both for coming and making the time to bring your expertise to us. Thank you.

Committee members, I'm going to suspend now. We're going to go in camera and carry on with some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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