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For Egypt's Coptic Christians, No Easy Choice

By Elizabeth Arrott

CAIRO - Egypt's minorities are looking with wariness at their choices in the second round of the nation's first post-Mubarak presidential election. Coptic Christians are one of those groups.

It's not easy being Christian in Egypt, a minority among the Sunni Muslim majority. But some times are worse than others. For Amal Beshara, the first moments of 2011 were as bad as they come.

She was at a New Year's church service in Alexandria. Her husband, Magdi, left a few minutes before the end.

She says she heard the explosion when they were still inside. Amal asked what happened and was told, "there are bodies scattered everywhere."

Her husband was severely injured, later succumbing to his wounds. He was one of 23 people killed in the attack.

The government accused Islamic militants of the blast, part of a long line of anti-Christian attacks. Copts blamed the government for not protecting them, some going as far as to say Interior Minister Habib el Adly was involved as part of anti-Islamist machinations.

Amal says she heard el Adly was behind the bombing, but notes the case has still not been solved.

Within weeks of the blast, a revolution swept that government from office. But now, a year and half later, Amal is being asked to choose a new president -- either an Islamist or a member of the old government.

The Coptic schoolteacher says she is afraid - afraid the old guard candidate will perpetuate the old government's ways, and afraid the Islamists will persecute Christians.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi has promised an inclusive Egypt. The last prime minister under the old guard, Ahmed Shafiq, vows he will boost security.

Amal Beshara's son, Antwan, who held his father as he lay dying, had hoped for a third way.

He had wished there would have been a candidate of the revolution, someone with no ties to the past. He wanted leftist Hamdeen Sabahi, but is resigned to the candidates running.

It is a hard choice, but Antwan, Amal and a majority of Copts are backing Shafiq. His side may have failed to protect Christians, but for the most part, is not the side doing the attacking.

Professor Said Sadek of the American University in Cairo says Copts are understandably afraid.

"If you have some of those fanatics all the time targeting them, how are you going to protect them? And, we have many experiences in Egypt of minorities leaving the country because of political conditions. Look what happened to the Egyptian Jews," he said.

Sadek says his Coptic friends are weighing if they too will leave. Not Amal. Egypt is where her husband is buried. It is her country. Despite everything, she wishes it well.

She says regardless of who wins -- "whether it is the old regime or the Islamist" -- she hopes it will be good for Egypt and that there will be peace.