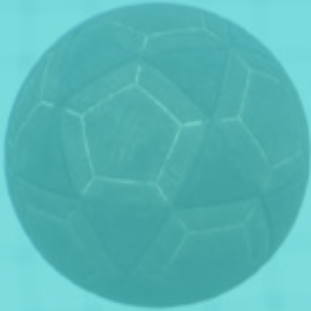


DISCRIMINATION AGAINST

COPTS IN EGYPTIAN SPORT CLUBS



END
DISCRIMINATION.

SUPPORT
#CopticAthletes

By Magdi Khalil for Coptic Solidarity –
June 15, 2018

*This report has been sent to the FIFA officials directly, and submitted online via the new **FIFA complaint mechanism**.*

Copts have been struggling with widespread, comprehensive and systematic religious, governmental and societal discrimination, which extends to all aspects of life in Egypt, including sports and soccer. During the past half-century, an infinitely small number of Coptic footballers – no more than 6 – have managed to join top flight soccer clubs. Some of those have spoken out about the rampant religious intolerance and the difficulties they have encountered. For instance, former Coptic footballer Ashraf Youssef told a newspaper that his teammates refused to eat with him simply because he is Christian ⁽¹⁾. There are currently 540 players in the top-flight soccer clubs in Egypt, and that number includes only one Coptic footballer. The Egyptian Olympic Mission to Brazil in 2016 was completely devoid of Copts, and the same applies to the Egyptian National Team at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Not a single Copt can be found in either the main team or the reserve, and it follows that there are no Coptic sports commentators anywhere in official Egyptian media outlets or in private Muslim-owned media.

Coptic Solidarity has filed a formal complaint with FIFA in 2016 to investigate the widespread sports and soccer discrimination against Christians in Egypt. This Complaint prompted many Christians to speak up about the significant religious discrimination in soccer, which amounts to sports racism. A number of moderate brave Muslims have also addressed the same issue.

“In Egypt, we have a large number of racists who do not try to hide [their racism],” said renowned international player Ahmed Hossam – known as Mido – in a TV interview. He frankly wondered, “Does it make sense that throughout the entire history of soccer in Egypt, there have only been five Christian footballers at the top level? There are many Christian children who are not allowed to continue to play because of the racist attitude of certain coaches. I have proposed that Christians should make up at least 10% of all junior teams in order to resolve this problem”⁽²⁾.

In another TV interview, footballer and sports commentator Khalid Al Ghandour mentioned a racist incident against a Coptic person at Minya Sports Club. The caller, Shenouda Wahba, reported that one of his relatives had signed up for soccer tryouts at Minya Sports Club. The club’s technical director rejected him and stipulated that he should convert to Islam in order to be selected. Mr. Al Ghandour concluded by saying, “No one knows more than I do that there are Christian soccer talents treated unfairly in Egypt, it is absurd that there are 18 major soccer teams, and not a single Coptic player in any of them” ⁽³⁾.

Strangely, instead of investigating this racist incident, the Sports Media Committee rebuked Khalid Al Ghandour, claiming that his statements provoke sedition and fanaticism!!!!⁽⁴⁾.

An altercation, seen on TV, between Al Ahli club technical director, Mr. Ikrami, and a young Copt named Pierre Zouhair Shafiq, took place when the young Christian man expressed his desire to join Al Ahli. When Ikrami found out that Shafiq and his colleague were Christians, he pointed to the main door of the club and told them to get out ⁽⁵⁾. Shafiq's colleague recalled the incident in another TV interview and confirmed that Ikrami threw them out after realizing they were Christians ⁽⁶⁾.

In an interview with Al Youm Al Sabeer newspaper on March 22, 2018, Pope Tawadros II, who usually steers clear of the issue of Coptic rights, said in answer to a question about the lack of Coptic soccer players, "Do not ask Copts about this, rather address the question to clubs and playgrounds, how likely it is that there is not a single Coptic footballer to be found in all Egyptian soccer teams?!!"⁽⁷⁾.

At the well-known club Al Ahli, a Christian child named Tony Atef was rejected because he had a cross tattooed on his wrist. The media picked up on the incident, which forced the club to reconsider and accept him to avoid a possible scandal ⁽⁸⁾.

Dr. Yasser Ayoub, the most renowned sports reporter in Egypt, wrote several articles explicitly stating that there is widespread sports

discrimination against Copts. In one of them, he observed, "It is neither logical nor natural that we do not have a single Coptic soccer player in all of the Official Egyptian league teams ... One of the real reasons for this situation is the implicit oppression of Copts, which is not acknowledged due to ignorance and intolerance, or out of fear of offending sensibilities and causing tension" ^(9, 10, 11).

Mr. Ayoub reiterated in another interview, "Anyone who tries to prove that Christians are discriminated against in soccer is considered an agitator who is sowing sedition, so the issue is only raised in secret, while everyone denies it publicly" ⁽¹²⁾.

Egyptian intellectual Dr. Khalid Montaser put it in a nutshell in an article in Al-Watan Egyptian newspaper, "There is a chronic red line set against admitting Christians to soccer teams in Egypt ... We are a racist state par excellence, and a nation adept at discriminating between its children by means of religion, and this is the reason we did not even have 10 Christian footballers over the past 100 years ... If a Christian excels and tries to join a team, the coach may sing his praises, but then turns him down because 'he is unfortunately a Christian'"⁽¹³⁾.



Segregation Was Wrong Then... And Is Wrong Now

1963- School Segregation In The USA



2020-Copts Prevented From Playing For Egypt's National Team And Most Professional Soccer Leagues.



Learn more and see how you can help put an end to this modern segregation at CopticSolidarity.org

Author Sami al-Behairy told one such story: his Christian friend Maged Nabih Mikhail had passed the tryouts in Al Ahli club, performing well in front of the foreign coach. However, an official at the club asked about his name to issue a player I.D., and once he realized he is Christian, he simply told him: "Sorry, we cannot admit you into the team" ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Famous Art critic Tariq al-Shennawi raised a question in his column at Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper about the reasons for Coptic absence in soccer, stating, "The undeniable fact is that there is a distinct Coptic absence in soccer. Are Muslim families no longer willing to let their children play soccer with the children of their Coptic neighbors?"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Writer Osama Ghareib responded to this question in the same newspaper, "Copts are being excluded from soccer because they are being increasingly accused and labeled as infidels," he explained, adding that "Exclusion from soccer is not the only repercussion, as the infidel label may make them targets for murder and rape.... Since the majority of sports officials in major clubs are newly religious, you will not find one among them who would welcome a Christian child even if his talent exceeded that of famous international footballer Messi" ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Mada Masr online Newspaper published an Arabic/English report on the marked exclusion of Copts from professional soccer in Egypt, highlighting a number of cases that were excluded for religious reasons ^(17, 18).

Writer Tawfiq Humaid called on international player Mohammed Salah to lend his support to the efforts to end religious bias in sports against Christian Egyptians. He reminded him that were he a Christian, he would not have had the opportunity to play professional soccer in Egypt; and on the other hand, if the Western World did not consider competence to be the sole criterion, Salah would not have achieved international status ⁽¹⁹⁾.



ISLAMIZATION OF SPORTS

The problem of Coptic absence from soccer teams reflects a wider phenomenon, namely the Islamization of Egyptian society, including sports. In Egypt, the national soccer team is known as "the kneeling team" i.e., those who kneel down to worship in the Islamic way. Former technical director of the Egyptian national team, Hassan Shehata, used to have a Muslim cleric accompany the team on international trips to recite the Quran. He once said in an interview that "a player's relationship with God and his proper behavior are important factors when he selects players who represent Egypt internationally"⁽²⁰⁾.

In an article published in Al-Ahram newspaper, researcher Wahid Abdel-Majid criticized Shehata because of the way he mixed religion and sports ⁽²¹⁾.

This general push for Islamization is reflected in the pressure put on foreign non-Muslim coaches and players to convert to Islam. Some of them have already converted to Islam so as not to lose their jobs, while others refused to, including Ivorian footballer Coulibaly who left the Egyptian team, later stating that they wanted him to convert to Islam ⁽²²⁾.

Islamization of sports was also manifested in such statements made by Al-Azhar Institution, "Every goal scored by Mohammad Salah promotes Islam in Europe, makes English people sing the praises of Islam, and changes the way Europeans view the [Islamic] beard" ^(23, 24).



COPTIC REACTION TO DISCRIMINATION IN SPORTS

As frustrated Copts struggle to find a way around the prevalent discrimination in sports, their options remain limited. In fact, filing complaints is about the only thing they can do, given that all sports clubs are under the supervision of the Egyptian State, and consequently their exclusion from soccer is a State policy.

A book entitled “A Goal in the Playground of Fanaticism”, published in 2010, explored in detail the exclusion of Copts from Egyptian playgrounds. Nour Qaldis, the book’s author and a Christian journalist at Coptic newspaper Watani, highlighted a large number of cases where talents were rejected on religious grounds. The book reached the conclusion that discrimination against Copts in sports is a far-reaching phenomenon, and that preventing young Copts from joining youth teams is a strategy designed to ensure that no Copts will be able to qualify for official soccer teams ⁽²⁵⁾.

The only option left to Coptic churches was to organize church tournaments in small playfields within these churches, which at least gave Copts the chance to practice. However, this option is still flawed, since these are small Playgrounds, lacking professional capabilities and the ability to nominate Coptic players for official clubs ⁽²⁶⁾.

Last year, a young Christian man founded the “Je Suis” Academy as a way to bring together talented Copts who were rejected by major clubs. He rented soccer fields in remote areas, thus allowing them to develop their skills. However, limited resources remain a problem, as well as the unchanging attitude of professional clubs which continue to reject those talented players ⁽²⁷⁾.

GRIEVANCES

Coptic Solidarity has received dozens of complaints from Coptic youth who have been rejected by soccer clubs because they are Christians, despite their abilities. Some of these cases are reported below.

1 – Name: Bassam Al Sayyid Hawash

Year: 2007

Club: Maghaghah District Club

Name of Coach: Omar

He told me: "You are Christian, and Christians do not play soccer".

2 – Name: Fady Gouda Nakhla

Year: 2015

Club: Al Nasr

The captain praised my skills and nicknamed me "the magician." He said I have been accepted, but as I was filling the "religion" item on the form, he found out I am Christian, and dismissed me.

3 – Name: Mina Samir Tawfiq

Year: 2017

They rejected me in the following clubs: Assiut; Petrojet; Ismaili; Haras Al Hedoud

They bluntly told me that being Christian is the reason. In Al Itihad club, they said that my [Christian] name would cause them a problem, and asked to change it to Mustafa, which meant converting to Islam, so I refused. At Haras Al Hedoud Club, they told me: "You are Christian, so you cannot play soccer."

4 – Name: Mina Bandari

They asked me to change my name in order to be accepted. I refused and founded Je Suis Academy to train Coptic youth.

5 – Name: Flobateer Bassem

Year: 2015

Club: Enppi

I was in the final tryouts, but when they learned my name they turned sarcastic, and rejected me.

6 – Name: Kyrolos Aziz Samir Youssef

Year: 2013

Club: Wadi Degla

Although I participated twice in tournaments in Jordan, they rejected me because I am Christian.

7 – Name: John Waguih Bahgat Morcos

Year: 2009-2015

Club: Al Ahli

Coach: Ikrami

On one occasion, Ikrami said [referring to me] he has a cross tattooed on his hand.

8 – Name: Youssef Nader Nassif Haneen

Year: 2015

Club: Wadi Degla

Coach: Yahia Fares

He rejected me because I am Christian.

9 – Name: Pierre Ragai

Name of Club: Al Ahly; Al Nasr

Year: 2010, 2013

In 2010, at Al Ahly Club, the coach told me that I am a decent footballer but that I have to change my name in order to play. In 2013, a similar situation happened at Al Nasr Club, but they said you have been rejected because you are Christian.

10 – Name: Maged Rizkallah Abdul Malak Ayyad

Club: Al Moqaweloon Al Arab (Arab Contractors)

Even though I had passed the tryouts, the coach rejected me when he heard my name. The same thing happened at the Railways club.

11 – Name: Mina Talaat George

Club: Al Sharqia Tobacco

I passed the three tryouts, but when they asked about my name, they excluded me.

12 – Name: Jeremiah Sobhi Shaker Abskharon

Year: 2016

Club: Al Nasr

After I passed the tryouts, the coach changed my name into Rabie Sobhi, when I told him that my name is Jeremiah, he crossed out my name, and told me to go home.

13 – Name: Rousdy Samir Gad Elrab

Club: Al Moqaweloon Al Arab (Arab Contractors)

Year: 2014

I was selected, among others, by the coach in charge of the tryouts. He set up a date for me to come in to sign [a contract] with the club and asked that I bring my father along. On June 26, 2014, the day I was supposed to sign the contract, as they became aware of my name and religion, they refused to sign the contract without providing any reasons.

14 – Name: Raymond Zachary

Club: El Gouna Club

I was told plainly that Coach Ismail Youssef does not like dealing with Christians. At Al Sayd club, the coach asked me, “Why do you play soccer? You Christians have nothing to do with soccer”.

15 – The name: Malak Milad Youssef Barsoum Messiha

Club: Municipality of Mahalla

I was rejected when they realized I am Christian

16 – Name: Hany Hanna Ayad Hanna

Year: 2007

Club: Ministry of Interior Club

Name of Coach: Samy El Gohary – Hamdy Al kot

I was rejected when they learned I am Christian.

17 – Name: Tamer Morris Rizk AbdelMeseeh

Year: 1993

Coach: Mohamed Osman

Club: Al Moqaweloon Al Arab (Arab Contractors)

I was rejected clearly because I am Christian.

18 – Name: Youssef Fanous Tabei Fanous

Club: Al-Qusiya Club, Assiut

Coach: Mohamed Selim

Year: 2015

The coach rejected me because I am Christian.

19 – Name: Antonius Anwar Khalifa

Club: Talae Al Geish (Army)

The coach liked how I played, and asked me “What is your name?” When I answered, and he realized it was a Christian name, he told me they already had the required number.

20 – Name: Fady Nagy Boulos

Club: Al Ahli; Zamalek; Wadi Degla

Although I excelled, Zamalek club refused to register me officially, and allowed me only to play in friendly matches. The other clubs rejected me because I am Christian.

21 – Name: Pierre Zuhair Shafiq

Club: Al Ahli

Coach: Ikrami

Year: July 25, 2016

Mr. Ikrami threw me out when he learned I was Christian.

22 – Name: Mina Essam Lotfy

Club: Al Ahli

Coach: Ikrami

Year: July 25, 2016

Mr. Ikrami threw me out when he learned I was Christian.

23 – Name: Michael Al Qumus Isaiah

Club: Beni Suef Telephone Club

Coach: Shadid Qenawy

I was rejected because I am Christian.

24 – Name: George Makram Zaki

Club: Beni Suef Telephone Club

Coach: Shadid Qenawy

I was rejected because I am Christian.

25 – Name: Kirolos Karim Shafiq Saad Khalil

Club: Moharram Bey

I played in a tournament, and one of the coaches was very impressed [with my skills] and told me I will have an amazing future with the club. However, when he noticed the cross [tattooed] on my hand, he ignored me, and refused to talk to me.

CONCLUSION

This is just a sample representing hundreds of Coptic names that have been rejected in soccer clubs in Egypt, simply because they were Christians. This report has also conveyed the testimonies of moderate Muslims who have spoken up about the prevalent discrimination and racism in soccer, and how it affects Christians in Egypt.

We ask FIFA to officially investigate the complaint submitted by Coptic Solidarity, and ask the Egyptian government to take concrete steps towards ending discrimination against Copts in Egyptian soccer, including the implementation of Mr. Ahmed Hossam’s suggestion to ensure that young Christian players make up at least 10% of youth soccer teams, in order to tackle the problem at its roots.

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