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Egypt and al-Azhar: love at first fight

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The relationship between the current Egyptian administration and the Egyptian religious authority of al-Azhar has been going through some changes in the past few months. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's ascension to the Presidency in 2014 was welcomed by the Coptic Christian community of Egypt and was supported by the al-Azhar University. Nonetheless, efforts to renew the Egyptian national identity and to push for a "religious revolution" in Egypt was met with discomfort, discontent, and, in some circles, distrust. The role of the al-Azhar university and its Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, as a leading authority on Sunni Muslim affairs within Egypt was believed to being sidelined. Consequently, a light should be shone on the intricacies of the different points of contention which dominate the political and religious fora in Egyptian society.

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The call for a “religious revolution”

During 2016, the government led by President al-Sisi has been moving forward with a number of initiatives that put a strain on its relationship with the al-Azhar University. The first, and most publicized one, was the decision by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to unify the Friday sermon across mosques in Egypt by issuing state-approved guidelines.¹ The root of the argument was anchored in the belief that a shared written sermon would put a stop or at least marginalize the radical elements in Egyptian society which play an important factor in religion-based conflicts related mainly to the Coptic Christian and Shia Muslim communities. On paper, a unified written sermon would prevent promoting discrimination and intolerance in the furthest corners of the country, where jihadist networks are likely to find fertile ground to build their networks. The Ministry's decision was not uniformly met with the consensus of the members of al-Azhar. The reasons behind the university's objection were twofold. Firstly, the board of al-Azhar was apparently not consulted or notified on a matter of such importance and magnitude. And secondly, this decision was considered to be forced upon the al-Azhar University, when, for the past decades, it has generally been considered as one of the most prestigious Sunni religious institutions as well as an authority and a reference on religious issues.

During the past year, the al-Azhar University has publicly attempted to strengthen its image as a moderate representative of Islam by opening channels on social media, by participating in international summits on religion, as well as by promoting and channeling the virtues and the openness of Islam in regards to other Muslim denominations and other religions. Despite these efforts, their effects have not, as of yet, been felt within Egypt. Specifically, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar referred to the Sunni and Shia religions as “the two wings of Islam”, went on to forbid the killing of Muslims of any denomination, and called for solidarity for moderate Shias. Due to the lack of a recent and accurate census, the Shia and the Coptic communities in Egypt are estimated to amount to 1% and 10%, respectively, of a population of approximately 90 million people. The main source of tension between the Sunni and Shia communities is found in the difference in interpretation of the Quran, and what ensues from it. As a result, the Ashura commemoration, considered a sacred day for practitioners of Shia Islam, is frowned upon by the general population and often leads to outbursts of violence. In 2016, the commemoration of Ashura was effectively canceled, as the al-Hussein mosque was closed on that day by the Ministry of Interior.²

Elsewhere in Egypt, sectarian strife afflicting the Coptic Christian communities rose exponentially during the summer of 2016. Researchers from The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) attempted to update the lack of information in previous years by building and providing a database of religiously motivated acts of violence in Egypt. Religion-related violence was found wherever large portions of the Coptic community were located, namely in the governorates of Alexandria, Cairo, Assiut and Beni Sweif. The cause of these disputes range from the suspicion that Coptic Christians were building or were planning to build a church, from rumours of romantic relations between members of the Muslim and Christian communities, from religious conversions, or from expressing opinions on issues of faith. In many cases, the disputes resulted in the burning of Coptic property, the expulsion of Copts from villages, death and injury, as well as public humiliation. The informal customary method of “reconciliation hearings” or “mediation sessions” was often elected instead of formal investigations in the disputes. These are usually comprised of representatives of al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, as well as other Muslim and Coptic political and other personalities. The downside to this procedure is that more often than not the culprits are not brought to justice for their crimes against the victims, and, as a result, sectarian incidents reoccur. In other words, the “reconciliation hearings” effectively place the situation into a never-ending sectarian loop, and official state intervention is in dire need.³

Perhaps as a way to tackle the above-mentioned situation of the Coptic and Shia communities, the expression “religious revolution” was coined and promoted by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi over the course of various addresses during 2015. Its aim was for it to supplant radical discourse

against Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and to put a stop to messages fuelling intolerance, violence and hate speech. The “religious revolution” called for religious reform on different aspects of Egyptian institutions, ranging from the al-Azhar University, to the Egyptian media, and to the judicial institutions.⁴ While the al-Sisi-led initiative was meant as means to mend bridges between the various religious communities within Egypt, its message to modernize religious discourse and fatwas was deemed a controversial one.

To that effect, another al-Sisi proclamation called for a re-evaluation of al-Azhar’s curriculum, and specifically, its sacred texts. In that spirit, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi called for al-Azhar to “purge Islam of its flaws” and for enlightened religious scholars to take the lead. It is needless to say that the President’s statement was not met with rousing applause, was critically panned, and considered an affront to the University’s authority on the matter.⁵ The fact of the matter being that these sacred texts are the ones to which al-Azhar goes back to, studies and bases its religious teachings on. By making such an all-encompassing proclamation, President al-Sisi effectively opened a “Pandora’s box” that might fuel a feud that could, at the very least, simmer in the background in the months to come.

The identity card debacle

Another matter indirectly intertwined with the “religious revolution” that was previously mentioned was the one regarding the mention of a citizen’s religion on Egyptian identity cards. Although a topical discussion had already began at various instances during the past decade, with even a draft bill being submitted to parliament, it was confined to the fringes of the Egyptian political forum. The event that triggered the rise to the forefront of the discussion on the need for a religious section on national identity cards was the joint decision by both the students, the academic and the administrative staff of the University of Cairo to no longer require the mention of religious identity on one’s university-related paperwork.⁶

The University’s consensus on the matter sent ripples through local and social media, prompting responses that were, to say the least, divisive. Although supported by liberals and secularists as a means to strengthen the efforts to build a unique Egyptian citizenship, the conservative political parties of Egyptian society found the University’s decision baffling, as one that challenges the Sunni Muslim identity of the Egyptian people. Despite the additional rift that was created between secularists and religious conservatives in the political arena, the discourse on the matter of the religion box on national identity cards has effectively began and seems to no longer be taboo or of secondary importance.⁷ As a result, while the Cairo University’s decision was revoked, the Ain Shams University followed suit and moved forward with its own decision to remove religious characteristics from its documents.⁸

The documentation of verbal divorce

Another initiative that has triggered a spike in tensions between the Presidency and al-Azhar is the debate on adding documentation papers to the verbal divorce process between a Muslim man and a Muslim woman. Verbal divorce is considered legitimate in Egyptian law, which enables a husband to divorce from his wife without witnesses. This makes it possible for divorce to be formalized without the wife’s knowledge.⁹ As a way to remedy against this situation, a parliament draft bill is currently being prepared. However, the latter is being pushed forward without any direct involvement from al-Azhar, making an already fragile relationship more strenuous. Nonetheless, the initiative has found its supporters in secular society, as well as in the Islamic Research Complex, which went ahead and formally validated its arguments.¹⁰

While the al-Azhar University’s stance on the matter is not yet official nor clear, it remains to be

seen if Egypt's religious authority will oppose or abide with the decisions of the draft parliamentary committee. Although hearsay is already confirming a negative reaction to the draft bill, one important aspect of the current situation should be clarified in the coming weeks: whether the need for modernization of Egyptian religious law is the essence of the issue, or if the lack of communication and cooperation between the Egyptian administration and al-Azhar University is in fact the catalyst that now hinders any religion-related debate.

The current Egyptian government and the al-Azhar University seem to have been at odds during the past year. Many issues have risen to the forefront, ranging from toning down or regulating sermons and fatwas to legislative religious reforms. The epicenter of the various issues is found in the absence of proper channels of communication between the two, as well as an unwillingness to build them. The consequences could be twofold: on the one hand, the Egyptian government could move ahead without any consultation from al-Azhar on the related topics, and gradually undermine its authority on religious matters; on the other hand, the al-Azhar University could torpedo – as a means of strength – any religious reform through the use of its influence in Egyptian society. Both outcomes would not be beneficial for either the religious communities in Egypt, or the standing of the state as a stable one in the region.

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