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Pulling the Rope: The Struggle between Official and Popular Islam in Egypt[1]

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As so often in the past after political upheavals, the state in Egypt is trying to get a strong grip on Islam. But it is only able to control the institutionalised element of the religion ("official" Islam), whereas the uncontrollable and fragmented form, "popular" Islam, meaning the real source of religious inspiration for people, is metamorphosing. The result of this process will not only determine the future agents of mass mobilisation but may also signal a broader social transformation in the Arab world in the long term.

If the preamble to the Egyptian constitution is to be believed, over the past four years the country has gone through two revolutions, has had four different governing bodies, descended into chaos only now to be on the path to "stability." But throughout these fluctuations in recent years one thing has remained constant, like it had over the past decades: the religiosity of Egyptians. All Egyptians polled claim they believe in God and almost all say that religion is important in their lives.[2]

Save for a tiny minority, that inherent religious imperative in non-negotiable: it provides clear guidance as to how to live, through prayer it gives rhythm to the day, through fatwas it dispels doubts. Of such potency is that religious power that despite various attempts to institutionalise Islam or play its many emanations against one another, no Egyptian ruler has ever been able to bring it under full state control. During and after recent revolutions, harnessing Islam has remained a political goal because religion is still the most certain of tools to mobilise the masses.

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[1] This article is a result of field research conducted by the author in Egypt in February and March 2015, as part of the Strategic Partnership in Transition (SPrinT) project led by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, with the cooperation of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. SPrinT is supported by the Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme Fellowship within the Seventh European Community Framework Programme.

[2] The numbers oscillate between 96% and 98%, so within the margin of error. See: "Egypt from Tahrir to Transition," Gallup, 2013, www.gallup.com/poll/157046/egypt-tahrir-transition.aspx; S. Crabtree, "Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Nations," Gallup, 31 August 2010, www.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx; "The World's Muslims. Unity and Diversity," Pew Research Center, 9 August 2012, www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-2-religious-commitment.

Official Islam

The form of Egyptians' religious life that the state is able to control is often called "official" Islam in opposition to "popular" Islam, meaning what is preached and practiced by Muslims every day.[3] For over a century now, official Islam in Egypt has been ordered by three institutions: the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments), the Al-Azhar conglomerate, and the office of the Grand Mufti, including the official fatwa issuing house, Dar al-Ifta'. These institutions have been used for two main political purposes: to control mosques and preachers, and to legitimise the political actions of subsequent governments as acts in accordance with Islamic law.

The most prominent and the oldest of the three institutions is Al-Azhar, a university teaching some 400,000 future muftis and preachers that is also a mosque and the highest authority on Islamic thought with a millennium of practice. Over the past two centuries it has been gradually brought under the state's financial and administrative control. Its independence was further weakened by the establishment of the office of the Grand Mufti and the Dar al-Ifta'. Ever since, the two bodies—with an overlapping prerogative of issuing fatwas—have been played against one another as counterweights by the state, which exercised nearly complete control over the institutions' heads through appointments and financing.

Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta' are also used to attempt to instil moderate Islam in society through proper teaching and issuing legal opinions (fatwas). Their prestige, however, has diminished due to their history of serving as a fig leaf to power. Whenever a controversial step—seen as dubious by the people—was to be taken by the government, Al-Azhar or the Grand Mufti would issue a convenient fatwa. Such fatwas were issued and supported by appropriate Quranic verses, for example, on the peace treaty with Israel[4] (1979), the Gulf War[5] (1990) and in domestic politics, such as in 2012 when President Mohammad Morsi asked Al-Azhar whether IMF funds were a form of usury, which it ruled they were not.[6]

Although Al-Azhar and the Grand Mufti are not seen as reliable authorities on political matters, they undoubtedly enjoy prominence in religious affairs. The third institution of Egypt's official Islam, the Ministry of Awqaf, cannot even claim that much. It oversees some 80,000 mosques in Egypt, appoints imams (graduates of Al-Azhar), and grants licenses to *khutaba'* (preachers from local communities). The ministry since 2013 has been headed by state loyalist Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa and is an integral part of the state machinery.

The 2011 revolution did shake up official Islam in that it provided impetus for reform, understood as making Al-Azhar more independent from the state but not so much as reforming the institution itself or its teaching. During the revolution, Al-Azhar clumsily tried to dissuade people from the demonstrations, which only added to its political unpopularity and the urgency for reform. New regulations for Al-Azhar, signed by Morsi in 2012, gave it the prerogative to nominate the Grand Mufti (previously chosen by the president) and elect the Grand Imam, the head of Al-Azhar, by a re-activated body called Senior Scholars (*Hayy'a Kibar Ulama' al-Azhar*) also instead of the president.[7] Now, that body is composed of scholars chosen by the Grand Imam himself.

Experts point out that not only did these changes not liberate Al-Azhar from the state's grip (as it is still state-funded) but they were primarily aimed at making the Azharian elite impervious to the Muslim

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[3] The designation of "official" and "popular" forms of Islam can be found in the writings of French orientalist Maxime Rodinson. These aspects of Islam can also be understood differently: what is taught (official Islam) as opposed to what is practiced (popular Islam).

[4] *(1316) Ittifaqiyya as-salam bayna Masr wa Isra'il wa atharuha* [The peace agreement between Egypt and Israel and its effects], www.jiis.org/.upload/publications/fatwa/fatwa%205.pdf.

[5] L. Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 113.

[6] "Brotherhood asks Al-Azhar to issue fatwa on IMF loan," *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 29 August 2012, www.egyptindependent.com/news/brotherhood-asks-al-azhar-issue-fatwa-imf-loan.

[7] Decree 13 of 2012 with amendments to law 103 of 1961 on the re-establishment of the Al-Azhar organisation and the bodies it includes, www.cc.gov.eg/Legislations/Egypt_Legislations_Images.aspx?ID=279738.

Brotherhood and Salafi influence rather than the state.[8] After the deposition of Morsi from the presidency, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Mohammad al-Tayyeb clearly stood on the military's side, but differences within the Senior Scholars surfaced immediately. Shaykh Hasan Al-Shafi'iyy called the deposal a brutal military coup, and Yousuf al-Qaradawi, also sympathising with the MB, quit the body in December 2013. The Azharian elite may come from moderate Islam but inside the institution, among staff, faculty and students, all shades of Islam are represented, from hardline Salafists to moderate liberals.

Simultaneously with the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ministry of Awqaf adopted a strict ban on preachers without a license from delivering Friday sermons and closed smaller mosques.[9] Moreover, since February 2014 at least, the topic for each Friday's sermon is now predetermined and announced by the ministry on its website.[10] The state's strategy is to rid the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists of a platform while giving official Islam more tools with which to manoeuvre. For example, in the plan for 2015, Dar al-Ifta' forecasts establishing both a YouTube channel and a "mobile fatwa house" to reach out to the Egyptian countryside.[11] Its website already has nine language versions and plans for wider international outreach, while also monitoring non-official fatwas.[12]

In spite of the new regulations of Al-Azhar, and probably because of the deposing of the MB president, official Islam is in the state's firm hold once again. Had Morsi's rule continued, Al-Azhar might have been transformed substantially and precisely so as not to fall under the control of the state, which was MB. The attempts at reforming official Islam have so far failed and even if revisited would take decades to yield results. Today, the state under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has so much power over official Islam that it is Sisi himself who preaches to the highest scholars (*ulama'*).

On 28 December 2014, the president gave a speech at Al-Azhar in which he articulated the need for a "religious revolution." According to Sisi Islamic texts and thought, sanctified by the ages, antagonise the whole world, and it is the *ulama'*s duty, he claimed, to change this.[13] He then repeated this message in Davos in his first major speech outside of the Muslim world.[14] Posing as a religious authority is easier for him because, unlike his predecessors, he gives off an aura of being a devout Muslim. Sisi reads people well and knows that his message falls on attentive ears both at home and abroad. Abroad there is a clear expectation that respected bodies in the Muslim world will rid Islam of its radical interpretation. At home, because of widespread doubt and disillusionment, there is a clear demand for true religious guidance. So far, it has only been found in popular Islam.

Popular Islam

Popular Islam consists of all the various sources of religious inspiration that people trust. These sources are uncontrollable by the state, capricious and to a large extent unpredictable as a whole. They also differ from one social class to another.[15] The different aspirations and ways of life of Egyptians require different, sometimes conflicting religious rationalisations. With its inbuilt plasticity, Islam offers just that. Each social class will therefore look for religious inspiration in places that are most convenient for their needs.

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[8] S. El Masry, "Al-Azhar of post-revolutionary Egypt," *Daily News Egypt*, 20 March 2013, www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/03/20/al-azhar-of-post-revolutionary-egypt.

[9] A. Morsy, N.J. Brown, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Steps Forward," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 November 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/07/egypt-s-al-azhar-steps-forward#.

[10] *Khutba al-gum'a* [Friday sermon], www.awkafonline.com/portal/?cat=20.

[11] *Mufti al-gumhuriyya yu'lin al-khutta al-mustaqbaliyya li-dar al-ifta' fil-'am al-gadid 2015,* Dar al-Ifta', 1 January 2015, http://dar-alifta.org/Viewstatement.aspx?ID=4180&text=يوتيـــوب .

[12] *The fatwa monitoring observatory: infedilizing (sic) fatwas are seen as legal permits for killing which undermine the objectives of Islamic law*, Dar al-Ifta', http://eng.dar-alifta.org/foreign/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=479&text=revolution.

[13] "As-Sisi yad'u lithawra diniyya did nusus tamma taqdisuha liqurun," *Al-Jazeera*, 2 January 2015, www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/1/2/لقـرون-تقديســـهاتـم-نصـوص-ضـد-دينيـــة-لثـــورة-يـدعو-السيســـي .

[14] "Sisi tells Davos 2015: 'no one can monopolize the truth'," *Al Arabiya News*, 22 January 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/special-reports/davos2015/2015/01/22/LIVE-Egypt-s-SISI-speaks-at-Davos-2015.html.

[15] Official Islam does not differentiate between social classes—it is meant for the rich and the poor—although in reality it hardly gets to either.

The most prominent actors in popular Islam can be grouped into four class-related categories: lower-class popular Islam (i.e., Salafist organisations such as *Al-Gama'iyya al-shara'iyya*, or the Association for Moral Rectitude), lower/middle-class popular Islam (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood), middle/upper-class (i.e., modern Islamic "televangelists") and others.

Salafism represents socially the most oppressive and self-restricting way of life. It is inspired by the Wahhabi socio-religious model from Saudi Arabia. In its purest form it does not advocate violence against the state; quite the contrary, it forbids standing against a Muslim ruler. Its most prominent and oldest organisation, *Al-Gama'iyya al-shara'iyya*, was established in 1912 and since has had only one goal, protecting itself from the modernising environment, even by making deals with anti-Islamic governments. Other significant organisations include *Gama'at ansar as-sunna al-muhammadiyya* (Association of the Followers of the Acts of Muhammad) and *Ad-Da'awa as-salafiyya* from Alexandria.

Ideologically, Salafism is in conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and official Islam. It finds support mostly in rural and suburban Egypt among the lower social classes and has an estimated following of less than 10% of the population. *Al-Gama'iyya al-shara'iyya* alone, though, has some 6,000 mosques under its supervision, hospitals and schools notwithstanding. They operate on the local level because, according to the group, that is the only way Egyptian society can be reformed and Islamic teachings reinvigorated in opposition to the forces of modernism and secularism.[16] *Da'awa* is the only Salafist club to have established a party—Al Nour. It is still functioning and has candidates running in the 2015 parliamentary elections. Realising the numbers of Salafists, the government, both before and after 2011, has let them be and preach under the condition that they not use the mosque to politically mobilise people.[17] In essence then, the state accepts and effectively finances Salafism: an ideology unmatched in its social harshness and backwardness.

The MB, on the other hand, has been de-legalised and designated a terrorist organisation. With their older leadership in jail, the organisation fell into the hands of its younger members. Given MB's recent popularity (some 25% of all eligible Egyptians voted for it in 2011/2012), combined with the brutal crackdown on them and the inept rule of Morsi, that popularity might have somewhat dropped since then. If Salafism drew people's support thanks to the provision of healthcare, religious instruction and a promise of a revived religion in places with no other alternative and without internet access, MB seduces lower-middle classes by not only providing charity but also promising a better socio-political system altogether—a promise the MB could not deliver, mostly due to its incompetence when in power. The MB's rise and fall in Egyptian politics has made people wary of Islamism as they have known it. As a result, both Salafism and more moderate Islamists are losing popular support.

The middle/upper-class form of popular Islam has produced several celebrities over the past two decades. The '90s and '00s belonged to Amr Khaled, a self-made young, modern and eloquent religious teacher who changed the template of an Islamic scholar. He spoke the language of the upper-middle class and was well-off himself. Good-looking and eloquent, he eventually managed to attract millions of followers to the mosques where he taught, as well as on TV and online. The moment his popularity grew beyond a level the government felt was safe, he was made to leave Egypt. His fame faded with time and with allegations he was close to the MB and had his own political aspirations. Others are now trying to emulate his model, such as Mustafa Hosny, who has 15.5 million followers on Facebook, but the era of a single religious leader in this class seems to be over.

Overall, most popular Islam actors have been losing support. But apart from the easily defined sources of religious inspiration there are also amorphous phenomena of unknown strength. Media can raise people without religious background to prominence, who, nevertheless, engage in debates on religious matters and give their audience a specific point of reference. For example, popular journalist Ibrahim Issa can stir debate on TV about the use of a veil or the validity of old religious texts, prompting official, critical responses from

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[16] C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006, p. 57.

[17] Ismail Rafat, *Ittifaq bayna al-awqaf wal-gama'iyya al-shara'iyya lililtizam biqawanin al-khitaba wa tawfiq awda'iha*, Youm7, 17 September 2014, www.youm7.com/story/2014/9/17/اتفاق-بين-الأوقاف-والجمعية-الشرعية-للالتزام-بقوانين-الخطابة-/1869117#.VODBZig_604.

Al-Azhar. Another debate about atheism has recently surfaced; previously hesitant to publicly voice their opinions, young leftists are today more openly declaring their doubts on social media. Even if the number of Egyptians questioning the dogma is marginally slim,[18] the public debate they stir results in greater socio-religious ferment.

The multitude of religious TV channels, papers and websites has left popular Islam fragmented but mutating at the same time. Religious Egyptians are changing religion every day through their search for answers, fatwas and opinions. That process has been going on for at least two decades, facilitated by technology. Around half of all Egyptians have internet access and 96% of households have a TV set.[19] Those bottom-up changes in Islam might have particularly speeded up recently. Today, unlike in the past, internal political upheavals in the Arab world coincide with the proliferation of intra-Muslim jihadism and terrorism. Egyptians are put off by the brutality of ISIS, which claims to be the most righteous of Muslims, and the horrific situation in Sinai, where a regular war between the Egyptian military and jihadists is taking place, though also by the way the authorities have dealt a blow to the Muslim Brotherhood. Even if initially many Egyptians supported the crackdown on them, today with activists and journalists jailed as well, they are having second thoughts and are caught between extremism and authoritarianism.

Toward Islamic Reformation

Sisi's speech at Al-Azhar about reforming Islam begs the question whether a true religious change can come from authoritarian inspiration. Judging from the way the government deals with its opposition it is highly doubtful that the real aim, as elucidated by Sisi, is to empower moderate Islam versus the extreme. It is much more likely that the bigger goal here is to keep the religious "market" (more than 90% of Egyptians, including Copts) fragmented so as to prevent any single actor from attaining mass popularity. Why else would Salafism be receiving a *de facto* helping hand from the state, while a more moderate group is termed a terrorist force?

Experts have rightly recommended that the state should include rather than exclude different religious currents, because exclusion is unwittingly creating room for underground organisations.[20] But that has been tried already: the legislation against unlicensed preaching existed before 2013, but it had been ignored by the government most of the time precisely to let the more extreme vent their energy. What seems to be the deeper problem in state–religion relations is, of course, not so much the dependence of official Islam on the state but the state's unconstitutional policies that the religion is then supposed to legitimise. These policies only increase the demand for the alternative, popular Islam.

The existence and strength of both the official and popular forms of Islam proves that the "no clergy" doctrine—that there need not be an intermediary between God and the individual—in Sunni Islam is a myth. First, the government needs "clergy" to implement and sanctify its policies. Socially, only better-educated Muslims, who account for a fraction of Egyptian society, can do without clergy in their everyday lives because they know how to look for answers in religious texts. But with the complexity of modern times, even they look to a higher religious authority in the form of someone more learned. The existence of "clergy" in mosques was implicitly admitted by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar himself: "rostrums, given the reverence they enjoy among people, give extra power to those standing above; and people tend to believe that anything said on the rostrum is inherent in religion."[21]

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[18] There are no credible statistics on such a socially controversial issue but numbers vary between 1,000 and 1 million. See: A. Fouad, "Egypt campaigns against atheism," *Al-Monitor*, 24 July 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/egypt-government-fears-atheism.html.

[19] For internet statistics, see www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country. For TV statistics, see www.tradingeconomics.com/egypt/households-with-television-percent-wb-data.html.

[20] G. Fahmi, "The Egyptian State and the Religious Sphere," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 18 September 2014, http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/09/18/egyptian-state-and-religious-sphere.

[21] "Al-Masry Al-Youm interviews the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayyeb (Part I)," *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 24 January 2015, www.egyptindependent.com/news/al-masry-al-youm-interviews-grand-sheikh-al-azhar-ahmed-al-tayyeb-part-i.

Since the "clergy" do have such power, some would argue that the true independence of Al-Azhar—the proud bearer of a thousand years of Islamic scripture and thought, and bringing up future "clergy"—would help diminish the appeal of Salafism and extremism, purifying the perception of Islam in Egypt from the stain of being in the state's pocket. But Al-Azhar is both the solution and the problem. Its curricula are outdated, marred by overly rigorous thought with too much emphasis on the past, and teaching a tradition that has very little to do with modern times. Similarly, Dar al-Ifta' is also viewed as a bastion of conservatism. Even though on the spectrum of religious interpretation these institutions represent mainstream Islam (*wasatiyya*), they are perceived by the Egyptian upper-middle class as conservative. Al-Azhar has often been in conflict with the Ministry of Culture and intellectual elite. Using its prerogative to give opinions on works of art, plays to be staged or movies to be shown at theatres, it has imposed censorship.[22] In fact, Al-Azhar and the MB share the same ideology when it comes to comportment and morals, though they may differ on political issues. Al-Azhar is still an emanation of the average social conservatism of all Egyptians, although an upper middle class Egyptian would not turn to it for a fatwa if in need because of its tendency for conservatism. Neither, however, would a Salafist, for whom official Islam is too mellow and who most likely would ask for a fatwa from Saudi Arabia. The important question is what would the biggest group of the median, mainstream Egyptians do? For now, they are turning to Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta'—their landlines are constantly busy. But with religious ferment growing and official Islam calcified the way it is today, that group may also disintegrate.

Official Islam has an inbuilt system failure when it comes to its outreach strategy. It really does not matter so much anymore what the Friday sermon is about. When in doubt, a Muslim would most likely search online for a fatwa on a topic of interest and decide if he or she wants to take it. Except for people without internet access or who are dependent on local sheiks, others—liberals, Salafists, mainstream Muslims—all look for answers online. It is an open-ended process of constant interpretation and reinterpretation, which ultimately, according to the Quran, allows the person in question to decide—*istafti qalbak* ("find a fatwa in your heart"), says one hadith. Today the biggest fatwa issuing house is not an official institution but the internet itself. All shades of Muslims can find a convenient fatwa online, even if Islam forbids accepting a fatwa simply because it is comfortably suitable.

Overall, Egyptians seem to be in a stand-by mode: still religious but taken aback by the atrocities committed in the name of Islam by ISIS and the extremists in the Sinai, wary of European reactions to terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims, disillusioned with the moderate Islam presented by the MB—who never really offered a coherent vision of Egypt—and distrustful of state institutions, the military, the police, the judiciary, and official Islam, which they see as complicit in undemocratic politics. There is a vast religious market that will soon turn to other sources of inspiration, while some may abandon religion altogether. The morphing of religious demand in popular Islam in Egypt needs to be closely monitored because it will breed future agents of mass mobilisation. Furthermore, that process, specific to Islam, of a work in progress, combined with the possibilities that the internet brings, speeded up in a time when, driven by political events, many Muslims are questioning parts of their sacred scripture, may in the end be part of a long-term social transformation of the Arab world.

[22] It recently censored the theatrical performances of "Hussein is Rebellious" and "Hussain is a martyr," because it depicted companions of the Prophet, and the movies "Exodus: Gods and Kings" and "Halawat Ar-Ruh," the latter due to its sexual content.