

New Egyptian Legislation Aims to Reduce Al-Azhar's Authority

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Aug 20, 2020

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Brief Analysis

The latest twist in the long battle for control over Egypt's religious realm could have profound implications for the state's ability to regulate—and thus reform—Islamic discourse.

On July 19, the Egyptian parliament provisionally approved a bill bringing Dar al-Ifta, the country's main body responsible for issuing religious guidelines, under the cabinet's purview. If implemented, this measure would move fatwa oversight authority outside the orbit of Al-Azhar, the centuries-old religious seminary widely considered to be the Sunni world's leading institution of Islamic learning. In doing so, it could give President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and his supporters a big win in the ongoing struggle to control Egypt's religious realm.

WHY IS SISI TRYING TO SIDESTEP AL-AZHAR?

The power struggle between religious and civil authorities in Egypt dates back to the establishment of the modern state in the nineteenth century, but the latest chapter began in 2012. Following the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, the interim leaders on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces granted Al-Azhar responsibility for choosing the head of Dar al-Ifta, a prerogative previously reserved for the president pursuant to reforms in the 1960s. The SCAF's move was seen as a preemptive effort to impede the Muslim Brotherhood—then poised to dominate the legislative and executive branches—from exerting additional influence in Egypt's religious and legal realms. Indeed, jurists affiliated with Dar al-Ifta routinely issue nonbinding legal opinions in response to requests from individuals, state agencies, and courts, thus exercising considerable sway over the everyday lives of Egyptians.

Al-Azhar welcomed the SCAF's decision, and in the political tumult of the ensuing years it sought to increase its independence from the government regardless of who was in charge. Sisi's 2014 election seemed to bode well for

that quest. The new constitution adopted that year enshrined Al-Azhar's status as the country's leading religious body, defining it as "an independent scientific Islamic institution with exclusive competence over its own affairs" and "the main authority for religious sciences and Islamic affairs." For his part, Sisi recognized the benefits of maintaining positive relations with the institution. In 2013, for example, Al-Azhar's Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb was invited to attend Sisi's 2013 speech outlining a new political roadmap after President Mohamed Morsi's removal from power—a move undoubtedly aimed at legitimizing Sisi's subsequent election.

But what started as a mutually beneficial relationship began to show signs of strain in 2015. Against the backdrop of the ascendant Islamic State in the Levant, an emboldened jihadist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, and increasing terrorist attacks targeting Coptic citizens, Sisi delivered a widely publicized speech imploring Al-Azhar's scholars to lead a "religious revolution" aimed at "renewing" Islamic discourse and countering the extremist ideologies wreaking havoc across the region. Numerous other entreaties to Al-Azhar followed, most of them indicating that the government was principally concerned with two objectives: stamping out the vestiges of the Muslim Brotherhood, and empowering a religious elite that could forcefully rebut jihadist ideology, promote tolerance of religious minorities, and legitimize reforms regarding women and personal-status laws more generally.

With its extensive network of more than 9,000 elementary and secondary schools educating over 2 million students, and a university replete with research institutes that train thousands of aspiring preachers annually, Al-Azhar was uniquely positioned to wield the kind of influence Sisi sought. Yet the institution largely balked, chafing at the perceived encroachment on its territory.

So Sisi tried other means. In 2016, the Ministry of Awqaf, an agency of the executive branch responsible for overseeing religious endowments and regulating mosques, launched an initiative to streamline and unify the content of Friday sermons delivered across the country. The ostensible aim was to gain greater control over the mosques in order to reduce the influence of extremist preachers (which from the government's standpoint included ultraconservative Salafists and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers). Yet Al-Azhar rejected the proposal as an affront to the intellectual discretion of prayer leaders, and a number of Azhar-affiliated imams reportedly refused to abide by the directive.

That same year, Grand Imam Tayeb rejected demands for Al-Azhar to declare that members of the Islamic State terrorist group were apostates, even as he forcefully denounced the organization's activities. Tayeb's critics drew parallels between his position and earlier instances in which Al-Azhar had issued fatwas accusing individuals of blasphemy for questioning the validity of traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, or labeling them as infidels for advocating a woman's right to choose whether to wear the veil. In 2017, Sisi publicly suggested the need for legislation tempering the practice of verbal divorce, whereby a man can leave his wife simply by uttering the words "I divorce you." He argued that this practice should be illegal unless a marriage official was present, but Al-Azhar countered by affirming that the existing rules complied with Islamic law.

Later that year, several apparently exasperated members of parliament pushed for legislation to impose a term limit on the grand imam's tenure and compel Al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars to include non-religious experts. Yet the institution quickly mobilized its parliamentary supporters to kill the bill, largely by invoking constitutional provisions that enshrined Al-Azhar's independence and barred the government from dismissing the grand imam (Article 7).

The new bill put forward last month does not directly mention the grand imam, suggesting that Sisi's allies have learned from the 2017 episode. Instead, it seeks to strip Al-Azhar's exclusive control over the main body responsible for issuing fatwas, give final say over choosing Dar al-Ifta's leading cleric back to the president, introduce term limits on that cleric's tenure (which the president can choose to extend), and create new imam training programs under Dar al-Ifta's auspices to compete with Al-Azhar's. Notwithstanding the latter's fervent objections to the bill, this time

the government appears to have outmaneuvered its rival.

THE WAY AHEAD

At this stage, the proposed bill must still be adopted in full by parliament and then sent to the president for his approval, a process that is likely to take time. But even if the measure is adopted and implemented, the government will face formidable odds in carrying out its envisioned reforms. Al-Azhar's prestige is unlikely to plummet anytime soon, and the new law could rally segments of Egyptian society to its defense, making the task of presenting credible reforms all the more challenging.

Yet while Al-Azhar's reluctance to take up Sisi's calls for reform may have helped it preserve a measure of legitimacy among some Egyptians, for others it has merely confirmed that the institution cannot offer relevant answers to citizens seeking guidance on evolving norms. Such concerns extend beyond Egypt as well. Earlier this year, when an Al-Azhar professor issued a fatwa praising Tunisia's draft law equalizing inheritance between men and women, the university immediately declared that his ruling contradicted both the Quran and Al-Azhar's official stance on the issue. The episode suggested that although **Al-Azhar's leadership remains conservative** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-the-islamic-state-renewed-urgency-for-religious-reform>), reformists within the institution see things differently.

Whether the Egyptian government manages to elevate such reformist voices and develop a convincing alternative to Al-Azhar's brand of conservatism remains to be seen. If it succeeds, however, it would likely bolster Egypt's stability and advance the broader regional battle between moderate and extremist streams of Islamic thought—two outcomes in which Washington has a clear interest. Sisi's government deserves much criticism for its human rights abuses and abysmal record on upholding basic democratic principles. But in the arena of religious reform, growing state control could be a step in the right direction.

*Sarah Feuer is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute and author of its 2019 study **Course Correction: The Muslim World League and Saudi Arabia's Export of Islam** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/course-correction>). ❖*

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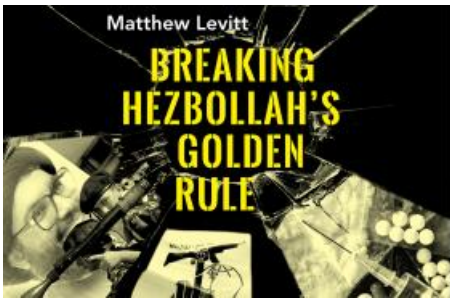
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