

CARNEGIE
P A P E R S

**Middle East
Series**

**THE DANGERS
OF POLITICAL
EXCLUSION:
Egypt's Islamist
Problem**

Bassma Kodmani

**Democracy and
Rule of Law Project**



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

**Number 63
October 2005**

© 2005 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Endowment. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-483-7600
Fax: 202-483-1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org

This publication can be downloaded for free at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs. Limited print copies are also available. To request a copy, send an e-mail to pubs@CarnegieEndowment.org.

Carnegie Papers

Carnegie Papers present new research by Endowment associates and their collaborators from other institutions. The series includes new time-sensitive research and key excerpts from larger works in progress. Comments from readers are welcome; reply to the author at the mailing address above or by e-mail to pubs@CarnegieEndowment.org.

About the Author

Bassma Kodmani is associate professor at the College de France and director of the Arab Reform Initiative. She can be contacted at bassma.kodmani@college-de-france.fr.

CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Mighty State | 4 |
| Religious Establishment | 5 |
| Political Choreography | 8 |
| Ramifications | 12 |
| Reclaiming Politics | 17 |
| Notes | 23 |

Je ne vois pas dans la religion le mystère de l'Incarnation mais le mystère de l'Ordre social. La religion rattache au Ciel une idée d'égalité qui empêche le riche d'être massacré par le pauvre.

[I don't see in religion the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, but rather the embodiment of the Social Order. Religion ascribes to Heaven an idea of equality which prevents the rich from being massacred by the poor.]

—Napoleon
Conseil d'Etat, 1806

INTRODUCTION

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN in recent years about Islam and politics, Islam and democracy, and Islam's compatibility with the requirements of modernity. These debates cannot be settled conclusively by referring to the holy texts, because such texts lend themselves to conflicting interpretations. This paper, therefore, takes a different approach. Using Egypt as a case study, it focuses not on the relationship between Islam and politics in the abstract, but on the relationship between religious authority and political authority as it unfolds in practice. It outlines the motivations, interests, strategies, and agendas of the institutions that represent and speak for Islam and those that represent the state and act in its name.¹ The interaction between them is a mix of complicity and rivalry that has profound effects on Egyptian society, the Egyptian state, and its relationship with the outside world.

Egypt is an interesting case study because the government maintains an intricate and dynamic relationship with the religious establishment. At times, the state leans on the Islamic establishment to support its policies, and the religious establishment likewise seeks—and receives—the support of the government to reassert its full control on religious affairs when needed. By studying this interaction, this paper concludes that conservative Islamic authorities that claim to be nonpolitical are more problematic and dangerous for social progress than legally recognized Islamic parties participating in the democratic process would be. The paper advocates a return to overt political activity by political parties rather than covert political activity by the religious establishment, as this would secure responsible behavior from the state, the religious establishment, and the citizenry and would ensure that each fulfills its designated role.

It also suggests that initiatives by outside partners to promote change in the Arab world by targeting the social, educational, or religious fields may be unproductive and are alienating public opinion. Foreign assistance is more likely to be effective if it takes the political actors as interlocutors. This does not suggest intervening in the political affairs of a sovereign state but rather more respect for Egypt's sovereignty as will be argued.

Egypt always appears to be on the verge of an imminent explosion, but the explosion never happens. Observers invariably predict that the “Arab street” (and Egypt’s is the most crowded) will flare up as a result of social and economic frustration and anger about open conflicts in its immediate neighborhood. The impressive capacity of the security apparatus to maintain law and order goes a long way toward explaining why Egypt does not explode, but there is more to it. By restricting political participation and representation, the authoritarian leadership has ultimately created a stagnant political society and diverted tensions and confrontations toward other spheres of life: cultural, social, economic, and legal. In this vacuum of mass political activity, the religious establishment has thrived on the fringes of the political sphere, establishing its authority over the public’s beliefs and lifestyles. Thus, as the Egyptian regime tightens its grip on political power, it provides the Islamic establishment with the venue and audience to advance its own religious agenda. Paradoxically, by denying its citizens access to political space, the Egyptian government reinforces the authority of the Islamic establishment in the public sphere and surrenders a significant amount of control as a result.

MIGHTY STATE

With its large bureaucracy and a powerful security apparatus, the Egyptian government is able to respond effectively to security threats and ensure public order. Centralized and highly visible, it benefits from a deeply ingrained “statist” culture within the society. At the same time, however, it has no political message, and for a long time it has not been able to mobilize its citizens.

Although the Mubarak regime has changed the social, economic, and political direction 180 degrees since the Nasser era, it has not paid much attention to the need to devise a new societal model or to develop a new political discourse to mobilize support. Survival seems to be its main ethos and concern, and societal demands for some political or moral direction have been largely ignored. With a focus on regime stability, the state devotes considerable effort to denying significant political forces access to political space and preventing the formation of competing power centers.

The government suppressed Islamic extremists during the 1990s and has also been largely successful in dealing with challenges from the mainstream, nonviolent Islamic movement or indeed from any movement with a political agenda. The mere hint that an organization has a political agenda triggers the deployment of a toolkit of control, intimidation, coercion, repression, and co-optation instruments. The political process has been turned into a bureaucratic dialogue between agencies of the state. Although there is a diversity of political and intellectual trends and schools of thought within society, they are not represented within the political space. Public intellectuals lack political backing, which makes them easily tamed and co-opted. In fact, the minister of culture often boasts of having brought the intellectuals into “the fold” and has managed to transform the cultural field into a permanent festival of ongoing inaugurations.

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) is a nonideological structure, willing to accommodate any political or social force, including Islamic, that is willing to be absorbed by it. It does not seek even a semblance of ideological unity but instead maintains firm political control. The government’s grip on political space is such that many candidates elected as independents after competing successfully against NDP candidates end up joining the party anyway because they cannot hope to have any influence or reap any rewards if they stay outside.

Following the semiauthoritarian model, the Egyptian government has the formal political sphere neatly organized and policed, and the society has resigned itself to the idea that issues are not settled politically. Even the religious establishment has accepted the government's restrictions and agreed to keep away from the banned area of politics as defined by the government. This does not mean that the Islamic establishment has no influence, however. Knowing that adopting an open political agenda amounts to waving a red flag in front of a bull, it has opted to concentrate on social and cultural agendas that in reality have profound political implications.

RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT

Formally, the Egyptian government has complete control over the religious establishment. It appoints the heads of all three main Islamic institutions: Al Azhar, Dar el Ifta, and the ministry of religious endowments, which in turn control all other Islamic structures for education, research, dissemination, and *fatwas* (a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority). All three institutions are directly and exclusively accountable to the executive. No other authority can exercise any form of control over them. Al Azhar comes under the authority of the prime minister, and Dar el Ifta falls under the authority of the ministry of religious endowments. However, this power structure does not result in the subordination of the religious establishment to the political authority. The reality of the relationship is a complex combination of interdependence, competition, and muted struggle, in which each side is careful to avoid a showdown.

Al Azhar

The institution of Al Azhar is composed of a mosque, the university, the grand sheikh's offices (*mashiakhat al Azhar*), and a host of specialized centers for research, publication, dissemination, and international relations.

Al Azhar receives its funding from the government but considers itself free to decide how best to use the money, protesting against any interference by the government in its spending, organization, or educational curricula. The institutes of Al Azhar have proliferated across the country over the last decade thanks to generous government and private donations from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. There are now over 6,000 institutes that are lavishly equipped, pay salaries three times higher than those paid by the government, and offer their students attractive scholarships and benefits. The government does not exercise any control over their teaching or finances.

Since 1996 Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Al Tantawi has been at the head, or grand sheikh, of Al Azhar, and he is arguably one of the most important political figures in the Egyptian power structure. The government relies on him to confront the radicals within the institution on religious and theoretical grounds and to develop the arguments to counter their discourse. Tantawi is in charge of managing tensions that arise among religious scholars and leaders, thus allowing the government to protect itself by keeping the conflicts inside the institution. Tensions inside Al Azhar serve as a barometer of the general political climate. During the early 1990s, when the Mubarak regime was pitted in open conflict with the Islamist radicals and engaged in fierce repression of them, Al Azhar was also torn apart by dissension.

The Consortium for Islamic Research (*Majma' al Bohouth al Islamiya*), an integral component of Al Azhar, has had a particularly difficult relationship with Tantawi. The center houses a committee of twelve members that issues *fatwas* on questions of concern at the popular level. Despite Tantawi's attempts to unify the issuing of *fatwas* under one body, namely Dar el Ifta (which he headed in the past), the committee continues to ignore his decisions and issues *fatwas* that often contradict his opinions and those of Dar el Ifta. According to its bylaws—as redefined in the mid-1970s—the *Majma'* is responsible for monitoring publications on Islam and Islamic tradition, but it has interpreted its mission in a much broader way. In the early 1990s, it started producing reports to condemn certain books and recommend banning them. The center continues to claim that it has a duty to scrutinize any publication or artistic production that affects “Islamic values, moral public order or the security of the state, including the behavior of the ruler.” It criticizes Tantawi publicly and has come to form an “Al Azhar within Al Azhar.” In effect, the internal conflicts within Al Azhar are becoming difficult to resolve. Further dissension is evident as disputes are increasingly taken to a legal body for arbitration.

Dar el Ifta

Dar el Ifta is formally recognized as the only source of *fatwas*, although this is not the case in practice, as shown earlier. Instead, there is a cacophony of *fatwas* at all levels and even a war between official *fatwas* from the formal institution and so-called civil *fatwas* issued by sheikhs at the community level. For a fee of five Egyptian pounds, anyone can obtain a one-sentence *fatwa* on any issue. There is even a dial-a-*fatwa* hotline service that allows people to obtain *fatwas* over the telephone. Tantawi has sought to contain this phenomenon, and the government has tried to help by signing a protocol in 1998 to reassert his authority over the issuing of all *fatwas*. However, the protocol did not have a lasting impact. The grand mufti (the head of Dar el Ifta) was a former member of the ultraconservative *Gabhat Ulema' el Azhar* (Front of Al Azhar Ulema) and turned out to be less docile and closer to the views of the majority within the religious establishment than Tantawi thought when he picked him for the position. The mufti asserted the primacy of Dar el Ifta over Al Azhar in issuing *fatwas*. He also believed that he had a right to scrutinize the use of income from the religious endowments (*awqaf*) by the ministry. He openly opposed the use of *awqaf* money in what he called risky economic projects, arguing that this money is dedicated to the poor and should not be used by the government. He has denounced with particular vehemence the investment of the *awqaf* revenue in the Toshka project, a particularly controversial desert irrigation project. President Hosni Mubarak launched this mega-enterprise as the signature project of his time in office, but it has had very disappointing results that revealed hasty preparation by dubious experts.

Ministry of Religious Endowments

The minister of religious endowments is a member of the cabinet, and his role is considered to be as important as that of the ministers of interior and information. The ministry administers the funds of all religious endowments, both Christian and Muslim. It is in charge of controlling mosques and preventing infiltration by radical preachers. The ministry is in a permanent struggle to regain control of the over 150,000 mosques that exist across Egypt, and it receives ample government funding to do so. However, the proliferation of unauthorized preachers and unlicensed mosques is simply uncontrollable.² The government lacks the financial means to pay all preachers and, more

important, is unable to provide the needed number of preachers trained in official institutions, primarily Al Azhar, to staff the mosques. Integrating all preaching activities into the sphere of the state is a Sisyphean task. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private mosques continue to offer an alternative religious space, and the distinction between official and private mosques is blurred because many preachers constantly move between the two. For all its power, the Egyptian government is unable to control the religious establishment.

The Religious Establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood

As a major power center whose influence is equal to and at times exceeds that of the government, the religious establishment is naturally targeted by various forces seeking to infiltrate its different branches and turn them into their own institutional vehicles. Chief among such forces is the Muslim Brotherhood movement founded in the 1920s as a grassroots political movement, whose members maintain a complex web of relations with religious clerics.

A de facto alliance has developed between the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Azhar clerics because both want to preserve the autonomy of the institution vis-à-vis the state. The Brotherhood complains about the politicization of Al Azhar, believing it to be used by the government to provide the blessing the government needs for its policies. They demand its depoliticization, by which they do not mean that Al Azhar should not weigh in on issues of policy, but rather that the government should not manipulate the institution. On other issues, however, Al Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood diverge sharply. The ultraconservative clerics of Al Azhar are not allied with the more radical groups who advocated violence in the 1990s. In fact, the extremists among the politicized groups are staunchly opposed to the institution of Al Azhar and have openly clashed with its representatives, including by kidnapping and murdering one of its sheikhs in 1987.

However, many clerics are Muslim Brothers and through them the Brotherhood occasionally manages to gain the upper hand in one or another office, until the head of the institution, backed by the government, intervenes to crush its influence. One of the institutions where these informal but powerful connections between clerics and the Muslim Brotherhood exist is the *Gabhat Ulema' el Azhar* (Front of Al Azhar Ulema). The Front is not institutionally part of Al Azhar, but it is an NGO established in 1946 to look after the social interests of Azhari clerics and their families. In the last decade, it has become the most active and conflict-prone body within the constellation of religious institutions. Under the leadership of Sheikh Jad el Haq, the grand sheikh of Al Azhar at the time, the organization increased its membership fivefold during the early 1990s, and it started issuing *fatwas* to confront secular thinking and preserve Islamic values.³

As soon as Tantawi came to Al Azhar, he clashed with the sheikhs of the Front when he agreed to enforce the government's decision to take control of the mosques and license every preacher. Many of the Front's *Ulema* (clerics) were opposed to state licensing because they were members of the Muslim Brothers, stood little chance of being granted a license by the ministry of religious endowments, and thus would lose their hold on important mosques around the country. The Front was also suspected of being a façade for the Muslim Brotherhood and of sharing its goal of undermining Tantawi's authority. The Front was critical of Tantawi's autocratic practices and argued that Al Azhar should revert to its tradition of consultative decision making in order to restore its credibility. In response, Tantawi dismissed the Front's board and appointed a new one composed of *Ulema* loyal to him.

POLITICAL CHOREOGRAPHY

The relationship between the mighty Egyptian state and the contentious religious establishment remains an unresolved issue marked by constant tension. The political choreography of this relationship has profound consequences for the country.

Reform of the Islamic Establishment

In 1895, the government introduced institutional control over Al Azhar by creating a governing board that was not controlled by the grand sheikh and included nonreligious members, usually government representatives. A 1911 law forbid personnel of Al Azhar from participating in politics, including being a member of a political party. Sanctions associated with this law included disciplinary measures and even expulsion from the institution.

The next set of reforms was introduced by President Gamal Abdel Nasser after the 1952 Free Officers' coup. Nasser's main objective was to bring the religious establishment under the control of the government. However, he also faced a problem with the Muslim Brotherhood and at times chose to accommodate the *Ulema* as a way to take the sting out of the Brotherhood's criticism that his socialist government was opposed to Islam—a strategy the Egyptian government still uses today.

In the early days of the 1952 revolutionary coup, many of the Free Officers had good ties with the Muslim Brothers, who expressed support for the new regime as soon as it had overthrown the monarchy. As a result, some were offered positions in Nasser's first government. While turning down the government posts, the Muslim Brothers nevertheless tried to maintain good relations with the Nasser regime and to convince it to consult with them to ensure that all decisions were in conformity with Islam. Nasser refused, tried to befriend the *Ulema* instead, but also continued to strengthen state control over religious institutions.

His first move in 1955 was to abolish the autonomous *Sharia* courts and unify the judicial system. He also ordered that all mosques and religious charity (*zakat*) should be put under the control of the new ministry of religious endowments.

A 1961 law introduced still more sweeping reforms: The grand sheikh of Al Azhar was to be appointed by the president and no longer elected by his peers. In addition, science, mathematics, and social sciences were introduced in the teaching curricula of Al Azhar, signaling clearly that knowledge of Quran and *Sharia* were insufficient tools for dealing with the challenges of modern life. Due to his charisma and the attraction of his political ideology, Nasser was able to imbue religion with Arab nationalism and to present himself as the defender of the state and the faith. As a result, the sheikhs fell in line with the new order and provided the moral justification for socialism. The sheikhs were in no position to challenge Nasser's credibility with the Egyptian public, which helped further ensconce the religious establishment in the bureaucracy.

After the 1967 Egyptian defeat in the war against Israel, however, Nasser needed to mobilize public opinion in preparation for a new war and sought the help of the religious establishment. The relationship between political and religious authorities took a strategic turn as a consequence. The symbolic turning point was a historic public prayer by Sheikh Sha'rawi, the most popular religious leader to date, following Nasser's announcement of the defeat. He "thanked God for a traumatizing defeat that served to awaken the nation from its engagement on the wrong path, by having left

religion aside.” From this point on, the influence of the religious establishment started increasing, and the trend continues today. The government started to use religion for the national struggle, thinking it could control it. Nasser put Sheikh Sha’rawi in charge of *dawa* (preaching) within the national party, knowing Sha’rawi could mobilize millions. (Indeed, even today, more than seven years after his death, he remains a venerated sheikh and one of the most popular public figures in Egypt.) Sha’rawi’s high profile soon became problematic, however, and Nasser sought to curtail his influence.

After Nasser’s death in 1970, President Anwar Sadat again turned to the religious establishment. Personally religious and also keen to distance himself from Nasser, Sadat made the religious establishment into a major player on the political scene, entrusting it with formulating an ideology to destroy the appeal of Nasserism and to mobilize the population for the next battle against Israel. He appointed Sha’rawi minister of religious endowments and gave the grand sheikh of Al Azhar the title of deputy prime minister.

During the 1970s, however, the religious establishment realized that as a result of the close association with Sadat, it was losing its legitimacy in the eyes of society as a whole. This realization started Al Azhar’s journey toward independence and its strategy to take control of public space and social order away from government. Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar Abdel Halim Mahmud took his political role very seriously. He praised the military’s achievements in the 1973 war against Israel calling it a gift from God, a victory secured through *jihad*. Within a few years, the *Ulema* had succeeded in appropriating the struggle against Israel, presenting it as a battle between the faithful and the atheists.

Sadat was assassinated in 1981 by the most radical elements within the very Islamic movement he had actively nurtured a decade earlier to counter the Nasserite leftist and nationalist legacy. He had played the sorcerer’s apprentice and paid with his life. Sadat’s death was followed by an uprising in Upper Egypt led by the radical Islamists from the Gama’at Islamiya. The state retaliated forcefully since it was a matter of life or death, even arresting militants hiding in mosques. Fearing accusations that it was violating mosques and suppressing religion, the new government of President Hosni Mubarak accompanied the wave of repression against radical Islamists with a campaign to build more mosques.

Growing Influence of the Religious Establishment under Mubarak

Since 1981 the Mubarak regime has successfully pursued a policy of keeping under its control institutions that might prove a threat to its authority. It has controlled the press through chief editors who remain in the same position for decades and exercise a level of censorship some describe as unprecedented in Egypt. All other institutions, such as labor unions and universities, have also been controlled by a stable leadership that prevents challenges to the status quo. As the strategy has become gradually institutionalized and effectively internalized by society, open confrontation has been reduced to a minimum.

Mubarak’s government has followed the same strategy in dealing with the religious establishment. The grand sheikh is expected to keep it under control and does so very effectively, knowing that if he helps the government maintain a monopoly over the political sphere, he will be rewarded by being granted a monopoly over the religious sphere. For example, when Al Azhar faces competition from

graduates of non-Azhari faculties (which are known to provide better quality education), it seeks the support of the government to help reestablish its monopoly over the interpretation of religious texts and the training of preachers.

But the religious establishment has gone even further in its relationship with Mubarak. It has taken advantage of the government's fear of radical Islamists to expand its sphere of influence. In exchange for fighting the influence of radical Islamists, mainstream religious institutions have demanded increased autonomy in the fields of education, preaching, and the media—all fields that do not challenge political authority directly but nevertheless increase the power of religious authority.

No issue is more revealing of the shifting terms of the government's relationship with the religious establishment over the last few years than the issue of *zakat*. This form of charity—mandatory for a good Muslim—represents between 17 and 20 billion Egyptian pounds annually (approximately \$2.7 and \$3.2 billion), and is collected by over twenty different institutions, including NGOs, mosques, hospitals, Islamic banks, and more than 5,000 *zakat* committees affiliated with mosques.⁴ No single authority exercises oversight on the process of collection or distribution.⁵ Historically, *zakat* was always left to the religious establishment to manage as a voluntary contribution from the faithful.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the Egyptian government was emboldened by the international suspicions about Islamic charitable networks and attempted to bring this precious money under its control and use it to cover the deficit in the social security budget, which amounted to some \$2 billion in 2001. A draft law was prepared by the ministry of finance, but it was never submitted to parliament because of the uproar from all of the religious institutions.

The grand sheikh himself openly defied the government, arguing bluntly that the people did not trust the government as they trusted religious institutions and would probably evade paying the *zakat* as they do taxes. The strong negative reaction convinced the government, which apparently had seen no problem in taking a step that affected the image of Egypt as a modern state combating religion's intrusion into politics, to withdraw the bill. In fact, the government even denied having ever prepared one. A few weeks later, the religious establishment launched a counterattack, asking for a reform of religious endowments, criticizing their management by the *awqaf* ministry and calling for a return of the *awqaf* funds to the control of civil society organizations, as was the case before Nasser came to power.

Vital Interests versus Secondary Issues

The dynamics of the relationship between the government and the religious establishment with its mixture of confrontation and accommodation are best understood against the background of what the government considers to be its vital interests and what it dismisses as secondary issues. The government will do everything to protect its vital interests but is willing to allow the religious establishment to take control over issues it considers to be of secondary importance.

The government's definition of what constitutes its vital interests includes its physical security and its image in the eyes of foreign allies and international financial institutions, on whose goodwill much of Egypt's economic development and financial survival depend. When these interests are threatened the government does not hesitate to intervene.

Sources of threat are the Islamist extremists on one hand, and the young crowds that can fill the streets with any political demand on the other hand. Individuals who are identified as agitators capable of mobilizing crowds are closely watched and harshly treated even when they have no Islamist affiliation.

The government also fears sheikhs who develop a popular following and are able to mobilize crowds. The implicit rule is that the government allows the influence of the sheikhs in the public sphere as a way to keep the streets quiet. In Spring 2001, *Al Shaab* (an opposition newspaper and mouthpiece of the Muslim Brotherhood movement) triggered a controversy over a book it considered an insult to the Quran and Islam. Students of Al Azhar University took to the streets in a massive demonstration. The government accused Al Azhar of allowing or even encouraging the demonstration, concluding that the religious establishment had overstepped its bounds and breached the implicit agreement with the state. The newspaper was closed down and the president of Al Azhar University, who was also the head of the *Sharia* commission in the National Democratic Party, was dismissed from this latter position. The issue was not whether or not he was a Muslim Brother; his crime was that he had allowed the use of religion to mobilize crowds and had thus crossed the line of acceptable influence.

The government defends with equal determination its economic interests and does not hesitate to intervene when it sees a threat. In 1989, a conflict erupted between the grand mufti of Dar el Ifta (Tantawi at that time) and the grand sheikh of Al Azhar over whether the payment of interest on bank deposits was legitimate under Islamic law. It is widely accepted in the Muslim world that Islam bans usury (*riba*) and that interest rates are a form of usury. For this reason, the wide network of Islamic banks do not pay interest rates per se and instead offer some form of share in profits from investments. These banks proliferated as oil money increased and religious revival spread across the Muslim world.

Mufti Tantawi stated that the payment of interest rates on bank deposits is acceptable, but a large majority of *Ulema*, led by the grand sheikh of Al Azhar, rejected this position. The controversy came at a critical moment for the government, as it was implementing an International Monetary Fund structural adjustment program that required an increase in interest rates to encourage savings. The government was not able to settle the dispute by taking a firm stand in favor of interest rates. As a consequence, Egyptians lived through a decade of a banking system with no clear rules, which was extensively used by bankers and businessmen to develop a pseudo-Islamic banking system. Islamic banks coexisted side by side with regular banks. Sometimes banks that conducted interest-based transactions also had Islamic branches, creating embarrassing inconsistencies and widespread profiteering by those who controlled the sector.

In this battle, banks and investment firms appointed religious scholars (*fuqaha*) to reassure their clients that their practices conformed to Islamic principles, paying them regular salaries (usually proportionate to their degree of popularity, which determined their ability to attract funds). The government joined the fray by pressuring Tantawi to issue a *fatwa* declaring that interest-paying government bonds were in conformity with Islam. The *fuqaha* advisors and the bank owners saw their interests threatened and sought to pressure Tantawi not to issue his *fatwa*. The government, however, was adamant and the *fatwa* was issued, drawing public criticism of Tantawi by many religious institutions and managers of the Islamic financial system.

Finally, in December 2002, Tantawi was able to secure a majority vote from the Majma' El Bohouth Al Islamiya (the Consortium for Islamic Research) asserting the conformity of interest rates with Islam. Although he was not required to put such a decision to the vote, Tantawi did because he felt he could not decide to issue such a *fatwa* on his own. He anticipated strong reactions, and indeed numerous Islamic institutions across the world criticized Al Azhar for having broken ranks on an issue on which there has been unanimous agreement across the Muslim world for more than 150 years.

Another issue of vital interest in which the state intervenes is the filling of official positions directly linked to its power. Other less critical positions it leaves open to free vote. Until the mid-1990s, elections were held for deans of faculties, village *'omdah* (community leaders who serve as mayors), and heads of many professional associations, but when the government began seeing that Islamists were winning elections for such posts it introduced restrictions to control the results. Deans of university faculties are now appointed, and when elections are held, even elections within professional associations, the state exerts its full capacity of surveillance and interference to influence the outcome.

However, on secondary issues such as women's rights, culture, freedom of thought, and most social issues, the state relinquishes control to the religious establishment, without concern about the impact on Egypt's identity as a modern state. In fact, the government is all the more willing to give in on cultural issues because it is unsuccessful in addressing economic and social problems. Concessions in the cultural realm are highly visible, least costly for the government, and most valued by the religious establishment and Islamic activists.

These secondary issues are areas in which the deep malaise is most clearly reflected, precisely because they are among the few that the government has not sought to control. The heated debates over cultural and social issues reveal the deep divisions over unresolved fundamental questions: What kind of society is Egypt striving to build? How do Egyptians relate to one another and the world? Should Egyptians define their own modernity, or relate to Western modernity and adopt its basic values? Clifford Geertz described a similar malaise in Indonesia this way: "How open, how borderless, how transnational an economy does society really want? How 'global', how 'developed'; how 'market rational' can we be, should we be, dare we be?"⁶

RAMIFICATIONS

The government's willingness to allow the religious establishment to exert its control over issues it considers to be of secondary importance has had profound repercussions for the country. A conservative interpretation of Islam permeates Egyptian society to an extent that appeared unthinkable twenty years ago. The influence of the religious establishment is like a thread that runs through all Egyptian government and social institutions.

Religious Capture of the Public Sphere

Historically, Muslim societies, although not democratic in the Western sense of the word, had a public sphere or arena in which the ruler, various elites, and social groups negotiated and confronted one another continually about the definition of the common good and the legitimacy

and accountability of authority, challenging existing hegemonies.⁷ This remained true as long as the Muslim world was under the caliphate regime, which came to an end in 1924. Although this negotiation process took place within the framework of *Sharia*, a vibrant civil society crystallized as a result of the interaction among the *Ulema*, the law, the rulers, and various sectors of society.

The modern Egyptian state gradually acquired administrative and financial control over the religious establishment. In the last two decades, however, the religious establishment has regained its autonomy, and its moral authority often appears to surpass the authority of political rulers. It has become the arbiter on many issues with political implications, while continuing to appear to play outside the political arena. The state is finding itself forced to seek religious approval and support and pays the price by making new concessions to the establishment. The idea that secularization was a historical mistake has managed to work its way into people's minds because the political authorities neither appear able to formulate a vision for the society nor able to stand for specific values or principles.

In Egypt today the relationship between political and religious authorities looks neither like a return to what it was in the traditional Muslim state nor like what it should be in a modern secular state. The religious authorities now have unprecedented power, and they have come to control a most influential social machinery, similar in many respects to that established by the *Shia* clergy of Iran. Although in Egypt the government does not initiate this Islamization process nor does it seek to institutionalize it through laws, its benign neglect toward—and at times complicity in—this process allows the religious establishment to assert its moral legitimacy and deploy its strategy.

The religious establishment is in a unique position to impose its beliefs and value system thanks to its control over key institutions of socialization and tools of dissemination, including mosques, schools, radio and television, and publishing houses. Control over audio-visual media is critical, because they are used as a tool to reach people's senses, create myths and symbols, and nourish a common memory and history of the community, rather than to disseminate information.⁸ In addition to indoctrination, the religious establishment also uses coercive methods through the use of agents that constitute a "thought police," as discussed below.

The ideas disseminated by the Egyptian religious establishment have gradually evolved into a frame of reference that dominates the society and even reaches out to the Islamic *Umma* (Islamic community) beyond its national borders. The religious institutions constantly comment on the issue of the day, from the most trivial to the most serious: peace with Israel, suicide bombings and martyrdom, transplant of human organs, smoking in public, men and women shaking hands, the wearing of wigs, and so on. Thus society lives with the idea that Islam has answers for every aspect of life and can offer a viable framework for social order. Some sheikhs speak out on political issues (although they focus on foreign rather than domestic issues). But the ultimate objective is control over the social order. They seek to exploit resentment toward the West or Israel by criticizing the peace agenda or dependence on U.S. aid, which in turn increases their credibility among the faithful, allowing them to advise more forcefully on social matters such as birth control, female circumcision, marriage, divorce, and the veil. A modern secular state would feel deeply threatened by such a strategy. Turkey, for example, reacts strongly against much lesser interference in public matters by the religious authorities. The Egyptian state, however, does not try to defend a particular value system. Its main concern is survival, and to ensure that it is willing to cede large portions of the terrain that should have constituted its power base as a secular state.

To close the political space for the Islamists it sees as a threat, the government has paid a price far higher than it would have by allowing them formal political existence. It has given in to the clerics' demand not to allow Marxists on television because they question the absoluteness of Islam. It has become reluctant to publish the thoughts of anti-Islamist or secular scholars, and it is overly sensitive to the emergence of an enlightened discussion of religion. Forbidden areas have multiplied, including debates on history, political thought, philosophy, social practices and their foundations, even science and knowledge in general. Intellectuals and experts from a wide range of fields are systematically slandered, and as a consequence they increasingly withdraw from broad areas of debate and refrain from expressing their opinions on matters of concern to society.⁹

Closing the door to political participation encouraged the emergence of a booming new market of ideas in which cultural products imported from abroad (particularly from Saudi Arabia) and from the distant past hold sway. Books of famous *fuqaha* dating back to the fourteenth century are now bestsellers; the film industry, largely funded by oil money, propagates conservative social ideals; and returning migrant workers from the Gulf seek to reproduce the model of society they experienced there.

Absolutist positions, reductionism, and the claim of a monopoly over truth and morality are born from the absence of political competition and negotiations. Identities and values create segregated camps, leading to the belief that nothing is negotiable. Identities become dangerous when they are static and serve only to assert differences. Values are inevitably intransigent when they are not mediated and negotiated.

In the new climate prevailing in Egypt, issues are no longer debated in terms of choices between alternative solutions with advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits. The only question has become whether something is *halal* or *haram*, permissible or forbidden, as if religion takes precedence over life itself. The religious establishment appears to assume that Egyptians are lost in the dark and should trust religious authorities to guide them through darkness instead of seeking to understand and judge reality for themselves.

For the religious establishment, cultural authenticity has become the ultimate symbol of sovereignty, in the same way that development of heavy industry was the symbol of progress and independence for Nasser's Egypt. As in Iran and other Muslim countries, the cultural field is where the fiercest battles are being waged. And in the words of a prominent sheikh from Al Azhar, it is clear where they believe the threat is coming from: "There was a long-standing American plan to target Islam but it was postponed until the end of communism. Since the downfall of communism, the West declared officially that Islam was the alternative enemy and Egypt is the first target because it is home to Al Azhar, the greatest symbol of Islam. The plan now is to secularize Al Azhar."¹⁰

In the grand mufti's more radical terms, the religious establishment is responsible for protecting people's minds from intellectual poisons just as the ministry of health protects their stomachs by punishing those who circulate poisonous food. It is also responsible for controlling exchanges with other cultures by erecting an intellectual customs service to search minds for any smuggled culture.

Egypt is now subjected to multiple layers of censorship. As in the past, there is the state censorship over political matters, exercised by the ministry of interior with its security apparatus and by the ministry of information. There is now also the religious censorship from Al Azhar, and, even more insidiously, there is often a moral censorship exerted by society itself on cultural products,

the media, women's dress code, and sexuality. Minds are increasingly imprisoned. Free thinking becomes an act of courage that one cannot expect from ordinary citizens.

Wearing the veil is an issue of daily debate and is presented as an achievement for women who willingly choose to wear it. Women are often forced to wear the veil by their social milieu or future husbands; many women make the choice voluntarily and enthusiastically after attending a few lessons on Islam from a charismatic male or female preacher. Such preachers have turned women's virtue into a banner to defend the dignity of society as a whole. New laws that protect women's rights, such as the law allowing women to initiate a divorce and the campaigns against female circumcision, are met with accusations of selling off society's collective honor and values to the West. The protection of women's virtue, it seems, is expected to make up for what is seen as the government's inability to protect the nation's sovereignty and dignity. This is not exclusive to Egypt as a Muslim society. In the late 1940s after the end of World War II and the liberation of France, Arletty, a famous French actress was accused of what was known as "horizontal collaboration," namely, having slept with "les Boches" (the Germans), to which Arletty replied, "Well, you guys shouldn't have let them in!" If male soldiers and the government of France had been incapable of defending the nation against occupation, they had no right, Arletty argued, to try to make up for it by blaming the women for having surrendered their virtue. In Egypt as in most of the Arab world, this connection between the sensitivity toward foreign penetration and the inflated values of shame and decency, particularly around women's virtue, is a semiconscious but powerful one.

Defying the religious establishment brings censorship and punishment, whereas joining the mainstream Islamic network brings many rewards, because it entails much more than a mere political affiliation. A person joining the Islamic network steps into a world in which he is adopted, protected, and even procured a spouse. Thus a new identity is shaped by a network of social organizations with their specific ways of thinking, language, and references, and it becomes a new way of life. Members find a friendly environment as well as the opportunity to champion a "real cause" that procures self-esteem and emotional compensations for the frustrations borne outside.¹¹ Specialists of communism have described similar processes within communist parties across Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s.

Implicit in this hegemonic discourse with such powerful means of dissemination is the exclusion or depreciation of other beliefs. Muslims joining the network are taught that they are morally superior and that they should be suspicious of the outside. For the *Umma*, the outside is the West; for the faithful who go to the mosque, it can easily become a Christian neighbor and Christian churches. This situation pushes Christians, but also secularists, leftists, and liberals, to seek refuge in their own camp and to cultivate their differences as their main way of existing. Because of the closure of political space and deafness on the part of the government, there is no incentive to act, join forces, or build alliances on any issue. The warmth that the religious community provides to the followers is built on the coldness nurtured against other groups within the same society.

Religious Lobby within Government Institutions

How has the religious establishment come to exercise such enormous influence on the Egyptian state and society? After all, Egypt is not Iran, where clerics rule the country. In fact, the Egyptian religious establishment has a formal agreement with the government that forbids it from interfering in politics. But it has exclusive control over the mosques and a strong presence in all academic institutions,

government agencies, and many civil society organizations where it can preach “the truth.” This allows it to deflect any interference from the government.

The Islamic establishment has secured a presence for itself within most government institutions. Its influence runs like a thread woven throughout the entire fabric of the administration—in the ministries of culture, education, social affairs, and information, for example, but also in the media and security agencies. Members of the Islamic network are also present in other ministries although in smaller numbers. It is often difficult to distinguish between individuals who are personally religious and those who are religious activists, because it is never clear when and why a shift from one to the other may occur. This thread is what allows the religious establishment to monitor government action from within and ignite a controversy in the public space on any issue it chooses.

The presence of this thread is very evident in the censoring of intellectual works. Over the last two decades, dozens if not hundreds of plays, films, novels, and academic works of scholars of religion, philosophy, sociology, and politics have come under scrutiny from the religious machinery. The religious establishment often reacts to such works through a convoluted series of procedures. An employee of the national book committee who usually remains anonymous (or perhaps does not even exist) might present a complaint to the control commission, the main agency in charge of censorship in the ministry of culture. The commission then examines a given book and determines whether or not it constitutes a breach or offense. But a breach or an offense to what? That is less and less clear: to “morality, public decency, or what is considered socially acceptable.” If the commission decides that the book is offensive, it transfers it to the “relevant authorities” (that is, Al Azhar). The commission insists that although it has no right to confiscate a book (published or still being printed) the Majma’ of Al Azhar does. When this process is started, it almost invariably ends, with the Majma’ formally banning the book.

Censorship is also often exercised when a journalist writes an article in either specialized Islamic newspapers or the official press (including in the Islamist paper of the ruling NDP party, *Al Liwa’ el Islami*). Although the journalist may claim that the article does not need clearance from the religious authorities because it does not deal with Islam, the article will still be reviewed by the relevant committee within the censorship administration of the ministry of culture. Two of three committee members may agree with the journalist, but if the third considers the article to need clearance from Al Azhar, the process is set in motion, and Al Azhar issues a report. Its condemnations are usually formulated in the following terms: The article is decadent and dangerous, contains words that are indecent, constitutes a danger for public decency, pollutes the minds and encourages deviation and vile instincts among the youth, threatens the motherland, and so on. The controversy is thus started and will be amplified in the thousands of pulpits that the religious establishment controls.

In the legal field, too, the clerics have regained the influence they had lost to secular law over the decades of modernization of the state.¹² Under President Sadat in 1980, a constitutional change made *Sharia* the primary source of legislation. This was enough for conservative judges to begin ruling according to what was considered “morally just,” based on norms defined and inculcated on society by the religious establishment.¹³

With the support of the *Ulema* and the Islamic members of parliament, *Sharia*-inspired laws have gradually crept back into the penal code, most often without formal change that can be dated precisely.

Al Azhar has no recognized role in the legal sphere and no formal control over any section of the judiciary, but it has successfully infiltrated the bar association and penetrated the judiciary system. The adoption of this strategy coincides with the end of the government's campaign against the violent Islamist groups in the early 1990s. Some analysts believe the two developments are directly related: Radical Islamists, having lost the battle of violence, changed tactics and tried to gradually conquer the judiciary.¹⁴ Although the individuals who seek to Islamize the culture and the judiciary are not the same as those who take up arms, the two categories are united in their radical thinking and their ultimate goal of building a uniform monolithic Islamic society. The government mobilizes very effectively against those who turn to violence but gives a free hand to those who seek to influence the culture and the judiciary. It also refuses to engage in a political dialogue with those in the middle who seek to pursue their goals by setting forth political demands.

Al Azhar has been working consistently over the years to expand its control over cultural products and publications, but it initially lacked the legal authority to do so. The rise to the position of president of the State Council of a respected jurist known for his Islamist ideas in 1996 allowed Al Azhar to start a convoluted process to gain the legal authority to impose censorship. It secured an opinion from the State Council stating that the Egyptian constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, that Al Azhar's bylaws make it the protector of *Sharia* and the source of opinion on religious affairs, and hence that Al Azhar has jurisdiction over enforcing Islamic public order and morality. Such an opinion from a respected jurist acquires the force of a *fatwa*.

Al Azhar seized upon this opinion to force all institutions with a role in research, publishing, and media, including the ministry of culture, to submit their products to it as the only body qualified to deliver authorizations. It declared that all new laws should be submitted to Al Azhar or to Dar el Ifta and that the parliament is committed not to issue any laws that are not in accordance with *Sharia*. This self-proclaimed mission is meant to "purify" Egyptian legislation by referring all laws to the religious establishment and by abiding by the *fatwas* that the religious establishment issues. The State Council's opinion represents an alarming growth in Al Azhar's role and amounts to giving the religious establishment the legal backing to exercise control over public order at large. Al Azhar has thus established a de facto trusteeship over all government institutions and society. No authority has been willing to stand up and point out the fact that this new prerogative granted to Al Azhar contradicts many existing laws.

The judiciary increasingly finds itself in situations where it has to arbitrate intellectual and cultural disputes and must resort to principles that are not embedded in clearly formulated laws and understood by all participants in the process—the judge, the defense, and the citizen. Judges thus are forced to act simultaneously as interpreters, judges, and politicians, and as a result their personal beliefs acquire disproportionate weight.

RECLAIMING POLITICS

There is no point talking about political reform in Egypt, and even less democracy, unless the political arena is reclaimed as the place where decisions are made, and policy discussions are pulled back from the realm of religious discourse into that of political discourse. The challenge is how to break the present pattern of domination of the public sphere by the religious authority.

Whether the Quran or other Islamic texts contain radical or intolerant ideas is not the issue. Some certainly do because they reflect different historical phases in the expansion of Islam, the expansion of the Islamic state, and the evolution of its relations with others at different points in time. That such ideas are in the texts is one thing; that people are kept busy with them is quite another. This is true of any religious establishment that has the power to choose “which of the prevalent beliefs and speculations it wants to lay out as dogma and which to declare as heretical.”¹⁵

Crucial to the process of reclaiming a political space would be the legalization of Islamic parties as a less dangerous alternative to the domination by the supposedly apolitical religious establishment. A political party or movement is a recognizable player. If it seeks to be legalized, it registers under a name, has an address, publicizes the names of its leaders, and spells out its agenda. Such an identifiable actor participates with others in a debate over issues. Political movements may have an ideological agenda, but they fight political battles. They can be required to respect the rules and can be countered through political means. In contrast, religious authorities that claim to be apolitical are more problematic and dangerous because they are not required to undergo the electoral test of credibility or to measure their popularity or abide by set rules.

People can oppose a government, its laws, and institutions and lead a democratic battle for change, but if they oppose the religious establishment, it is their faith, not their political choices, that are called into question. Disagreement over censorship becomes a religious issue instead of a civic one. Political disagreement becomes a cultural confrontation. Debate over any issue involving the religious establishment is based on the absolutist premise that those who disagree with it disagree with Islam. Religious scholars and their institutions are the actors *par excellence* of the clash of civilizations.

The banning of Islamic parties has other negative consequences. Because they have not been allowed to form their own party or parties, Islamists in Egypt have instead infiltrated every existing political party, state bureau, and nonstate institution, and they have become a pressure group in all of them. Because the influence of political parties is so limited, party leaders are forced to court the feelings of their remaining members to keep their support, and they feel the best way to do so is by using the Islamic discourse.¹⁶ The result is that all political parties have adopted the Islamic vocabulary and slogans, and seek to outbid each other in calling for the implementation of *Sharia*.

Because the religious establishment has created an atmosphere of suspicion about other religions, the political parties are tempted to ride the trend or at best do not seek to counter it. The larger the political party, the less responsible its discourse on inter-religious strife because its constituency is in large part affected by sectarianism. Only elitist parties such as the liberal Wafd maintain a responsible discourse on this issue.

Egypt's Options

Authoritarian systems work to prevent the emergence of an alternative political elite or other serious political challenges. Egypt has been extraordinarily successful in this respect. With no political society nurtured over two generations, the unmovable leaders have no challengers and no partners. They have paid a high price, however, for this success: They have unintentionally inflated the role of the religious establishment, which does not have anything concrete to offer to solve the problems the country faces.

The government thus remains the one player that creates new realities on the ground and is expected to provide answers to the problems of uncontrolled population growth and the resulting societal needs, as well as to challenges of globalization and foreign policy. With this do-it-all syndrome, the government has made all other players and society in general irrelevant. It has contributed to strengthening the barrier between political authority and society at a time when society's mobilization is needed so that the development process can be inclusive and thus succeed. The religious establishment offers no help with these problems.

But the Egyptian state has proven incapable of solving these problems alone. It needs to enlarge the process and allow the battle for change to be waged between political forces that have a name, a face, a legal status, an address, and a platform. And Islamists need to be included in this process. This strategy is not without risks, but the examples of Turkey and Algeria provide powerful reminders that integration of Islamist parties may help a country move on toward greater democracy, whereas their repression may trigger a situation of protracted violence.

Egyptian society has very similar attitudes and expectations to Turkish society vis-à-vis the state, which suggests that the top-down model followed by Turkey might be suitable for initiating genuine political liberalization in Egypt as well. A major lesson from Turkey is that the democratic game has altered political calculations among Turkish Islamic leaders, leading them to realize that demagogic religious discourse and the manipulation of symbols do not pay. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey's ruling party, made the leap toward democracy and became a serious political force the moment it understood that questioning the founding principles of the Turkish Republic leads to polarization and loss of public support at the center. It won the elections when it began to address people's social and economic concerns. In the current environment in Egypt, there are many indications that it could still open its political system in a controlled manner, but that may become more difficult with the passage of time. Time is a key factor in determining whether the Turkish scenario of peaceful integration of the Islamists and transition to democracy will prevail, or whether a more violent and confrontational course will be taken resulting in a radicalization of politics. Delaying a political opening makes the Algerian scenario more likely in Egypt. It was not only the nature of the Algerian state and society that brought confrontation, but also the Algerian government's mismanagement of social and political demands during the two decades leading up to the crisis.

The question of what to do with the Islamists is the central challenge of democratic change in Egypt and the Arab world. Political Islam is a popular voice, just as communism was for close to a century in Europe. Islamists have all they need to enter into democratic competition from a position of strength: money, an educated elite with a reputation for integrity, a solid base at the grassroots, an ethical discourse, an anticorruption agenda, and most important, a social agenda. Eradicating them is proving impossible, so containment and taming are more realistic goals until new historical circumstances can bring change.

Opening the door to the participation of Islamists is not without risks of course, but it cannot be avoided. Would the Islamists seek to confiscate democracy and keep power once elected? Would they replace the rule of law with the rule of *fatwas*? Fears and suspicions are legitimate, but they do not provide a convincing reason for denying the Islamists a place at the political table. They do, however, justify that a serious challenge must be put to the Islamist political movements to choose between two options: either revert to being social movements with a religious and charitable character, or

engage in a renewed effort of exegesis (*ijtihad*) that would lead them to admit first and foremost the need for a state that is neutral toward all different religious communities. This transformation à la Christian Democrats is what the Islamists in Turkey underwent in order to reach power.

Egypt's powerful religious establishment introduces a factor that did not exist in either Turkey or Algeria. In a process of political liberalization that would include the Islamist movement, the Islamic institutions would become a major object of competition between the government and the Islamists, both of which would seek to mobilize them to serve their own social and political agenda. Even with such a risk in mind, the government might still find it possible to achieve liberalization through a controlled process that will maintain enough strings in its hands. Egypt could succeed where Algeria failed because a public space exists with a diversity of opinions, trends of thought, political parties, and civil society organizations. Even if these remain weak for having been deliberately reduced to insignificance by the government, they have recently shown that they stand ready to be energized at the first sign of political liberalization.

The run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005 brought a few surprises to observers of the Egyptian political scene. The government's reluctance to concede genuine reforms and its resistance to power sharing is not one of them. The surprises were first, that there is a vibrant civil and political society able to mobilize, formulate demands, and make good use of the international and Arab media to exert pressure on and embarrass the government. Second, the movement is diverse and reveals a much more pluralistic political scene than existing legal parties reflect. While the mobilization of judges, doctors, journalists, academics, and intellectuals in public protest movements such as Kefaya remain elite based, their voices alter the prevailing vision of a monolithic society where Islamists are the only existing opposition force. Third, the Islamists themselves are cautiously avoiding any step that might indicate an intention of monopolizing the opposition movement and are actively seeking alliances with other forces calling for democratization.

Role of Outside Partners

What implications can outside partners draw? How can they help in promoting change, through which institutions, and by dealing with which players?

No doubt there is a need to reform the Egyptian religious establishment, the training of preachers, religious education, and the educational system at large, but this process will take generations before it produces visible results. A Western agenda that openly seeks to promote religious reform is an erroneous and arguably dangerous approach. It is dangerous because it will most likely cause the religious establishment to cast itself as the noble force resisting foreign interference and thus inhibit other groups from working for reform for fear of being accused of caving to outside demands. It is also erroneous, because the only means to tackle the influence of the religious establishment within a reasonable time frame are reform of the political authority, new constitutional rules, and restoration of politics to the appropriate arena.

Egypt receives assistance from over twenty bilateral and multilateral donors. Beyond its vital need for foreign aid, it is also keen to be recognized as an important and responsible actor of the international community through participating in regional security arrangements, contributing to peace-keeping in conflict situations and competing to secure a seat for itself within the

United Nations Security Council if and when it is enlarged to include new members. With such considerations, the Egyptian government is likely to be increasingly receptive to a political dialogue that builds the link between international stature and democratic reforms.

Reintroducing political requirements into development assistance programs is crucial. Donors and outside partners have only recently started doing so. But for such an approach to succeed, there are two important conditions. Donors should first be consistent in their demands and sustain them over a long period of time, regardless of other strategic priorities, as the government will seek ways of subverting the process and buying time. Second, by focusing on political conditions, foreign partners would be acknowledging that cultural, educational, or religious reforms are part of the political responsibilities of the government. By interfering directly in those areas, donors are alienating the vast majority of public opinion who sees such an approach as a breach to sovereignty. If donors emphasize the link between responsible political action and respect for state sovereignty, they are more likely to gain support among civil society for their role in promoting reform.

Foreign partners also need to show increased interest in social issues and encourage political forces, both the ruling party and opposition forces, to develop a credible social welfare agenda among existing political forces. This is necessary to mitigate the impact of donor policy over the last two decades that has promoted market-oriented economic reforms with damaging consequences for the poor. It is also necessary to mitigate the influence of the Islamists who represent the only political force with a political platform that speaks to the concerns of the population, 90 percent of which are poor.

Islamists in Egypt may well have understood the new U.S. agenda for the Middle East as the coming of their hour; some seem to believe that they should be preparing themselves to “inherit power.” If the inclusion of Islamists into the democratization process is a necessary evil, it is also essential and more urgent than ever to revitalize and nurture other political forces. Foreign partners are showing considerable interest in the modernization of the ruling National Democratic Party. They tend to neglect other existing political parties as unrepresentative, divided, and insignificant and promote the idea that civil society organizations and social movements might make up for the weakness of opposition parties. Although it is undoubtedly true that other parties suffer from those weaknesses, it would be unfair to dismiss them outright because it would mean accepting the Islamists’ claim that they represent the only grassroots political movement. Or it would mean accepting the authoritarian government’s argument that political parties are dehydrated and irrelevant, when the blame should clearly be on the government for closing political space. It would also be unwise because it would imply an acceptance of the Islamists’ rationale of a monolithic society with a culture, a history, and an identity that is exclusively Islamic, which is clearly not Egypt’s reality. In Egypt, no less than in any other country of the region with a long history of diverse cultural influences, religion cannot provide an institutional basis for a common morality. A sound political authority is the only force that can ensure that religion is part of what Talal Asad characterized as “inessential to our common politics, economy, science and morality.”¹⁷

Cultivating diversity within Egyptian society is an urgent priority and all forces ready to mobilize and build alliances are needed to defeat the resilience of authoritarianism.

NOTES

- ¹ This study on Egypt is part of a forthcoming series that examines the relationship between religious and political authorities in several Muslim countries including Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.
- ² There are no official statistics on the number of mosques in Egypt, and estimates differ extensively, varying from 150,000 to 200,000.
- ³ Mohammad Kamal El Sayyed Mohammad, *Al Azhar Jami'an wa Jami'atan* [Al Azhar, the Mosque, and the University], book 4 (Cairo: Majma' Al Bohouth al Islamiya, 1984).
- ⁴ Abdel Ghaffar Shoukr, ed., *Al jam'iyat al ahliya al Islamiya fi Misr* [Islamic Civil Society Organizations in Egypt] (Cairo: Dar al Amin, 2001).
- ⁵ Data from Al Azhar published by *Al Wafd*, November 10, 2001.
- ⁶ *New York Review of Books*, May 7, 2000.
- ⁷ S. Eisenstadt, "Introduction," in *Public Spheres in Muslim Societies*, 3rd edition, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).
- ⁸ Philippe Braud, *Sociologie Politique* (Paris: Librairie Generale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1996); see especially chapter on political culture.
- ⁹ Farag Foda, *Qabl el soqoot* [Before Falling] (Cairo: privately printed, 1985).
- ¹⁰ Sheikh Ibrahim el Kholi, *Al Shaab*, August 7, 1998.
- ¹¹ For a fascinating account by a young Islamist radical of his personal experience with one of the movements of Gama'at el Islamiya and how he left it, see *Khaled el Berri, Al-Dunya Agmal minal Ganna* [Earth Is More Beautiful than Heaven] (Beirut: Dar el Nahar, 2001).
- ¹² Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam: Les Oulemas d'Al Azhar dans l'Egypte Contemporaine* [Guardians of Islam: The Ulema of Al Azhar in Contemporary Egypt] (Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 1996).
- ¹³ The well-known case of Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid—who was declared an apostate by a court and divorced from his wife for having written a critical essay of Islamic discourse in Egypt—will remain one of the milestones of this strategy. The court's decision was not based on a law, because there was no law that regulated *hisba* (an Islamic principle based on the value of common social interest according to which each Muslim has a duty to enforce Good and chase Evil to protect society). The judge thus had to base his ruling on his own interpretation of what the dominant Islamic school of thought (the Hanafi school) "would have ruled."
It took three years for the state to produce a law that regulates the religious principle of *hisba*, a law that is largely influenced by Islamist thinking as it merely limits the right to raise a case for *hisba* to the general prosecutor. By so doing, the government was throwing the onus again on the judiciary to solve sensitive issues that it does not want to address, thus allowing a violation of the principle of separation of the legislative and judiciary authorities.
- ¹⁴ Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, *Naqd al khitab al dimi* [Critique of Islamic Discourse], 3rd edition (Cairo: Madbouli Publications, 1995).
- ¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968).
- ¹⁶ Gamal Abdel Gawad, "The Limits of Bureaucratic Management of the Religious Issue," *Al Abram Strategic Files* (Arabic version), February 2002.
- ¹⁷ Talal Asad, "The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument," in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Through research, publishing, convening, and, on occasion, creating new institutions and international networks, Endowment associates shape fresh policy approaches. Their interests span geographic regions and the relations between governments, business, international organizations, and civil society, focusing on the economic, political, and technological forces driving global change.

Through its Carnegie Moscow Center, the Endowment helps to develop a tradition of public policy analysis in the former Soviet Republics and to improve relations between Russia and the United States. The Endowment publishes *Foreign Policy*, one of the world's leading magazines of international politics and economics, which reaches readers in more than 120 countries and in several languages.

For more information about the Carnegie Endowment visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org.

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project analyzes efforts by the United States and members of the international community to promote democracy worldwide. The project also examines the state of democracy around the world, looking at patterns of success and failure in transitions to democracy. Most recently, it has launched a special effort to analyze the problems of democracy in the Middle East and the challenges the United States faces in its new attempt to promote democracy in that region.

The project also publishes the *Arab Reform Bulletin*, a timely, incisive, and objective e-monthly that analyzes political developments in the Middle East. Each issue features original work from authors in the region, United States, and Europe. Read current and back issues at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/ArabReform.

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project is part of the Endowment's **Global Policy Program**, which addresses the policy challenges arising from the globalizing processes of economic, political, and technological change. The program recognizes that globalization, though by nature a universalizing phenomenon, extends around the world unevenly, producing sharply varied effects, both positive and negative. The program focuses on integrating the emerging global policy agenda with traditional security concerns, and also seeks to increase public understanding of globalization.

For more about Carnegie's Democracy and Rule of Law Project, visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/democracy.

Carnegie Papers

2005

63. *The Dangers of Political Exclusion: Egypt's Islamist Problem* (B. Kodmani)
62. *Why Did the Poorest Countries Fail to Catch Up?* (B. Milanovic)
61. *Legalism Sans Frontières? U.S. Rule-of-Law Aid in the Arab World* (D. Mednicoff)
60. *The Complexity of Success: The U.S. Role in Russian Rule of Law Reform* (M. Spence)
59. *Evaluating Palestinian Reform* (N. Brown)
58. *Judicial Reform in China: Lessons from Shanghai* (V. Hung)
57. *Lessons Not Learned: Problems with Western Aid for Law Reform in Postcommunist Countries* (W. Channell)
56. *Evaluating Middle East Reform: How Do We Know When It Is Significant?* (M. Ottaway)
55. *Competing Definitions of the Rule of Law: Implications for Practitioners* (R. Belton)

2004

54. *E.U.–Russia Relations: Interests and Values—A European Perspective* (R. Schuette)
53. *The Political-Economic Conundrum: The Affinity of Economic and Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (E. Bellin)
52. *Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment?* (A. Hawthorne)
51. *Cambodia Blazes a New Path to Economic Growth and Job Creation* (S. Polaski)
50. *Integrating Democracy Promotion into the U.S. Middle East Policy* (M. Dunne)
49. *Islamists in the Arab World: The Dance around Democracy* (G. Fuller)
48. *Democracy and Constituencies in the Arab World* (M. Ottaway)
47. *Development and Foreign Investment: Lessons Learned from Mexican Banking* (J. Steinfeld)
46. *Detering Conflict in the Taiwan Strait: The Successes and Failures of Taiwan's Defense Reform and Modernization Program* (M. Swaine)
45. *Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform* (R. Youngs)
44. *Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?* (A. Hawthorne)
43. *Small Enterprises and Economic Policy* (A. Åslund, S. Johnson)
42. *Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World* (M. Ottaway)

2003

41. *Beyond Rule of Law Orthodoxy: The Legal Empowerment Alternative* (S. Golub)
40. *Strengthening Linkages between U.S. Trade Policy and Environmental Capacity Building* (J. Audley, V. Ulmer)
39. *Is Gradualism Possible? Choosing a Strategy for Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (T. Carothers)
38. *Verifying North Korean Nuclear Disarmament* (J. Wolfsthal, F. McGoldrick, S. Cheon)
37. *Liberalization versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform* (D. Brumberg)
36. *The Enlargement of the European Union: Consequences for the CIS Countries* (A. Åslund, A. Warner)
35. *Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility* (M. Ottaway)
34. *Promoting the Rule of Law Abroad: The Problem of Knowledge* (T. Carothers)
33. *The Other Face of the Islamist Movement* (M. Kamel Al-Sayyid)

2002

32. *China's WTO Commitment on Independent Judicial Review: An Opportunity for Political Reform* (V. Mei-Ying Hung)
31. *Fire in the Hole: Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Options for Counterproliferation* (M. Levi)
30. *Mythmaking in the Rule of Law Orthodoxy* (F. Upham)

For a complete list of Carnegie Papers, go to www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.