

Political Factors in Al-Azhar's Foreign Relations

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In the process of modernization in the Middle East countries, Islam has a profound impact on the reform of the nations' political systems. Egypt, as the most populous country in the Middle East, has been struggling to restore regional dominance. When all Egyptian regimes were actively involved in regional and international affairs, al-Azhar, as a long-established Islamic Sunni authority, has also been an influential voice on behalf of Egypt. Since the time of Muhammad Ali in the 19th century, Egyptian leaders have always viewed al-Azhar as a powerful tool for shaping and promoting the domestic and foreign policies of the government with which Egyptian leaders could gradually expand their control over the nation. It was not until the constitutional change in 2012 that al-Azhar was freed from state control and regained some degree of independence. However, as it has provided legitimacy for the government's controversial policies for a long time, al-Azhar has come under increasing criticism and questioning. The "religious reform" proposed by President Sisi in 2015, attempting to change the right of religious discourse, has undoubtedly worsened al-Azhar. However, al-Azhar and Sisi are not completely opposites. The two sides have profound common interests in counterterrorism and social welfare. It is also with Sisi's acquiescence and support that al-Azhar has frequently appeared on the international stage to export the Islamic values of peace and tolerance.

Keywords: al-Azhar, Egypt, politics, foreign affair

Introduction

Historically, competition, cooperation, and even tension between political powers and different religions have always been presented in the process of Egypt's political modernization. At present, the relationship between political power and religion in the process of Egyptian modernization is mainly manifested in the following four aspects: the relationship between Islamic secularism and radical Islamism, the relationship between the Egyptian government and the Copts, the relationship of political power, moderate Islamism and Copts united against radical Islamism, and the relationship between political power and orthodox Islam. Among them, the relationship between political power and orthodox Islam occupies a very important place.

What the secular regime wished was to rely on Islam to maintain and expand the legitimacy of the regime, whilst did not want the orthodox Islam, represented by al-Azhar, to gain more political influence. During Nasser's rule, Azhar University was nationalized, and al-Azhar system was controlled by the government. Sadat and Mubarak basically continued Nasser's secularized policy and tightened restrictions on the religious sphere. The al-Azhar system has become a policy implementation tool for the government to a great extent. Although al-Azhar tried to make an independent religious voice in the 1990s, it did not make a substantive breakthrough. Secular politics in Egypt was weakened for a time after the Arab spring, when Morsi, a

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representative of political Islam, came to power. In December 2012, the independence of al-Azhar was greatly enhanced, further strengthening the authority of Islam, when the new Constitution was adopted by Egyptian referendum which stipulated the independence of al-Azhar. Since then, the political discourse power of orthodox Islam, centered on al-Azhar, has increased, and the power interactions with the secular regime have become frequent and intense. In 2013, the Egyptian military, headed by Sisi, deposed president Morsi and began a nationwide purge of the forces of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Azhar publicly supported Sisi, which increased the legitimacy of military actions. However, with the continuous consolidation of Sisi's regime, the relationship between the two sides has become delicate. In 2014, the Sisi's government reformulated a new constitution, which established al-Azhar as an Islamic authority whose main function is to spread Islam, deliberately weakening the political power of al-Azhar. Especially after Sisi announced the religious revolution in 2015, the two sides expressed their discontent with each other in public many times. After that, the disagreements between Sisi and al-Azhar have often been expressed in public.

This paper aims to introduce the history and functions of al-Azhar, to sort out the external practice under different leaders' administrations, to analyze the factors that influence its external role, to predict the prospects and challenges of al-Azhar's external functions, and to explore the degree of al-Azhar's external role.

Literature Review

Researches on al-Azhar and Egypt regime often tended to focus on the interactive relationship between them. Moshe Albo and Yoram Meital (2014), for example, specifically described the differences between Sheikh and the rulers in the 1970s and Sheikh's efforts to expand the influence of al-Azhar. Rachel M. Scott (2012) discussed the different and complex positions of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Azhar on constitutional issues and analyzed that the differences between the two may lead to an alliance between different actors committed to abiding by the Sharia law, which would break down the binary difference between the Muslim brotherhood and al-Azhar. In addition, other studies focused on the impact of al-Azhar on the process of domestic politicization. Khalil al-Anani (2012) discussed that despite the entanglement between religion and politics that has led al-Azhar to chaos over the past 30 years, religion was still used as a tool to mobilize the public in the revolution, and the documents published by al-Azhar during the revolution were also supported by the public, which may mean that political movements are more inclined to rely more on the legitimacy given by religion. James M. Dorsey (2019) explained that al-Azhar is now facing Sisi's accusations and "religious reform", which will be a protracted war. To sum up, scholars have studied al-Azhar extensively, which provides multi-faceted ideas for this paper with reference value. However, the research results are relatively scattered and generally, have not dug into the dynamic changes of political factors behind al-Azhar's foreign relations in Egypt.

Al-Azhar's Foreign Affairs

The history of al-Azhar can be traced back to 969 A.D. when the Fatimid dynasty invaded Egypt. It is now the oldest and most active Islamic learning center. It advocates a harmonious and stable society, where different classes, races, and beliefs coexist in harmony, calls for dialogue among religions and civilizations, and works together against extremism. Moreover, representing the moderate force of Islamic Sunnis, it is recognized as the most influential institution of Islam. The al-Azhar system refers to the Islamic religious system established around al al-Azhar University and mosques. With the trend of historical development, it has become the

authority of Islamic Sunnis in Egypt. The regime changes over the past millennium have not and will not stop the pace of Muslims' prayers and the spread of faith; al-Azhar has played a leading role in this process therein. Therefore, the rulers were aware of the pivotal position of al-Azhar in Egyptian society, thus the influence of al-Azhar in the political field became increasingly extensive. However, the conservative Islamic education centered on al-Azhar is also faced with the problem of integration with the modern society. The progressive line of the reformists dispersed the educational resources and financial support of al-Azhar, impacted the authority of al-Azhar Ulema as an interpreter of religion, and threatened the status of al-Azhar as a religious leader. Therefore, al-Azhar innovated teaching methods as well as new disciplines, and the ruler went along with the reshaping of the al-Azhar's administrative and hierarchical model. As a relatively independent religious institution at that time, the fate of al-Azhar was inseparable from the intervention and promotion of the state. The conflict between the two had always influenced the political process of Egypt. In July 1952, the Republic of Egypt was established, when a new chapter of al-Azhar also unfolded.

Prior to the 1952 Revolution, Egypt had an independent religious court. The *Sharia* court had jurisdiction over Muslims which was applicable to matters, such as inheritance, personal status, and marriage (GPO for the Library of Congress, n.d.). In 1955, Nasser abolished the religious court and transferred its functions to the secular court, but religious law continued to affect the decisions of the secular court. Nasser's purpose was to subordinate religion to politics and to narrow the jurisdiction of religion over law. In the Suez Canal incident in 1956, the Arab nation unprecedentedly united against Britain, France, and Israel, which strengthened Nasser's belief in Arab unity and began to explore and promote the idea of Arab unity. In 1961, the attempt of this concept extended to the sphere of religion. Nasser promulgated Law No. 103, which placed the entire al-Azhar institution under the jurisdiction of the government's donation department and transformed it into a branch of the state apparatus. Although al-Azhar began to associate with religious institutions in other countries, it was used more often by the Nasser regime as a tool to promote the diplomatic goals of Pan-Arabism. In the 1960s, Nasser's radical Arab nationalist ideology was in sharp contrast to the conservative Pro-Western thought of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Faisal used Islam to condemn Arab socialism, while Nasser used al-Azhar's fatwa to claim that Arab socialism was rooted in Islam to prove that his thought and foreign policy were in line with Islamic law (Esposito, 1998). Nasser's reform of national modernization is more reflective of the political and diplomatic objectives of the ruling class. The modern state system of the west was not suitable for Egyptian society with its different values. The differences in social beliefs resulted to the failure of Nasser's reform. However, from Nasser's reform of al-Azhar, we can realize that various forces have contributed to the re-emergence of Islam in Egyptian politics, which still has a broad and profound impact on all levels of Egyptian society. Nasser's reform of al-Azhar is unclear. He imposed the modern secular content on al-Azhar, making it close to the modern educational style and opening the door to al-Azhar for all secular occupations. However, the reform has never provided a set of systematic mode of operation, resulting in the inability to integrate the two fields of religion and modernization. The incomplete educational system left al-Azhar in the dilemma of religious and secular imbalance, and the internal structure of al-Azhar was also in need of reform.

Sadat continued his policy of control over al-Azhar in Nasser period, but al-Azhar began to resist controlling the situation. Abdel Halim Mahmoud used the strength of Arab countries to promote the reform of al-Azhar. In 1976, Mahmoud wrote an open letter to Arab leaders asking them to provide financial support for the expansion of al-Azhar. Arab countries generously donated more than US \$3 million (Zeghal, 1999). On the surface, this appeared to be the external assistance al-Azhar's in the reform process. But in fact, it reflected the

paternalistic role of Islam. Mahmoud led al-Azhar to expand its sphere of influence, which served to consolidate the rule of Arab countries. Despite the limitations of al-Azhar as a religious institution at the time in confronting the ruling class, Mahmoud insisted on expressing independent views in religious areas, such as Islamic law and personal law. He published several articles in al-Azhar magazine, criticizing Sadat's policies in the form of open letter and correcting the name of Islamic law. Different from the passive state of al-Azhar under Nasser's rule, al-Azhar maintained a relatively high degree of independence during the Sadat's period. This is not only a sequence of Mahmoud's decisive and resolute attitude and working style, but also an evidence of the high dependence of the Egyptian regime on al-Azhar, Sadat signed the *Camp David Agreement* with Israel in 1979. Al-Azhar issued a statement for this agreement, providing an Islamic reason (Barraclough, 1998). Consequently, Arab countries refused to provide financial support to Egypt and expelled it from the Arab League. Meanwhile, demonstrations sparked by economic difficulties broke out in many major Egyptian cities. The internal and external difficulties have significantly weakened the legitimacy of Sadat's regime. Accordingly, al-Azhar's credibility and authority in Egypt and Arab countries have also been impaired.

Nasser and Sadat's rule over al-Azhar paved the way for Mubarak's manipulation. Sadat's open policy provides space for the development of political Islam. Mahmoud tried to return Egyptian society to Islam, but the emergence of radical Islam in the 1970s dispersed the power of al-Azhar against the regime. In the 1980s, al-Azhar's authority was openly challenged by radical Islamists, reflecting not only that the government's control over al-Azhar has tarnished the sanctity and integrity of religion, but also that it has been worth reflecting on al-Azhar's longstanding role as a government's "pawn". Instead of benefiting from past games between the two sides, al-Azhar and the government have incurred challenges from a third party. The government obtained a broader mass base by suppressing al-Azhar, but it also undermined the al-Azhar's authority in the hearts of believers. When radical Islamism expands rapidly in Egypt as a third party, the government needed to rely on the orthodox Islamic forces of al-Azhar to curb its influence. However, Al-Azhar did not have the deterrent power before 1961. Al-Azhar had to stop and submit to the state power and cooperate with it to oppose radical Islam. In domestic, al-Azhar and Mubarak seemed to have started a tacit deal. The government was forced to grant al-Azhar greater independence and autonomy and to acquiesce in al-Azhar's critical attitude towards policies. The combination will help restore al al-Azhar's religious authority in Egypt to resist radical Islamism. In terms of foreign affairs, al-Azhar also tried to make an independent voice. Before the Gulf War in 1989, al-Azhar issued a fatwa, announcing that if the "Crusader" army attacked Iraq, every Muslim has the obligation to fight back and firmly play his/her role as a moderate Islamic force against terrorism and radical Islamism (Jones , 2004).

In addition, unlike Mubarak's soft stance towards Israel, al-Azhar has always shown a strong position towards Israel. In 1994, when Israeli President Weizmann visited Cairo, al-Azhar Sheikh Gad al-Haq refused to meet him. When Saudi Mufti offered blessings for Arab-Israeli peace, al-Azhar scholar Yusuf al Qaradawi mercilessly criticized his remarks, softening the Saudi Mufti's support. Mubarak had no ability to prevent al-Azhar from exporting ideas in the Arab world. Instead, he needed al-Azhar to expand its religious power to suppress Salafism and expand radical Islam across the country, even if he is inconsistent with al-Azhar's position.

The Arab spring made al-Azhar see the dawn of restoring independence. In many religious dialogues during the revolution, al-Azhar realized that only when the regime obeying the rule of law and the country having a diversified and democratic political system, can it achieve independence from the country. Such a

system would ensure that even if the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafi movement were to come to power, they could not interfere in the al-Azhar's affairs. Based on this understanding, on June 20, 2011, al-Azhar released the "al-Azhar Declaration on the Future of Egypt" (Al-Azhar and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Coordinating Committee, 2011) widely recognized by religious people in Islamic institutions, which advocated the establishment of a modern democratic country based on the Constitution and the separation of powers of government departments and called on al-Azhar to separate from the government. In October, al-Azhar again issued the "The al-Azhar Declaration in Support for the Arab Revolutions" (Durham University, 2011). In this document, al-Azhar expanded its perspective to the Arab world, discussed the plight of the Arab people under the dictatorship, and supported the liberation movements against oppression as well. In January 2012, al-Azhar released the third document "Declaration by al-Azhar and the intellectuals on the legal ordinances of fundamental freedoms" (OASIS, 2012), which advocates freedom of belief and expression for all citizens. The release of these three documents has been endorsed and supported by citizens of Arab countries. It has been al-Azhar's most independent and influential voice since 1961, demonstrating to the whole Arab and Muslim world that it has remained vibrant even in a turbulent political situation and successfully defended the authoritative status of Islam.

Like previous governments, Morsi's government needs the support of the religious authority of al-Azhar. The fall of the Mubarak government left a political empty in Egypt, creating room for al-Azhar to operate in its quest for greater autonomy. Article 4 of the 2012 constitution lists the provisions on al-Azhar separately. "al-Azhar is an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs". This article officially gives al-Azhar an independent status. Since entering the modern era, al-Azhar has long had three important interests: to maintain institutional autonomy, to become the primary interpreter of Islam, and to spread Islam (Brown, 2011). Al-Azhar defines itself as a global institution, rather than an Egyptian institution, with the belief that it has a long-term responsibility to the Muslim world.

Therefore, although al-Azhar publicly denounced Morsi's policies and decrees, al-Azhar is more eager to cooperate on the international stage than domestic politics. In 2013, when Morsi's administration was in trouble, Tayeb went to the United Arab Emirates to accept Sheikh Zayed's annual cultural personality Book Award, which aims to praise Tayeb's moderate and tolerant leadership (Dorsey, 2020). The close relationship of Tayeb and Zayed shows to the Arab world that the morality of al-Azhar in the Arab world has not been eroded by the Muslim Brotherhood and that the moderation advocated by al-Azhar was fundamentally different from Morsi's power expansion.

On July 3, 2013, accompanied by al-Azhar elder Tayeb and others, general Abdul Fatah al Sisi delivered a televised speech, announcing the removal of President Morsi, the suspension of the constitution, the establishment of an interim government and the arrest of several brotherhood members. Al-Azhar has become an important support for the Egyptian military's actions. No matter how hard al-Azhar tries to keep himself out of the violence, the fact remains that it has been involved in political competition. Al-Azhar's move has caused divisions within the organization and resentment in the Arab world. Karadawi, chairman of the International Union of Muslim scholars, resigned from the al-Azhar scholars committee to protest against Tayeb's support for the army's recall of Morsi. Karadawi once wrote a letter to remind al-Azhar that standing with Sisi was conducive to legitimizing the military operations by the Egyptian army, and jointly signed and issued a document in 2015 with more than 200 Muslim scholars from more than 20 countries, accusing al-Azhar's elders of being responsible for the killing of innocent people, and claiming to have "Smashed the national

honor history of al-Azhar, corroded the present of Azhar and endangered the future of Azhar” (Bano & Benadi, 2018, p. 10). After Sisi announced the religious revolution in 2015, the relationship between the two sides headed for a deadlock. Al-Azhar turned to the international stage to seek broader diplomatic relations. In 2019, Vatican Pope Francis and al-Azhar Sheikh Tayeb signed the “Human Fraternity Document”, beginning the process of religious dialogue (Arab News, 2019). In 2021, Tayeb called for “serious action” to address climate change in interreligious dialogue due to extreme weather, such as droughts and floods in many places in the Middle East (Al-Monitor, 2021). However, Tayeb did not make any public opinion on the normalization of the United Arab Emirates and Israel in 2020, which also reflects the limitations of al-Azhar as a religious institution. The UAE has been the sponsor of al-Azhar since the Sadat period. Especially when the Egyptian military purged the forces of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the UAE has maintained friendly relations with al-Azhar and expressed its support for al-Azhar’s position of protecting real Islamic values as well as opposing violence (The National, 2014). Al-Azhar also praised the UAE’s decision in the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Qatar in 2017 (Alarabiya News, 2017), and affirmed the importance of bilateral relations in public on several public occasions (Teller Report, 2021). Therefore, al-Azhar and the United Arab Emirates have common interests in opposing extremism and promoting religious dialogue. Even though the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel undermined the basis of both sides on the Palestinian issue, al-Azhar still puts aside differences and opts to continue friendly relations with the United Arab Emirates based on mutual interests.

Future

Under the background of globalization and informatization, social media such as the Internet have changed the power pattern of religious discourse. What’s more, the dominance of official religious institutions no longer exists. To meet the needs of education, many countries have established local religious schools. The expansion of Madrasa has spread the resources of teachers and students in al-Azhar and weakened al-Azhar’s important position in the field of Islamic education. Islamic intellectuals and Azhar also had conceptual differences. Some intellectuals believe that al-Azhar should be responsible for the radicalization of Islam, and therefore it should not be respected that al-Azhar obtains increasing power on the political stage (ICT, 2016). In addition, as Azhar is increasingly dominated by Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabi elements, conservative forces within the institution gain the upper hand. Mistrust and fragmentation of cohesion limit the creative ability of Islamic scholars to vigorously promote innovation or reform.

Sisi’s religious revolution has attracted international attention and evolved into a struggle against al-Azhar’s control over religion. At present, the “game” between al-Azhar and Sisi continues. They are careful to avoid a head-on confrontation with each other, and there are no clear signs of turnaround in the relationship. Sisi’s religious revolution, including the revision of al-Azhar’s curriculum, has caused disagreement within Azhar. While Sisi’s involvement in the religious field has presented the al-Azhar with unprecedented challenges, Sisi’s actions are still within the Azhar’s reach, and it is unlikely that the relationship will get out of control.

The function of religious institutions is related to many factors, among which the most critical factor is the interactive relationship with the Egyptian regime. At the national level, al-Azhar provides religious legitimacy for the controversial political decisions of successive Egyptian regimes. At the regional level, Azhar maintains regional religious security, opposes all forms of violence, and maintains good relations with other sects. At the

international level, it adheres to the anti-terrorism line and works with countries around the world to deal with tensions brought by terrorist forces. The pragmatism route pursued by al-Azhar has brought psychological benefits to other countries—Terrorism is not supported by authoritative religious institutions, but al-Azhar's firm Islamic tradition has been questioned by all sides. The dissonance between dogma and the times may narrow the space for al-Azhar's activities.

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