

Consensus-building in Al-Sisi's Egypt

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Robert Springborg, one of the most important scholars of contemporary Egypt, had already anticipated the key to the presidency of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in May 2014: his use of religion. As Springborg wrote, "Sisi will draw far more heavily upon Islam to legitimate his autocratic regime than he has led Egyptian and foreign observers to believe."¹ The speech on the "religious revolution" delivered by Al-Sisi on 28 December 2014 to Al-Azhar was just the open, public manifestation of a strategy of which religion is only one, albeit a very important, part. The strategy is aimed at the consolidation of Al-Sisi's presidency and of the regime as a whole, and requires, necessarily, at least six pillars for its success: (a) control over the message on religious consensus; (b) an economic sector in the hands of the military, so as to ensure a quick exit from recession by means of the distribution of investment in sectors which are capable of immediately controlling social unrest; (c) the consensus of public-sector employees, secured through salary increases; (d) the loyalty of the police, secured through substantial impunity as regards acts carried out both during the 25 January revolution



A 2014 app that lets people snap photos of themselves with Abdel Fattah Al Sisi.

¹ Robert Springborg, "Sisi's secret Islamism", in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 26 May 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141458/robert-springborg/sisi-secret-islamism>.

and the repression which began with the 3 July 2013 coup; (e) action by the regular judiciary, used as an instrument of repression against anyone who, Tahrir revolutionary or Muslim Brotherhood militant, is opposed to the consolidation of the regime in its post-Mubarak form;² (f) the definition of a strategic role for Egypt in the region as an outpost and trench against the real or imagined dangers coming to strike the West as well, an argument which will be analysed in detail in the next issue of *Insight Egypt*.

In the building of consensus, it is in particular the so-called “religious revolution” – of which Al-Sisi is the self-proclaimed champion – which emerges as the key not only to his presidency, but also to the re-establishment itself of the regime.

1. The "Religious Revolution" ad usum delphini

Al-Sisi's communication campaign to put himself at the head of a moderate revolution in Sunni Islam could not but have started at Al-Azhar on the occasion of the festivities (profoundly felt in Egypt at the popular level) to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. What Al-Sisi did on 28 December last year before the leaders of the most authoritative and traditional Sunni school was not, however, a simple request, i.e. for support in the task of changing the perception of Islam on the part of the rest of the planet and putting himself at the head of a moderate Islam, in large measure normalised. Instead, Al-Sisi indicated the political key of the Egyptian regime, (re)born with the 3 July 2013 coup, as depending on control over consensus and religious conformity as an integral part of the strategy to redesign and consolidate the institutional and economic system of this latest chapter in the Egyptian Republic.

In a recent article co-authored with Katie Bentivoglio, Michele Dunne³ did not use moderate terms to define Al-Sisi's communication campaign – re-launched throughout the entire world by means of websites and newspapers of precise geopolitical and cultural orientations – as “instrumentalizing religion for political purposes.”⁴ Dunne is just one of the voices warning governments and opinion-shapers against considering Al-Sisi as the harbinger of a true and proper cultural/religious revolution in the Arab region. On the contrary, the recent communication campaign about a moderate religious revolution guided by the Egyptian president conflicts with the events and politics of recent months, with the campaign against atheism, the arrests of homosexuals and people defining themselves as LGBT, and anti-Semitism. In the same way, the gestures of a closer relationship with the Egyptian Coptic Church are to be read in a more complex light: the gestures have been reiterated and reciprocated with a good relationship with Pope Tawadros II, but they conflict with the failure to find a solution to the most thorny question in the relationship between the Egyptian regime (in this case, the military

² This issue has already been dealt with in a previous edition: see Daniela Pioppi, “The Judiciary and ‘Revolution’ in Egypt”, in *Insight Egypt*, No. 2 (August 2013), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/512>.

³ Senior at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Michele is among the most attentive students of Egypt.

⁴ Michele Dunne and Katie Bentivoglio, “Is Sisi Islam's Martin Luther?”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 16 January 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=57738>.

sector) and the Coptic community. The massacre carried out at Maspero on 9 October 2011, in which tens of Coptic demonstrators were killed, still has not seen anyone found guilty or investigated, not to mention those responsible being brought before a court, notwithstanding the fact that the evidence and the accusations reiterated by numerous witnesses and associations for the defence of human rights point in the direction of the army. The Maspero issue, far from being a mere factual event, weighs on the relationship between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian regime, not so much in terms of the positions taken by the leaderships, which up till now have been condescending (above all on the part of Tawadros II), as for the pushes from beneath by the communities of the faithful, who are expecting justice.

There is, however, not only an open contradiction on the part of the Egyptian regime between the request for moderate Islam made by Al-Sisi, on the one hand, and the violations of the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion, on the other. Following the presidents who preceded him, Al-Sisi has also contained Al-Azhar within the limits already defined at the time of Gamal Abdul Nasser, thereby confirming Al-Azhar as an integral part of the regime.

Indeed, the decision by Al-Sisi to use the principal instrument of religious and educational consensus in Egypt, i.e. Al-Azhar, is deeply Nasserian. By Al-Azhar is meant the theological complex of schools and universities, distinct institutions which, however, feed and support each other. Al-Azhar's theological column (a term not used by chance, given that the ancient masters each gave lessons around one of the columns of the mosque) supports, that is, the diffuse educational system which instructs young Egyptians, starting from six years of primary school, through the next six years in middle and high schools, up to the university degree. It is not only, therefore, the hundreds of thousands of students who attend the 67 faculties belonging to its structure, but the more complex scholastic system made up of more than 8000 institutions spread throughout the whole country, in which around 2 million pupils study, which make of Al-Azhar an organ of educational control.

Control over Al-Azhar, therefore, is one of the foundations on which the Republican regime, founded at the beginning of the 1950s with the July revolution headed by Nasser, has always built itself. Still today, it is the State which decides who heads Al-Azhar, whose autonomy from the presidency of the Egyptian Republic was discussed only after the 25 January revolution through a series of attacks and counterattacks coming both from within Al-Azhar, and from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which governed Egypt from the revolution to the election of Mohammed Morsi as President of the Republic. From the normative point of view, the result of a transition of power which was anything but linear has been an important recognition of the role of Al-Azhar in issues relating to religious and legal affairs through *sharia* (Article 7 of the Egyptian constitution published after its approval by referendum in January 2014⁵), given that in Article 2, Islam is confirmed as the State religion, and the principles of *sharia* as the main source of legislation.

⁵ An English-language version of the text of the 2014 constitution is available on the website of Egypt's State Information Service (SIS) at: <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Templates/Articles/tmpArticles.aspx?CatID=2603>.

The principal architect of the new-found influence of Al-Azhar in the post-revolutionary period is Ahmed Al-Tayyeb,⁶ nominated as imam by Mubarak and previously rector of the University of Al-Azhar for many years, from 2003 to 2010, adept at keeping for Al-Azhar the guise of independence and at controlling the internal struggles departing from its substantial centrism. Al-Tayyeb immediately became one of the leading supporters of Al-Sisi. On the other hand, during the revolutionary period, within the complex system of councils and theological organisms which binds Al-Azhar together, the offices of the mufti and the Ministry for Religious Affairs, no other figure was able to emerge sufficiently to damage Al-Tayyeb's influence. No other figure, with the exception of Emad Effat, a leading figure within Dar Ellfta, the office of the mufti which releases fatwas, and a relatively hidden, but nevertheless important, figure in Tahrir Square. Effat was known and recognised as an esteemed and influential theologian amongst the revolutionaries, a figure about whose influence much more has been known since his death in mid-December 2011, when he was killed during the demonstrations in the government quarter, just a few metres from Tahrir Square.

The case of Emad Effat, a student loved also by his mentor, the former mufti Ali Gomaa, notwithstanding their different positions, is indicative insofar as it demonstrates to what extent, even if not primarily, the initial phase of the Egyptian transition was played out through religion. Together with a younger generation trained, amongst others, by Islamists removed from the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, figures like Effat have begun to bring forward the debate on the involvement of Al-Azhar in Egyptian society beyond the limits imposed by the complex system of relationships with the regime. This debate, however, has not advanced very far. In any case, it has not managed to upset the pre-existing balances. The leadership of Al-Azhar has resisted the attacks both from figures such as Effat and from students at the Islamic University, which have not managed to weaken its role. Now, Al-Azhar is, to the fullest extent possible, the organism which sets Islam and State, Islam and regime, the Islam of conformist tendencies and the Egypt of Al-Sisi, side-by-side.

Al-Azhar is the principal instrument for the "nationalisation" of Islam, the first step towards the exportation of a model of the relationship between religion and State/regime already set out in the speech given on 28 December by Al-Sisi. Various actions undertaken by Al-Azhar and the competent organisms within the bureaucratic machine, intended to make control over prayer pervasive and to diminish the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, form part of this model, above all the stranglehold over the imams.

Fundamentally, we are confronted by a strategy which is traditional in Egypt's Republican history. The difference, if at all, this time lies in the religiosity of Al-Sisi, a man who does not come, as previous presidents have done, from the Nile Delta area, but who is the son of historical and popular Cairo. Native of one of the most important districts from the point of view of popular religiosity, Al-Sisi is

⁶ See Nathan J. Brown, "Islam and Politics in the New Egypt", in *Carnegie Papers*, April 2013, p. 13-16, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=51541>; see also Ahmed Morsy and Nathan J. Brown, "Egypt's al Azhar Steps forward", in *Carnegie Articles*, 7 November 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=53536>.

the exponent of a conservative, rather than a moderate, Islam. Furthermore, much more than his predecessors, he does not separate Caesar from God. On the contrary, he intends to give Caesar a role of theological guide – if the term fits – to serve the achievement of two objectives. One is internal, and that is control over consensus in favour of the regime through the flattery of the conservative religiosity of the silent majority. The second objective relates instead to the regional and international role of Egypt: the construction of the image of Al-Sisi as the Martin Luther of Sunni Islam, already supported by the media machine of the American and European right, is useful to a country which is preparing itself to be not only an outpost against the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” and violent and armed radicalism, but also the defender of a stability financed by the regional powers of the Gulf.

The so-called “moderate Islam” of President Al-Sisi presents itself, therefore, as the principal pillar supporting the (re)construction of the Egyptian regime, a construction in which the other pillars do have a role play, but not as much as that of “nationalised” Islam.

2. Homes for the Young, Courtesy of Military, Inc.

After having played the role of ferryman from the Mubarak era through the total storm of Tahrir and the Morsi presidency, the Armed Forces are focussing their specific (political) weight on their economic assets, as both company and financier. The economic/productive sector represented by the military now has a much more important role as a possible vehicle of economic recovery in comparison to the final years of the Mubarak regime, when only a few important and specific major businessmen had influence in the country, a small circle of tycoons with strong and direct ties to the Mubarak family. Now, in the first year of the Al-Sisi presidency, it is the military who are acting as the hinge between the aid coming, to a great extent, from the countries of the Arabic peninsula and the investment directed *in primis* at the construction sector. This investment has, above all, two roles: first and foremost, to control the unrest among the lower levels of Egyptian society which haunts the enormous suburbs of Cairo and the other major cities, the fruit of a process of urbanisation which has had, over the decades, enormous socio-economic and cultural costs. Secondly, the investment serves to diffuse, at least partially, the bomb of social protest which over the last decade has never abated, with the waves of strikes that have undermined not only the stability of the unions, but also their effective presence, in certain areas.

As part of this strategy, the role of the Armed Forces as economic actor and distributor of Gulf investment is also crucial to kick-starting work in the private sector. Indeed, exiting recession is one of Al-Sisi’s priorities. The protest against the Morsi presidency and the power of the Muslim Brotherhood was also fed by the increasingly deep socio-economic and infrastructure crisis, by the rise in prices for the supply of petrol, by the daily failures of the electricity grid, and by unemployment. Now it is the task of the Al-Sisi regime to show to the Egyptian people that the country is exiting the crisis, and the extensive investment coming above all from Saudi Arabia and the UAE serves this purpose: it must control social unrest.

The agreement concluded in March 2014 between the Armed Forces, their engineering department, and Arabtec, a UAE company in which the majority shareholder is Aabar, the State fund of Abu Dhabi, is emblematic in this sense.⁷ Arabtec will finance the construction of a million homes, which will be used to respond to the demand for low-cost housing for the “new generations,” as emphasised by Al-Sisi himself. These homes will be immediately available, built on plots on 18 sites which will be made available by the Armed Forces, managers (even this is controversial) of the large areas which make up the military estate. The objective behind the 40 billion dollars investment by Arabtec is immediately apparent: an all-Egyptian objective, to make available homes to the young, in the present circumstances, and therefore to re-launch a relationship, that between the regime and the young generation, which had crumbled in 2011 as a result, amongst other things, of the lack of a social contract with the new Egyptians. The attention paid to the young and to their future (the number of marriages has been in steep decline in recent years as a result of the economic crisis) seems also to be an attempt to divide the unity of the generation which was the protagonist in the 2011 revolution, at the very moment in which the prisons are full of leading activists, awaiting trial or condemned to long final sentences for having broken the new law against protesting.

The Arabtec case is, however, the proof of the attempt by the Armed Forces to make themselves at once promoter, distributor and manager of an economic development which is considered crucial to sustaining the Al-Sisi regime. Such economic development is sustained *in primis* by the Gulf, which, with a little under 20 percent of direct foreign investment, is the most important political, not to mention economic, actor for President Al-Sisi, who counts in his CV a long period as military attaché in Saudi Arabia, before becoming number one in the Egyptian military secret service. More than 11 billion dollars in aid from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, supplied to Egypt in various forms, from grants to investment, immediately after the military coup of July 2013: this is the particular influence of the Gulf, which has opted for return to supposed stability in the form of a regime of known structure (in comparison to the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood at the country's helm), a regime endowed, in addition, with the most substantial and the best equipped army in the whole Arab region.

Above all, and once again, large public works are the sector on which the Armed Forces are relying, here also taking up the tradition of the old Nasserian regime. Large public works to stimulate employment, or, to put it another way, large public works – i.e. the widening of the Suez Canal – on which, also in this case, military engineers are employed. The continual recall of Nasserism and his “populist authoritarianism”⁸ as a model for the new post-Mubarak and post-revolutionary regime illustrates well

7 “UAE's Arabtec agrees \$40 billion housing project with Egypt army”, in *Reuters*, 9 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/09/us-arabtec-egypt-idUSBREA280KK20140309>.

8 Amr Adly, “The Problematic Continuity of Nasserism”, in *Jadaliyya*, March 2013, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17135/the-problematic-continuity-of-nasserism>. “Nasser based his legitimacy on the Suez Canal Agreement of 1954, which led to the evacuation of British troops, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and the political victory he scored in the aftermath of the 1956 Tripartite Aggression. His legitimacy was also grounded in the four waves of agrarian reform, which created a large class of small and medium landowners who were supportive of the political regime and loyal to its ideologies and policies. Also central to this legitimacy were the creation of a public industrial sector along with the Aswan High Dam, and the extension of free university education and guaranteed employment for college graduates.

the extent to which the basic key to the power system which Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is trying to create is the social contract. The social contract with the young generation, which represents the overwhelming majority of the population, and whose ability to challenge the regime became clear in January 2011. The socio-economic solutions proposed up to now, however, look back in a highly slavish manner to the model of the golden decade of Nasserism, being built on the Armed Forces, large public works and rich stimulus packages for the productive sectors, but without putting the two kernels of the problem side-by-side. There can be no social justice without civil justice.

3. Between Consensus and Apparatus

The regime of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is, essentially, consolidating itself by means of a socio-identificatory “glue,” namely its “nationalised Islam;” by means of an “employment agency” as an integral part of its structure, namely the Armed Forces as distributor of work and of works; and, once again, by means of an “apparatus,” namely the extensive bureaucracy which has always been the unavoidable support for the Egyptian Republic of Nasserian stamp, and which in the final years of the Mubarak regime had expressed in increasingly clear terms its own unease.

It is not, therefore, by chance that the consolidation of the relationship with one of the pillars of the “deep State,” i.e. the State employee, figured among the first measures taken by the executive branch under Al-Sisi’s leadership. In January 2014, the government fixed the minimum salary of the State employee at 1,200 Egyptian liras, thereby bringing to a close the years of protests and demands on the part of a white-collar bureaucracy which employs around 6 million people and which has made the State the principal employer in the country. A few months after the decision regarding the guaranteed minimum wage, Al-Sisi also set the maximum wage of State employee (at less than 6,000 dollars), thus closing an important chapter in the establishment of the regime.

Al-Sisi’s presidency needs the loyalty of the apparatus, which covers the white-collar bureaucracy, on whose miserable salary a good part of the Egyptian population depends, and the State security bodies, for which the regime has ensured substantial impunity as regards the victims of the 2011 revolution. The performance of the Egyptian judiciary, in the judgments in the various courts and instances of justice, demonstrates very clearly the need of the Al-Sisi regime strenuously to defend the security bodies against charges relating to both the 25 January revolution, and the post-3 July 2013 repression. The bureaucratic apparatus, the security forces and the judiciary have shown themselves to be not only pillars of the (new) regime, but also the protagonists of new, revisited alliance with the presidency, which has tried in its one and a half years of existence to revise the terms of the agreement in order to avoid disaffection and protest.

Nasser’s regime and its social alliance, or at least the social contract upon which it rested, exemplified a kind of populist authoritarianism (per Robert Bianchi’s classification in the 1980s). The system was based on an understanding that traded political rights for economic gains.” For Nasser’s populist authoritarianism, see Robert Bianchi, *Unruly Corporatism. Associational Life in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989.

About Insight Egypt

The series is part of a two-year research project on Egypt, started in 2013, which aims at monitoring the uncertain transition taking place in the North African country. Following closely the evolution of events, the series explores the transformations of the socio-economic and political institutional, as well as energy policy and foreign policy of the country, including its relations with Italy and Europe.

A specific attention is devoted to the actors of the transition: opposition movements, youth groups, the judiciary, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the Muslim Brotherhood and other social actors such as trade unions and business associations.

Possible scenarios of the political, economic and social evolution in Egypt are also prepared and discussed.

The project will be realized by a multidisciplinary research team of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), which has developed over the years a solid experience on Egypt.

The author

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