

## The Religious Establishment and the Arab Spring: The Case of Egypt\*

서 정 민\*\*  
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### 종교기관과 아랍의 봄: 이집트 사례를 중심으로

‘아랍의 봄’ 정치변동과 이후 발생한 여러 정치적 혼란과 시행착오는 여러 정치 행위자들에게 적지 않은 영향을 주었다. 이 과정에서 이슬람세계의 주요 정치이념 행위자 중 하나인 공식종교기관의 역할도 다양하게 나타나고 있다. 그러나 이집트의 경우 셰이크 알-아즈하르, 무프티, 그리고 종교성장관은 친정부적 성향의 이념 기관으로서의 전통적 기능을 벗어나지 못하고 정치변동 속에서도 자신들의 이권을 지키기 위한 기능에 충실했다.

본 연구는 지배엘리트로부터의 정치경제적 지원을 지속적으로 확보하기 위해 이집트 종교엘리트는 국가의 기대에 부응하는 역할을 정치변동 속에서도 보여주었다는 가설을 바탕으로 한다. 루이스 알튀세(Louis Althusser)의 ‘이념적 국가기구(ideological state apparatus)’ 개념으로서의 이집트 공식종교기관이 생산한 정치종교적 담론을 분석하기 위해 본 연구는 이집트의 반정부 시위가 시작된 2011년부터 무슬림형제단 출신의 무함마드 무르시 정권이 축출된 2013년까지 이집트 최대일간 알-아흐람지에 게재된 3대 종교기관장의 연설, 인터뷰 등을 수집하여 분석하였다.

3년 동안 신문에 등장한 268개의 기사를 분석한 결과 이집트 종교엘리트는 국가의 권력유지 노력과 부합하는 담론을 지속적으로 생산한 것으로 나타났다. 혁명 세력 혹은 이슬람주의세력을 이집트 국가 안정과 안보에 위협이 되는 집단으로 분류하고 이들의 도전에 대응하기 위해 자신들의 전문분야인 ‘건전한’ 이슬람 사상 전파를 해결책으로 제시하고 있다. 이를 통해 이집트 종교엘리트는 국가와 협력하

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는 과정 속에서도 자신들의 기득권을 확대하려는 노력을 기울이고 있다.

[주제어 : 종교기관, 이집트, 아랍의 봄, 셰이크 알-아즈하르, 무프티, 종교성 장관]

## I. Introduction

From the onset of the Arab Spring, and in the transitions that have followed the successful and relatively peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the question of the role of Islam in these revolutions has been among the paramount concerns of observers and participants. Western observers, predictably, have been concerned that the revolutions will be a reprise of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, in which a broad-based revolution replaced the authoritarian and secular shah of Iran with what eventually became a clerical dictatorship, albeit with republican trappings. Participants in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions - while eager not to exclude Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia - were, however, profoundly divided on the role of Islam in the reconstituted public spheres of both nations.

In this process, the role and religious rhetoric of Muslim religious leaders during the first months of the Arab Spring was far from unified. In fact, it was deeply divided among those who supported the status quo, those who attempted to hedge their bets, and those who were enthusiastic supporters of the revolutions. However, official religious discourse largely tried to adopt a traditional position of pro-government, treating the events as a fitna, upheaval, as evidenced by a prominent fatwa given by Shaykh Ali Gomaa, the official mufti of Egypt, early on in the revolution in which he stated that it was permissible for individuals not to



attend Friday prayers in the present circumstances on the grounds that to do so would entail unreasonable exposure to risk of losing life or property (Al-Ahram, 4 February 2011). Another *fatwa* of his asked the demonstrators to return to their homes after the first of Mubarak's speeches in which he promised to reform the government and set it on a course toward genuine democracy (Osman 2013). Overall, Gomaa's *fatwas* were consistent with historical Sunni views that regard revolution with scepticism, if not outright terror, at the prospect of public disorder. The mufti's stance supporting the status quo alienated significant segments of the Egyptian population who expected him to take a much stronger stance against the unlawful conduct of the regime and its security forces.

Considering the traditional pro-governmental position of the official religious leaders in Egypt, this study aims at exploring how the religious establishment has reacted the volatile political situation after the revolution. This research hypothesizes that, in order to sustain the political recognition and financial support they receive from the ruling elite and to avoid further control or interference from the regime, the religious officials are, sometimes 'reluctantly', obliged to comply with what the regime expects them to do. On the other hand, they 'voluntarily' protect from radical Islamist challenge their religious position as officially and traditionally recognised religious authorities that administer Islamic assets and institutions and interpret Islamic doctrine. This indicates that both ruling and religious elites have recognised the necessity of 'symbiosis', which requires mutual co-operation in order to maintain already acquired rights and interests increasingly challenged by emerging new political power groups.



## II. The Religious Establishment as an Ideological State Apparatus

The ‘religious establishment’ is an operational concept in that this term does not actually exist in the Egyptian political order. It refers to a set of religious institutions or personnel incorporated into the state system. In the Egyptian context, the Islamic religious establishment is the set of state-controlled religious institutions which are integrated into the state bureaucratic system and whose main function is to enhance the state’s legitimacy in its general policies and support its ideological hegemony over the society. The Egyptian religious establishment mainly consists of three institutions, broadly defined: the Ministry of Religious Endowments or Religious Affairs; the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar; and the Mufti. However, the hierarchy is not clear among the three positions. Although the Grand Shaykh and the Mufti belong to the Ministry of Awqaf and the Ministry of Justice respectively, they are directly appointed by the President and they have independent areas of activity and relatively equal political weight.

It can be said that this operational concept is a part of the Althusserian notion of “ideological state apparatus” . Althusser distinguished between the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. The former is a unitary public body, incorporating government, administration, army, police, courts, and prisons, and functioning primarily through violence. The latter is a plurality of essentially private agencies - religion, education, family, law, politics, trade unions, communications and culture - which function by ideology (Althusser 1970, 114). The religious establishment, as an ideological state apparatus, has become more important in Egyptian politics as there has been an increasing competition in the Islamic ideological sector between the state and oppositional Islamic groups.



The religious establishment has not been widely studied or deeply analysed. Among the limited literature we encounter two main conceptual attempts, which utilize the Weberian concept of 'legitimacy' and the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Arjomand adopts Weber's approaches to analyse the relationship between Iranian regimes and the religious authority (Arjomand 1984, 1-2). Weber mentions in particular two fundamental sources of charismatic authority: the charisma of the divinely inspired and the charisma of the warlord. Weber also formulated that, in the need to secure and enhance its legitimacy, the ruling elite would seek help from religious forces (Weber 1978, 490-492).

Olsen attempts to apply the 'hegemony' to the analysis of the religious establishment in Egypt's political system (Olson 1988, 127-129). His main argument is that dominant classes practice power over subordinate strata as much through persuasion as through coercion (Gramsci 1987, 187-188). Considering the fact that Egypt has suffered from a serious 'hegemonic' crisis and Gramsci's view can be helpful in understanding the current Egyptian politics. According to him, hegemony can be achieved if dominant ideas are diffused by ideological agencies (Boggs 1976, 36).

On the basis of the above approaches, a number of studies have attempted to illustrate the weakened role of Islam and Islamic institutions. Merad concludes that Muslim societies witness a "noticeable retreat of Islam as the principle of movement in favour of political dynamics" and an "integration of the religious factor into the official ideology" (Merad 1981, 44). Zeghal gives a comprehensive view of the history of al-Azhar 'ulama', emphasizing on the changes of attitude during the three Republican Egyptian regimes (Zeghal 1999, 396). Barraclough examines the Mubarak government's transfer of significant administrative resources to al-Azhar in order to acquire an Islamic identity (Barraclough 1998, 236-241). Finally, Moustafa argues that the religious establishment has "directly challenged



the government” on various sensitive issues (Moustafa 2000, 3-22)

Keeping the above literature review in mind, this research has attempted to explore how the religious establishment in Egypt has conducted opportunistic discourse production in the volatile political situation. The data utilized in this research will be collected from official statements of the three government religious positions: Ministers of Awqaf, Muftis, and Grand Shaykh which appeared in the largest daily newspaper, al-Ahram between 2011 and 2013. The collected data will be treated to understand the discourse production of the religious establishment. The discourse mainly involves both legitimization and de-legitimization processes. In this regard, this study will analyse the legitimization process through examining the degree to which religious discourse validates the secular state and the de-legitimization process through the degree of criticism of opposition forces.

The legitimization and de-legitimization process will be explored through a analysis of thematic categories: (1) how the official religious officials interpreted the reasons behind the revolution and the following political upheaval; (2) how the religious elite defined the revolutionary forces and the Muslim Brotherhood and the terms they used to describe them; (3) how the officials evaluated the consequences of the political chaos for the Egyptian society and how they explained to people its negative effects on the society or the nation; and (4) the solutions suggested by them to solve the problem of the political chaos.

### III. Anti-Revolutionary Discourse of the Religious Establishment

It is not an easy task to measure the degree to which a religious group supports



the ruling elite. But an examination of formal statements made by the religious elite will give a clue to the understanding of the discourse made by the religious elite. Statements and speeches of the three top religious officials, Ministers of Awqaf, Grand Shaykh, and Republican Muftis, have been investigated to show how the religious establishment reacted the political changes and chaos. The anti-revolutionary discourse of the religious officials has been analyzed in terms of the following thematic categories of the statements and opinions: (a) the reasons for the sudden political upheaval and the following chaos; (b) the definition of the revolutionary forces and the Muslim Brotherhood and the terms used to describe them; (c) the consequences of the political chaos and its negative effects on the society or nation; and (4) the solutions suggested to the problems of the political chaos.

## 1. Explaining the Reasons for the Political Chaos

The reasons for the emergence of the Egyptian revolution and the following chaos are so complex and multi-factored that it is difficult to explain the background by limiting it to one perspective or factor (Ulrichsen 2014, 226). The Egyptian religious elite also tried to explain the revolution in order to convey official interpretations to the public. However, almost all the explanations were apologetic, attributing the reasons for the political upheaval to the nature of the revolutionary and Islamist movements and to external involvement, and paying less attention to internal political, social, and economic conditions.

In order to examine the above-mentioned four thematic categories, 268 speeches, statements, or interviews of the three religious personnel on the Egyptian political issues were collected from *al-Ahram* in the period between 2011 and 2013. Among the religious elite, the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar most actively participated in



making the anti-revolutionary and anti-Islamist discourse. From the speeches, statements, and interviews that I have surveyed, the following main reasons for the political chaos can be summarized: radicalism or ignorance of Islam, Western influence, contagion from neighbouring countries, and social and economic difficulties.

Table 1. The Reasons for the Political Chaos in the Statements of the Religious Officials in 2011–2013

Reasons	Frequency of Cited Reasons (percentage of total citations)			Sub-total
	Shaykh al-Azhar	Ministers of Awqaf	Muftis	
Radicalism or Ignorance of Islam	82 (61.2)	26 (57.8)	62 (69.7)	170 (63.5)
Western Influence	21 (15.7)	10 (22.2)	16 (18)	47 (17.5)
Contagion from Neighbouring Countries	17 (12.7)	7 (15.6)	5 (5.6)	29 (10.8)
Social and Economic Difficulties	14 (10.4)	2 (4.4)	6 (6.7)	22 (8.2)
Total	134	45	89	268

Sources: *Al-Ahram*. Speeches, statements, and interviews of the religious officials were reviewed.

As shown in Table 1, the Egyptian religious elite differed in their perspectives from the arguments of academic and media circles. The Egyptian leaders paid less attention to political and socio-economic interpretations. Yet, the religious leaders shared clear and similar views on the reasons behind the political chaos, focusing mainly on two reasons: radicalism or ignorance of Islam and Western influence. These official attitudes towards the revolutionary and Islamist movements contained



two political goals. First, the religious elite tried to weaken the revolutionary and Islamist political opponents and undermine their ideological foundation by labelling them deviant or ignorant Muslims. Second, the religious officials also made great efforts to deny a linkage between violence and the inherent political, economic, and social situation by arguing that the political chaos resulted from external forces that sought to destabilize Egypt. In so doing, it deflected attention away from critical domestic problems and its own ineffective responses to these difficulties.

## 2. Defining the Revolutionary and Islamist Forces

In the case of the conflict between the ruling power and the revolutionary and Islamist movements, there have appeared various terms for the anti-regime movements. Which terms did the religious elite use in the period under study to designate the revolutionary or Islamist movements? Considering that the question of ‘who is the enemy?’ is a starting point for the manufacture of political discourse, it is crucial to examine the terms used to indicate the anti-government movements, the enemy of the ruling and religious elites.

Table 2 shows the results of an examination of the terms which were used to designate the revolutionary and Islamist forces. The most frequently mentioned in the sample speeches and statements of the religious figures was ‘salafists’ or ‘radical Islamists’. The speeches and statements of the Grand Shaykh, the Ministers of Awqaf, and the Muftis showed their preference for the term, occupying 40.3, 31.1, and 52.8 percent respectively. ‘The instigator of sedition’ should be interpreted in the context of Egypt. This term appeared in the mass media and was frequently mentioned by the religious figures as sedition was warned of and criticised by the regime and pro-government intellectuals whenever serious conflicts erupted between the radical Islamists and Egyptian Coptic Christians, who comprise



10 percent of Egypt's population (Khosrokhavar 2014, 2).

Table 2. The Terms Used to Define the Revolutionary and Islamist Forces in the Statements of the Religious Officials in 2011–2013

Terms	Frequency of Cited Reasons (percentage of total citations)			Sub- total
	Shaykh al-Azhar	Ministers of Awqaf	Muftis	
Salafists or Radical Islamists	54 (40.3)	14 (31.1)	47 (52.8)	115 (42.9)
Instigators of Sedition	39 (29.1)	7 (15.6)	21 (23.6)	67 (25)
Terrorists	32 (23.9)	21 (46.7)	13 (14.6)	66 (24.6)
Protesters or Anti-regime opposition forces	9 (6.7)	3 (6.7)	8 (9)	20 (7.5)
Total	134	45	89	268

Sources: *Al-Ahram*. Speeches, statements, and interviews of the religious officials were reviewed.

From the collected data, two points can be extracted. The first and most important point is that the sample speeches and statements of the religious officials expressed a strong preference for the terms, 'salafist' or 'radical Islamists'. By contrast, they showed a considerable reluctance to use the terms 'protesters' or 'anti-regime opposition forces', which have been commonly used in the Western media. Second, almost all the terms collected from the statements and speeches of the officials pointed to emphatically negative meanings. It is granted that the religious elite normally create an unfavourable discourse against their political enemies painting them in a uniformly dark way and as beyond the pale.



### 3. Evaluating the Consequences of the Political Chaos

One of the main themes which were frequently mentioned in the statements of the religious figures was the consequences of the going-on political instability. The religious personnel illustrated various negative effects of the political chaos. According to data examined here, the negative consequences can be summarized into three main areas: destroying stability and security, sectarian conflicts, and misleading youth or national morals. Overall and unsurprisingly, the language invoked for the evaluation of the consequences was intended to warn the Egyptian public about the danger of the anti-government movements and their violent activities.

Table 3. The Consequences of the Political Chaos  
in the Statements of the Religious Officials in 2011–2013

Consequences	Frequency of Cited Reasons (percentage of total citations)			Sub- total
	Shaykh al-Azhar	Ministers of Awqaf	Muftis	
Destroying Stability and Security	75 (56)	29 (64.4)	36 (40.4)	140 (52.3)
Sectarian Conflicts	47 (35.1)	12 (26.7)	44 (49.4)	103 (38.4)
Misleading Youth or National Morals	12 (8.9)	4 (8.9)	9 (10.2)	25 (9.3)
Total	134	45	89	268

Sources: *Al-Ahram*. Speeches, statements, and interviews of the religious officials were reviewed.

The most negative consequence of the political chaos, which concerned the religious leaders, was its ‘destructive’ effects on Egypt’s stability and security.



140 out of the 268 sample articles pointed out its danger to the domestic political system and society. The religious elite pointed out the relationship between the anti-government movements and the nation's security. Minister of Awqaf, Muhammad Mukhtar, said that the attacks against public establishments and facilities committed by Muslim Brotherhood supporters "constituted a mere plot schemed to undermine the security and stability of Egypt" (Al-Ahram, 9 September 2013). More specifically, the religious figures mentioned the negative effects of Islamist activism on the Egyptian political system, mainly, the threat to stability. They argued that extremist and terrorist activities had destroyed the democratic political environment in Egypt and been an obstacle to the country's democratization process.

#### 4. Outlining Solutions to the Political Chaos

After examining the reasons for and consequences of the political chaos, the religious leaders suggested several solutions in order to cope with the crisis. As can be seen from Table 4, mainly four 'stick and carrot' solutions were suggested: spread of correct religious ideas, dialogue or national unity, physical crackdown, and political and social reform. According to the sample articles examined in this research, it is clear that the religious establishment placed much more importance upon the ideological or 'carrot' policies than physical crackdown. Only 13.1 percent of the total samples accounted for the 'stick' measures, while the remaining 86.9 percent represented the ideological or reform policies.

The fact that the religious elite regarded the radicalism or ignorance of Islam as one of the most important reasons for the political chaos led the leaders to an ideological war against 'corrupt' ideas. As can be seen from Table 4, 41 percent of the total sample articles was dedicated to this ideological response. The religious



figures, as the government officials charged with religious education, were much more concerned about this ideological solution than the government.

Table 4. The Solutions to the Political Chaos  
in the Statements of the Religious Officials in 2011-2013

Solutions	Frequency of Cited Reasons (percentage of total citations)			Sub- total
	Shaykh al-Azhar	Ministers of Awqaf	Muftis	
Spread of Correct Religious Ideas	46 (34.3)	13 (28.9)	51 (57.3)	110 (41)
Dialogue or National Unity	52 (38.8)	21 (46.7)	31 (34.8)	104 (38.8)
Crackdown	24 (17.9)	9 (20)	2 (2.3)	35 (13.1)
Political and Social Reform	12 (9)	2 (4.4)	5 (5.6)	19 (7.1)
Total	134	45	89	268

Sources: *Al-Ahram*. Speeches, statements, and interviews of the religious officials were reviewed.

As many political analysts have long regarded dialogue with an opposition as one of the best solutions to political conflict, many Egyptian writers have also argued the necessity of dialogue with the revolutionary and Islamists in order to put an end to violence (De Smet 2014, 39). In a similar vein, the religious elite deemed it prudent to conduct dialogue with the revolutionary and Islamist movements. As can be seen from Table 4, almost 39 percent of the sample articles spoke of this solution. However, the leaders concentrated on dialogue with moderate Islamists or anti-government forces and would-be extremist youths only, not elements thought to be violent or terrorist. Predictably, the religious elite did not show any great interest in a comprehensive political and social reform programme, however. As shown in Table 4, only 19 articles of the total 268 samples mentioned the idea of



changing the status quo.

## V. Conclusion

As we have seen, the terms most commonly used for the anti-regime and Islamist movements were ‘salafists’ or ‘radical Islamists’ . The religious leaders tended to argue that such radicalism mainly resulted from a misunderstanding of Islam or radicalism and foreign involvement. Through these two explanations, the Egyptian religious leaders tried to find scapegoats, attributing the reasons for the political chaos to others - mainly Islamists themselves and foreign governments or foreign pressure - not to their own government or the inadequacies of the political and economic system. The religious officials also warned of the negative effects of the political chaos on domestic stability and the religious values of the people. The solution proposed and supported by the officials was a combination of repressive and co-optive policies.

From this examination of official religious discourse, three points can be extracted. First, there were interconnections among several discursive levels - explanation of the reasons for the political chaos, the choice of the terms deployed, the warning of negative consequences, and the suggestion of solutions. The fact that the leaders found the reasons for the political crisis in an ignorance of Islam led them to define the chaos as salafists. In addition, since it was thought that the activities and ideologies had the effect of destroying domestic stability and sectarian conflicts, the religious officials were obliged to find solutions in the dissemination of ‘correct’ information.

Second, it is demonstrated from all the four categories of official religious



discourse examined in this research that the language of the religious elite was, to a considerable extent, similar. The officials sometimes used very similar or identical expressions. Such expressions as “extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam” , “[Islamists] wear the cloak of religion” , “Islam is a religion of tolerance” , and “revenge or retaliation against terrorists” were often used by the religious leaders.

Finally and most importantly, the religious officials appeared to hold out some hope for the ideological correction of Islamists and other revolutionary forces, thereby in the process both upholding the base of their social authority as the ones who would do the correction and subtly reminding the secular branch of government of their worth.

With the similarity and consistency of their arguments in mind, it can be said that there was a tacit agreement between the ruling elite and the religious establishment. As shown in the similarity of language and approach, the religious officials have exploit the conflict between the state and revolutionary or Islamist movements for their own hegemonic process. It is likely that they were trying to expand the scope of their activities and to enhance their political position as an ideological state apparatus.

The way the religious officials seem to have conceptualized the political changes that were going on in Egypt when President Morsi was in office must have confirmed to them not only that the alliance with the state was the safer bid if they wanted to maintain their privileges and consolidate their interests, but also that their traditional approach to politics was sound (Khan 2014, 81). Thus, the religious establishment has failed to break out of the vicious circle of the traditional conception of the relationship between religion and politics. The decision to take sides in the conflict between the Egyptian military and the Muslim Brotherhood was both dictated by its traditional understanding while at the same time reconfirming



this understanding. By siding with the state, the religious officials has failed to realize the contradiction between its position and the discourse that its scholars propagated in the last few months prior to the military coup.

[Key Words : The Religious Establishment, Egypt, the Arab Spring, Shaykh al-Azhar, Mufti, Minister of Awqaf]



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