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Egyptian Uprising: Al-Azhar's Changing Position

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Synopsis

The uprising in Egypt and the triumph of its people over the regime has put the role of Al-Azhar, one of the most renowned learning institutions in the Muslim world, into question. As it adjusts itself following Mubarak's downfall, will it motivate other religious institutions in the region to do the same?

Commentary

AL-AZHAR University has long been a revered institution in the Sunni Muslim world and is arguably the most influential Islamic institution in the world. One of its missions is the study of the Islamic religion and culture – hence its Fatwa Council that renders religious edicts on submitted queries that come from the world over. Its opinions and religious edicts have always been highly regarded and respected by Muslims globally. Ever since its establishment in the 10th century CE, Al-Azhar has always enjoyed financial independence and earned its revenues from its religious endowments funds (awqaf).

However, the stature of Al-Azhar was somewhat marred when it was nationalised by the secularising regime of the late Egyptian President Gamel Abdel-Nasser in 1961. Article 103 of the Constitution of Egypt that deals with the election of the Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh – the highest seat in Al-Azhar – was amended to be appointed by the President of Egypt. The religious endowments (awqaf) were made part of the state and became the Ministry of Awqaf earlier in 1952. The position of the Grand Sheikh was sponsored by the regime, which ultimately means the office holder has to balance between being a government official and an independent scholar, understandably leading to some critics classifying the institution as “hardly independent”.

Azharites in the Uprising

In the Egyptian demonstrations, the current Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyib, has been very careful in his stance. A day after Mubarak made the televised speech that he would not be running for another term, Al-Tayyib urged the Egyptian people to avoid violence and bloodshed, urging dialogues between representatives of the demonstrators and the government. While his stance resonated with the classic Sunni position – that obedience to the state, even a tyrant, is preferred over anarchy – it has nevertheless placed him at the opposite spectrum of other ulamas in Egypt.

On the other hand, the official spokesman of Al-Azhar, Mohammed Refah El-Tahtawy, reacting to the events that were unfolding, resigned and joined the demonstrations at Tahrir Square. Reports mentioned that he called for the immediate investigation into the clashes that have killed several and injured hundreds by then. Al-Azhar

Scholars' Front, a group that dates back to the 1940s and has mostly been strongly opposed to the perceived pro-government opinions and fatwas issued by the leadership of Al-Azhar, released scathing remarks against Mubarak and called for his resignation.

Before the resignation of Mubarak, Al-Azhar also saw its former student Muhammad Jibril, a renowned Islamic scholar, leading the Friday prayers at Tahrir Square. More prominently, the prodigal son of Al-Azhar, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who has spent his life in exile in Doha, Qatar, returned to Egypt to lead the Friday prayers at Tahrir Square a week after Mubarak's departure. He has been a strong critic of Al-Azhar as a whole, from the educational structure to its financial dependency on the government, but he is also a man whose Azharite identity is an essential part of him. He has been very vocal in lending his support for the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and now Libya.

The strong opposing stance from these Azharites against the status quo of Al-Azhar leadership, especially El-Tahtawy's resignation, gives an insight into the voices of dissent and opposition within the campuses against the institution's stance, which is perceived to be weak. It also exposed the fissures between the leadership and the public at the lower level of hierarchy. Leading Al-Azhar officials who expressed disagreement over the demonstrations include Saeed Amer, the Head of the Fatwa Council of Al-Azhar. Yet such calls are muted by the images of Al-Azhar scholars marching in Tahrir Square in their distinctive garb of grey robes and white-red turbans.

A Shifting Position?

After Mubarak's fall, Al-Azhar scholars gathered in front of the Ministry of Awqaf demanding that the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar be chosen through an election and not a presidential appointment, as it has historically been so. In a press conference, the Grand Sheikh Al-Tayyib backs this demand and states that he is ready to elect the Grand Sheikh. He also defended Al-Azhar's stances as being original and not tainted by politics, saying that the institution is "above governments and revolutions".

Given the recent triumph of the Egyptian people over the regime, there is no better and more interesting time to see what changes the oldest and most revered Islamic institution will bring in light of the fast-changing order in the region. Initial indications are pointing towards a change, as Al-Tayyib noted the near future will see "freer religious speech". Al-Azhar should take charge of its future just as Egypt has done and regain its foot in the collective memory of Muslims by allowing independent scholarship to expand and flourish.

Where open dissent by established Muslim clerics is generally rare in the region, the tsunami of awakening has rallied the masses, including the ulamas. A similar trend is visible in other parts of the region. For instance Libya's own Islamic leaders, under the umbrella of Network of Free Ulama of Libya, have issued a fatwa telling all Muslims it is their duty to rebel against the Libyan leadership and to demand the release of all jailed protesters. If and when popular revolts triumph, institutions – including religious ones – will be disengaged from the unseated rulers. It is thus likely that Al-Azhar's shifting position may motivate similar trends in the region.

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