

# Political paradox

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Is the amendment of Article 5 meant to separate religion from politics? **Gihan Shahine** sifts through conflicting government policies

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The amendment of Article 5 of the constitution seems to be triggering more controversy now than ever with many observers noting double standards in the way the government has been handling the issue of mixing religion with politics. Whereas the amendment prohibits the establishment of any political party or activity based on religion, the regime itself seems to have resorted to that same mix when rallying support for its proposed constitutional amendment.

It's not just that slogans such as "your vote is a duty before God", which was used by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to mobilise voters during the recent national poll on constitutional amendments were widely seen as religiously slanted. The recent controversial edict ( *fatwa* ) by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, equating boycotting the vote with "withholding testimony" in court, has made many wonder whether the amendment in question was actually meant at separating religion from politics. That paradox was corroborated even more when pictures of Tantawi, who is widely perceived as a government mouthpiece, were splashed all over the local press portraying him casting his ballot and as one paper noted, saying that he was "now relieved for having done his religious duty before God".

Tantawi's politicised *fatwa* immediately provoked more than the anger of the public who recently seem to have been putting increasingly little stock in the religious edicts of the grand imam. A few days later, prominent Islamic scholar Mohamed Emara criticised the Grand Imam's edict, saying the actual sin was to contribute to such "a farce" as the public poll on constitutional amendments, equating that with "giving false testimony" in court.

The Coptic Church, albeit financially and administratively independent of the state, has similarly rubbed the Coptic elite the wrong way for getting itself bogged down in politics, again more often than not, in favour of the regime. Pope Shenouda III, patriarch of the Coptic Church, angered many when he asked Copts not to ask for the removal of Article 2 of the constitution in order not to create sectarian sensitivities, advising them to "leave such matters in the hands of those in charge". Shenouda also removed Anba Morqos from his post as the official spokesman of the church for having asked to scratch the article.

But that was not the first incident in which Shenouda would garner support for the regime. Earlier, he provoked a wave of controversy when he pledged his support for the government even before President Hosni Mubarak had even announced his candidacy in the 2005 presidential polls, and reportedly after receiving a visit from presidential adviser Zakariya Azmi. The pope further suspended the parish priest of Giza's Virgin Mary Church, Flubatir Jamil, for breaking ranks and declaring support for Ayman Nour, the leader of the Ghad

Party. The suspension also came on the heels of Pope Shenouda's repudiation of Coptic Kifaya leader George Ishaq, whom he described as "no son of the Coptic Church".

The paradox on the part of the government -- prohibiting as it does political activities based on religion while in a predominantly religious society where religion seems to be a major motivator, and as it tries to root its legitimacy in religious grounds -- has opened a Pandora's box of questions about the real motives behind the amendment of Article 5 and whether it is possible to separate politics from religion.

According to prominent *Al-Ahram* columnist Salama Ahmed Salama, the regime seems to have shot itself in the foot when it resorted to such religious rhetoric in propagating the proposed amendment. "It has puzzled even the most ardent supporters of keeping religion and politics separate when it did not apply the same rule to itself," Salama told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "Now everybody seems to be sceptical about the real motive behind the amendment and its constitutionality."

Many, like assistant professor of political science at Cairo University Abdel-Aziz Shadi, would argue that in predominantly religious cultures as that of Egypt, and perhaps the entire Middle East, the very idea of keeping religion away from politics is not viable.

"Over ancient and contemporary history, historically, religion and politics have always been entwined," Shadi insisted. Shadi insisted that the current regime itself has never actually abandoned using religious discourse in many political and social spheres, and never actually headed towards secularism, as many people believe.

"If the regime aims at secularising the country, it would have abolished Article 2 of the constitution, which considers the principles of Islamic Sharia the main source of legislation, and not kept articles 9 and 11 which say that religion is the main pillar of any family," Shadi argued.

Many analysts would agree with Shadi, that the amendment of Article 5 was actually meant to abolish any possibility for the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, who constitute the largest opposition bloc in parliament, to form a political party and drive them away from the political sphere.

Although a law already exists banning the formation of any political party with a religious reference, embedding that term in the constitution would eliminate any chance the group might have had to get round the law or appeal its constitutional legality in court.

Shadi, who is a strong supporter of the government's constitutional amendment, regards the Brotherhood as "a threat to national security" and as such the amendment was needed "so that they would never be able to get round the law and form a political party."

"We definitely do not need a political party with a religious affiliation which would create schisms in the social fabric," Shadi insisted. He added that the Brotherhood, whom he perceives as "militant", should not be "a reliable source of religion; only the state-affiliated Al-Azhar and the House of Fatwa are." For the pro-government Shadi, "the state is the true guardian of religion."

It is common knowledge, however, that Al-Azhar has increasingly lost its credibility and is widely perceived as a government mouthpiece. The grand imam has been repeatedly lambasted as a government official willing to compromise the principles of Islam for the sake of state politics.

Fully dependent on the state for its funding, Al-Azhar's scholars are government employees who may, in some cases, adopt a pro-government discourse. The grand sheikh and the mufti, the institution's two most prominent voices, are both selected and appointed by the government, which was not the case before the 1952 Revolution. The grand sheikh then was elected by a committee of senior clergy and his authority was fully independent of the state.

Since then, according to Nabil Abdel-Fattah of Al-Ahram's Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Al-Azhar has been constantly used as "a tool to justify its authoritarian policies and garner public support for an autocratic regime."

Critics like Abdel-Fattah point to many incidents when Tantawi issued politicised and sometimes conflicting edicts to promote government policies. Many had, for instance, slammed Tantawi's earlier controversial edict equating the boycotting of May's vote on a presidential referendum with "withholding testimony in court while remaining silent on many of the regime's violations of human rights and state security abuse of prisoners," Abdel-Fattah said.

Earlier, Tantawi's retraction of a *fatwa* issued by a senior Al-Azhar cleric urging Muslim and Arab states to boycott the Iraqi governing council also made waves. Tantawi abjured the earlier edict, which bore Al-Azhar's official seal, 10 days after it was issued, and, more embarrassingly, immediately after meeting with David Welsh, the then US ambassador to Egypt. "No Egyptian cleric has the right to pass a verdict on the affairs of another country," Tantawi said by way of explanation.

According to Ibrahim El-Houdaibi, board member and columnist in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's official English website, *ikhwanweb.com*, the real danger of amending Article 5 is not that it would deprive the Brotherhood of any chance to form a political party or that it is a step towards secularising the country. "Rather, it is extremely dangerous because it gives the state absolute monopoly over the interpretation and the use of religion in the public sphere... defining what is Sharia and what is not, whether or not it should be applied, and how."

"In a sense, this creates a new form of theocracy... [that] will easily justify its [the state] violations of every law and will distort the image of political opponents, portraying them as apostates or at least as secularists who pose a threat to their very beliefs," El-Houdaibi wrote in an opinion piece published in *Islamonline*.

According to El-Houdaibi, the amendment of Article 5 is thus only meant to "guarantee that there will be no strong Islamist voice resisting the tyranny, corruption, and authoritarianism of the regime," especially when knowing that "in a country like Egypt, where the society is predominantly religious, the possibility of having a grassroots secular movement is very slim."