

# Shura blasts Al-Azhar demonstrations

Al Ahram Weekly  
7-13 February

The Shura Council has approved a draft law banning demonstrations in and around places of worship, reports [Gamal Essam El-Din](#)

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On Tuesday the Shura Council gave the green light for a controversial law aimed at banning public demonstrations inside or close to places of worship. Officially promoted as preserving the sanctity of places of worship, the new, three-article piece of legislation was immediately dubbed the law banning demonstrations inside Al-Azhar.

In the words of Minister of *Waqf* (religious endowments) Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq, holding demonstrations in the mosque of Al-Azhar has underlined the urgent need for the new law.

"It is deplorable," he said, "that the venerable mosque of Al-Azhar should have become a hotbed of demonstrations at which clerics are insulted and anti-Egyptian slogans chanted."

The law received overwhelming approval in the Shura Council thanks to the majority of ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) deputies. It is, however, expected to face fierce criticism when it comes up for final debate at the People's Assembly.

The 88-strong parliamentary bloc of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood has characterised the new legislation as a further restriction on public freedom and evidence of yet more backtracking on democratic reforms. Hussein Ibrahim, the Brotherhood's parliamentary spokesman, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the new law was only formulated because demonstrations at Al-Azhar had become a magnet for international media and satellite channels.

"The reality is that citizens have found in Al-Azhar demonstrations an opportunity to vent their anger against the regime and show their opposition to the inheritance of power and continued assault on public freedoms," says Ibrahim.

Saad Abboud, an independent MP with leftist leanings, agrees that demonstrations in and around the mosque have become a thorn in the side of the regime. "Do not forget that the Kifaya popular movement was born of demonstrations against the Anglo- American invasion of Iraq," says Abboud, who believes demonstrations in Al-Azhar Mosque have become "especially embarrassing because protesters shout slogans against President Mubarak and his son Gamal which are then picked up by the international media".

In the Shura Council Ragaa El-Arabi, chair of the Legislative and Constitutional Affairs Committee, explained that the law includes two important articles. The first, he said, bans demonstrations in and around all places of worship. The text, he continued, is "comprehensive and applies to indoor and outdoor places of worship", while the second imposes penalties on anyone who organises such demonstrations or participates in them. El-Arabi indicated that those found guilty of inciting or urging citizens to organise demonstrations in Al-Azhar and other Muslim or Christian places of worship will receive a sentence of no more than one year

in prison or a fine ranging from LE1,000 to LE5,000. Anyone judged guilty of participating in public demonstrations inside or outside places of worship will receive a sentence of no less than six months in prison or a fine ranging from LE500 to LE2,000.

He argued that the new law is in line with constitutional articles 46, 47 and 54 which guarantee freedom of assembly, speech and public expression, as long as it is exercised within the limits of law.

Moufid Shehab, minister of state for parliamentary and legal affairs, pointed out that demonstrations in and around places of worship are banned in many countries. "Most states do not have laws to cover this particular issue because the ban is customarily recognised and heeded," he said, lamenting that the government had been obliged to draft the law following recurrent violations of this international norm.

Minister of *Waqf* Zaghoul lashed out at critics of the law. "Freedom of expression should not be exploited to justify violating the sanctity of places of worship," he said. Zaqqouq revealed that council members had been shown many photographs showing citizens brandishing political slogans inside Al-Azhar Mosque. "It is a regular occurrence that at the end of Friday prayers people gather at Al-Azhar Mosque to chant political slogans and give interviews with anti-Egyptian Arab satellite channels," claimed Zaqqouq. In one recent demonstration, he said, the organisers burned the Egyptian flag and chanted slogans against the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Sayed Tantawi, while at others the flag of the Lebanese Shia armed militia Hezbollah had been raised alongside images of its leader Hassan Nasrallah.

It is no excuse, he continued, to say that mosques and churches were the centres from which the 1919 nationalist revolution was organised. "Nor is it plausible to say that late president Gamal Abdel-Nasser chose Al-Azhar pulpit to address the nation during the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956." These, he argued, were exceptional events during which mosques and churches were not used for organising demonstrations but for taking a united stand against invasion and occupation forces.

The law, he said, applies to churches as much as mosques because "in recent years it has become a disturbing phenomenon that Christians demonstrate inside churches or cathedrals for political reasons."

Nabil Louka Bibawi, an appointed Christian member of the Shura Council, said the law should not come at the expense of public freedom. "There should be alternative places for demonstrations, like Hyde Park in London, and I would suggest these places be in new cities around Cairo so as not to disrupt traffic," said Bibawi.

Hassan Hefnawi, another NDP appointee, blasted the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood for hijacking Al-Azhar Mosque and university to further their political agenda.