ISLAM AND THE SENSE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN MODERN EGYPT

Lecture given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor philosophiae, University of Bergen, 19 Sep. 1996

Egypt is “the land of all religions”, according to Ākhir Sā’a, a government-sponsored mass weekly.¹ The Egyptian personality, the archetypical Egyptian, has been empirically diagnosed as a being moved by a deep sense of religion, and that since the earliest times, min qadim al-zaman, seit urewigen Zeiten. From the time of the Pharoas until today, this particularly intense Egyptian religiosity has remained the same, throughout all the religious changes that occurred in the country.² And therefore, “religion has played a prominent role in the makeup of Egyptian thought and feeling”, so prominent that Hasan Hanafi, the mighty thinker, has called it the “fundamental axis of Egyptian life”.³

Such views are published by Egyptian national social science research institutions; I have been quoting from a work from 1990 entitled, “The modern Egyptian: a theoretico-empirical approach to some aspects of the Egyptian national personality”. There seems to be broad agreement among all but the most die-hard leftists in Egypt on this issue. ‘The Egyptian is religious’. Hasan Hanafi, whom I have just referred to, used to be a Marxist thinker but discovered that his message fell on deaf ears among the masses unless it was expressed in religious terms. And he became convinced that they were right. Muḥammad was a true socialist; Islam was socialism with a human face and with an horizon open to the transcendent. Other leftists have come a similar way. ⁴Ādīl Husayn is arguably the most influential of them today; he used to be editor-in-chief of the opposition journal, al-Shāb and has been been for three years now [since May 1993] secretary general of the Socialist Labour Party, a party which is strongly Islamist in outlook. “You cannot be”, says ⁴Ādīl Ḥusayn, “seriously nationalist if you are not completely open to Islam. Because Islam is the very identity of this nation”.⁴

I believe I have covered now all the words that make up the topic that I was given for this lecture. The identity and the national personality — all being in perfect continuity and utter harmony with Egypt’s history and these times of modernity — or something like that. — [Oh ja, I forgot — sense…!] It all makes perfect sense — or does it? Yes it does — it has to. Hope and stability hinge on this image, ever since — well, actually, I believe since the 1970s in particular, when president “Muhammad” Anwar al-Sadat, il-rayis il-mu’min, rediscovered that he was heir to 7000 years of grand Egyptian history, and that the peaceful coexistence side by side of mosque and church and synagogue was one of the cornerstones of the perennial ‘Egyptian national personality’. Hope and stability for Egypt was the message of Ākhir Sā‘a when it portrayed the country as the “land of all religions” in its new-year’s issue 1994.

Back in 1982, in his contribution to the widely-read book, “Islam in the political process”, Fouad Ajami, has given expression to his feelings about Egypt and religion and stability. He wrote that fundamentally, religion “cannot do much to change the distribution of power [in Egypt] or to make the system more democratic”. That was less than a year after the President had been assassinated by members of a militant Islamist group. An image of “Eternal Egypt” lurked beneath his analysis of the “essentially ‘stalled’ nature of the Egyptian political culture”. “From the time Islam swept into this riverbed society in the seventh century,” wrote Fouad Ajami in his unmistakable, elegant style, “Egyptians have been able to combine a pervasive religiosity with a certain lightheartedness and tolerance about their faith. Islam appropriated an old civilization here, taking unto itself some of its patience and rites and grace.” In the “quintessential land of stability”, as he put it, “the Hegelian proposition about the inevitability of revolution may have found a sure graveyard. There revolutions either do not happen or, when they do, they are turned into familiar and harmless things.”

If this image ever was right, momentous changes have taken place over the past fifteen years — changes that led even Fouad Ajami to conclude in ’94 that “History has velocity today. It blows with fury, and it spares not even the most ‘timeless’ and ‘eternal’ of places.”

What has happened in “the land where Islam made its peace with the world, fashioning a modern, enlightened, secular civilization”? “A grim struggle is being fought” there, says Ajami, “between the state and […] bands of zealous Islamic fundamentalists”. The outside world’s image of “stable Egypt” began to crumble in earnest in March 1992, when militant groups started to target police and security officials, representatives of the government, members and property of the Coptic minority, banks, and … tourists. Since

---

then, at least 800 people have been killed in the violence, and a slightly higher number were injured. The militants and the security forces are each responsible for roughly half of these victims. The figures pale in comparison to the 50,000 lives that civil unrest in Algeria has claimed so far, but still, they give cause to great concern, not least to the Egyptian government and its overseas supporters. The Economist Intelligence Unit in its current Country Profile (1995-96) sums up the political situation thus: “the maintenance of law and order has been a priority as the government pushes through an IMF-regulated economic reform programme and concentrates its energies on crushing the sharp rise in Islamic militancy.”

Therefore, even though (and I’m still quoting the Economist Intelligence report) “Islamist violence has finally forced the government to pay more attention to the underlying causes of popular discontent — poverty, unemployment and a lack of public services” — the government has set a clear priority for … “stability” — and here we meet it again, “stability” — the image of Egypt as “the quintessential land of stability”, but stability now, in this context, has a more precise meaning, it is no longer so beautifully mythical and poetic and timeless, but quite political, it means “law and order” at all costs, it means dealing with the Islamists as a mere security threat — and portraying them as a mere security threat — in order not to have to take them seriously as a political opposition, in order not to allow them seriously into the political game. The heavy-handed way the government displayed during the last parliamentary elections (Nov. 1995), and the subsequent replacement of ‘Ātīf Sidqi, who had served as prime minister for a decade, by his pro-establishment deputy, Kamāl [Ahmad] al-Ḡanzūrī, are clear signs of this direction. Of the two possible candidates for the job of prime minister, Kamāl al-Ḡanzūrī was seen as posing “less threat to the ruling elite”, in the words of the Economist [Intelligence Unit].

Am I diverging from my topic here? Talking about government reshuffles when I am supposed to edify you with thoughts on religion and identity? You will understand that I am doing this on purpose. “The battle for Egypt’s soul” — this is the title of one of Fouad Ajami’s contributions — is being fought in mosques and seminar rooms run by identifiable organisations, in newspapers and on television screens owned by specific groups with specific interests. It is only through an analysis of these groups and their interests that we can find out what makes ‘sense’ for whom, what ‘Islam’ or ‘nation’ mean in particular contexts, how such words are used in particular configurations characterized by the differential distribution of power and influence, in the social, economic, and political spheres.

I cannot propose to do more here than to sketch some salient issues characterizing the current ‘scenery’ in Egypt. Briefly, one may say that debates about what ‘Islam means in Egypt today’ move between two poles. The flag on one pole proclaims, ‘al-Islām huwa
al-hall’, ‘Islam is the solution’ to all of Egypt’s problems. On the other side, we are reminded that ‘Islam is tolerant and peaceful’ and quiet. It is the political opposition that holds up the banner of ‘Islam as the solution’, while the government media time and again emphasize that Islam is the moral tissue holding Egyptian society together in peace and harmony. The political opponent, in both cases, is portrayed as a threat to Islam and the integrity of its message. Sometimes, this can have lethal consequences. Hasan al-Bannā, Sayyid Quṭb and Farağ Fūda are but the most famous icons on this bloody path. Hasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), who had founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers in 1928, was assassinated by members of the political police in 1949. Sayyid Quṭb (1903-1966), an Islamist intellectual and chief voice of the Muslim Brotherhood after its official banning in 1954, was executed on conspiracy charges in 1966, along with two other Brothers. Farağ Fūda (-1992), a secularist intellectual and outspoken supporter of a hard line against the Islamists, was assassinated by militant Islamists in 1992. Such threats hang over the heads of those who in modern Egypt debate questions such as ‘Islam and the sense of national identity’.

Currently the most prominent case is that of Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd, a professor of Islamic studies at Cairo University. Last month, on 5 August (1996), the Court of Cassation, the highest court of appeal in Egypt, upheld a ruling that Abū Zayd must be divorced from his wife on the grounds that he was an apostate from Islam. The case goes back to [May] 1992 when Abū Zayd applied for tenure in the Department of Arabic Studies. A committee was formed to evaluate his recent scholarly output, among which were two books on The concept of Scripture and A critique of the religious discourse. In these as in his other works Abū Zayd employed hermeneutic and semiotic methodology to argue that “no text comes free of historical context”, that this includes the Qurʾān in its manifestation as a text, and that all interpretation of religious scripture, and all religious discourse, is informed by contemporaneous socio-political and cultural factors. Different interpretations serve different socio-political ends, he wrote, and proceeded to analyze and deconstruct in particular the ways in which, and the ends for which, contemporary Islamists attempt to impose their hegemony in interpreting the Qurʾān.

In December 1992, the evaluation committee spoke and — by seven votes against six — rejected Abū Zayd’s application for tenure. Now we all know that tenure cases are often not decided on the candidate’s scholarly qualifications alone, and Abū Zayd claims that in his case, personal animosity had played just such a role. Of the three Islamic experts consulted by the committee, only one had declared against Abū Zayd. This was Dr. ʿAbd al-Šabrū Shāhīn, a professor of linguistics? at Dār al-ʿUlūm/Cairo University. The trouble was that in the introduction to his Critique of the religious discourse, Abū Zayd had criticised the so-called Islamic investment companies (sharikāt tawālīf al-amwāl) that had

---

8 Submitted were two books and eleven articles. The books were: Mafḥūm al-naṣṣ: dirāsa fi ‘ulūm al-Qurʾān, Cairo: GEBÖ, 1990 (395 pp.), and Naqḍ al-khiṭāb al-dīnī, Cairo: Sīnā, 1992 (224 pp.).
been established in the 1980s as interest-free alternatives to conventional banks, attracting large numbers of depositors with promised ‘profits’ of 20-30%. Ābd al-Šabūr happened to have acted as a religious advisor to the largest of these institutions, al-Rayyān,⁹ which had been at the centre of a heavily publicized financial scandal in 1988. Ābd al-Šabūr’s opposition to Abū Zayd’s promotion, says the latter, was based on his involvement with these companies, and not on a scholarly assessment of his work — revealingly, his comments did not deal with any of the remaining chapters of the book.

This is thus precisely an example for the ways in which socio-economic context and power relations shape the interpretation of texts. What was the scandal about?

It appears that where the Islamic investment companies actually paid the promised returns of 20-30% — often, they were simply booked ‘on account’ — they derived not so much from actual profits but from the continuing high level of deposits made.¹⁰ Critics also pointed out that these ‘Islamic’ companies made much money by dealing in international markets that were everything but interest-free, while using religious scholars at home to boost their ‘Islamic’ image. The companies justified this behaviour by citing the example of the Prophet dealing with Jews.

The ‘Islamic’ credentials of these companies eventually resulted in a significant move of capital out of the banks and into an ‘Islamic economy’. Contrary to the banks, the investment companies — effectively run as family enterprises — completely escaped any sort of public control, but the government did not move until 1986, when reports reached the Egyptian press that al-Rayyān — the companies that had employed Dr. Ābd al-Šabūr — had suffered losses on dealings in gold in the order of one hundred million US$, causing a panic among depositors. Al-Rayyān withered the storm, but critics became more alert. Throughout 1987, a public debate was led on the subject, in which one side was arguing that what was going on was all a big swindle, duping innocent Egyptians into giving their hard-earned money to unscrupulous profiteers who exploited their religious sentiments, while the other side claimed that the government’s efforts to legislate the activities of these companies were yet another attempt to preserve the existing — unjust — economic order and to stifle the success of a truly independent Islamic economy. While this debate was still going on, the international stock market crash in October 1987 appears to have hit the companies hard. One of them collapsed early in 1988, and its owner fled the country. Another suffered liquidity problems. In April, two of the largest, al-Rayyān (again) and al-Sa‘d first announced their merger, then annulled it a month later, causing further speculation about a financial crisis. Under these conditions, new

---

⁹ al-Rayyān had over 190,000 investors and £E 1.5 billion in deposits (Denis Sullivan, “Islam and development: civil society and the state”, in Islam, Muslims and the modern state, New York: St. Martin’s, 1994, p. 213.

legislation was passed that not only required the companies to keep proper books, but subjected them to the directions of the Council of Ministers. Investigations revealed many irregularities, and in [early] November 1988, the government seized the assets of al-Rayyân. “Economists in Egypt were predicting that depositors’ claims of up to US$ 3 billion would be unmet as a result of illicit practices”.11 The loss of public confidence, combined with intrusive government control, eventually led to the liquidation of all but two companies.

Opinion in Egypt is still divided on the assessment of this whole issue. Has the government protected the people from unscrupulous swindlers? or has it acted to protect the established financial elites from the threat of a newly-emerging indigenous, Islamic economy? It is against the background of such debates that Abû Zayd’s books were quite consciously written and are being quite consciously read.

Abû Zayd’s colleagues in the department supported him in his application for tenure, but in March 1993 the rector of Cairo University, to whom all the papers had been submitted for a final decision, recommended him to “try again later”. Abû Zayd interprets this as cowardice: the rector being simply afraid of a confrontation with the Islamists. If the rector had hoped that with the case closed, the atmosphere would quieten down, he could not have been more wrong. Two weeks later, on Friday, 2 April 1993, Dr. ʿAbd al-Šabûr Shâhîn proclaimed Abû Zayd an apostate from the pulpit of the ʿAmr b. al-ŠÀš mosque in southern Cairo. The following Friday [9 April], this deadly verdict echoed from mosques throughout Egypt. Islamist activists and lawyers decided to file a lawsuit in court demanding the divorce of Abû Zayd from his wife Ibtihâl Yûnis (a professor in the French department at Cairo University) on the grounds that an apostate, a non-Muslim, could not be married to a Muslim woman. The lawsuit was accompanied by a publicity campaign against Abû Zayd in the Islamic press. Already on 15 April ’93, the Islamic weekly al-Liwâ‘ al-Islâmi, “founded by the ruling National Democratic Party to counter religious extremism […] ran an editorial fulminating against the ‘heretic’ Abu Zaid who had endangered the faith of his students and urging the rector of the university to fire him. A week later, the same paper counselled the government that ‘execution’ was the only fitting penalty for Abu Zaid — and that it should apply the provisions of the Islamic penal code immediately.

On top of this came statements by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazâlî [1917-], a leading authority among Islamists, [and Muhammad Ġâlî Kishk, a vocal Islamic agitator, who] during the trial of the assassins of Faraq Fâda declared that if the state did not do its religious duty, it was the duty of every Muslim to execute the punishment.12

11 Sullivan, “Islam and development”, 213. I have not found out yet whether this fear actually materialized.
This is not to be taken lightly. Egypt-Net — an electronic discussion list — witnessed a lengthy discussion of the issue, where people who endorsed the condemnation of Abū Zayd freely admitted that they had not read his works and were basing their opinion on what others were saying, specifically: “1. No scholar defended Abu Zeid. 2. We should trust our scholars.”\textsuperscript{13} It was based on such rumour and hearsay that back in 1994 the Nobel prize laureate Naṣīb Maḥfūẓ was stabbed and severely wounded in his neck; today, he can hardly write his name.

“On 27 January 1994, the judge in the First Grade Family Court ruled the case inadmissible because the plaintiff had insufficient personal grievance with Abu Zaid. The decision was challenged in the court of appeal and overturned. The Islamists succeeded [thereby] in having Abu Zaid’s apostasy confirmed and his marriage officially annulled. Abu Zaid took his case to the Court of Cassation, Egypt’s final court of appeal.”\textsuperscript{14}

As we have seen, the final verdict of this court was to reject the appeal. There is no recourse beyond this decision. Having been pronounced an apostate by Egypt’s highest court, Abū Zayd’s life is in acute danger. He and Ibtihāl meanwhile live in exile in Leiden where he was given a visiting professorship.\textsuperscript{15}

The government had supported Abū Zayd’s case in court, and many observers had expressed their belief that in the final instance, it could not allow the opponents of Abū Zayd to succeed. Why then this verdict? I have not seen any official reactions yet, but in part, one may see Abū Zayd as a pawn in a larger game, a pawn that the government thought it could sacrifice in order not to allow the Islamists to portray the Egyptian judiciary as a mere tool of un-Islamic authorities protecting ‘convicted’ apostates. From a slightly different perspective, one may see Abū Zayd as a victim of something that in principle is an asset of the Egyptian system: a judiciary with a long tradition of independence from the government. In a social situation where this independence from the government is chiefly expressed in Islamic terms, and associated with Islamist positions, Abū Zayd’s chances of finding judicial support would not seem to be very good from the start. Judges, in the final instance, are not really neutral but have opinions, too (the issue of abortion in Germany or the United States may perhaps help to illustrate this).

Islam has known theological debates and heated controversies over the interpretation of Scriptures, over method and result, throughout its history. Some of these controversies have remained purely academic, others were carried out with intolerance and violence. It seems to me that whether or not such a debate ends up in violence depends largely on the context, the social and political conditions, the utilization of a particular idea. The

\textsuperscript{13} Mohamed Trabia <mbt@charles.cs.unlv.edu>, posting on Egypt-Net 3 Sep 1996, in defence of Abū Zayd against Dr. Mohammed Sarhan <sarhanm@vmsa.csd.mu.edu>.


\textsuperscript{15} Abū Zayd’s \textit{Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī} (Cairo 1992, third edn. 1996; German tr. publ. Nov. 1995) which examines contemporary Islamic discourse was the book that started his troubles.
Mu’tazila— the so-called ‘rationalist’ school of Islam — is a case in point. In modern times, the Mu’tazila has often been invoked as an ‘indigenous predecessor’ to show that rationalist thought is possible in Islam. But we should not forget that for many Muslims, their image has been seriously tarnished by the state-run inquisition (miḥna) to which they subjected their opponents. Those who invoke the Mu’tazila among their intellectual ancestors should remember this.

Less publicized internationally, but no less on the mind of Egyptians these days than the case of Abu Zayd is the government’s crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. A month ago, on 15 August, the Supreme Military Court in Cairo sentenced seven prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood to three years imprisonment. One received a suspended sentence of one year, and five were acquitted. The thirteen men — all prominent academics, politicians, and leaders of the professional organizations — had been arrested in April and were charged with membership of an illegal organization (the Muslim Brotherhood, banned in 1954 after alleged involvement in an attempt on Nassers’ life, but tolerated from the early 1970s until 1995) which “aims to overthrow the regime and the suspension of the constitution”. None of them was charged with committing or condoning any acts of violence; the trials were purely political. In a similar case last year (23 Nov 1995), 54 members of the Muslim Brotherhood (out of 81 defendants) were sentenced to prison and hard labour for periods ranging from three to five years.

This is the first time in thirty years in Egypt that civilians have been tried in military courts on political charges. It is also the first mass trials of Brotherhood members since 1966, when Sayyid Qutb was sentenced to death. A third and even larger mass trial, this time

---

16 “The concept of metaphor as applied to the Qurʾān by the Muʿtazilites” was the subject of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s MA-thesis; it was later published as, al-Ittiḥād al-ʿagīlī fī l-tafsīr: dirāsā fī qadīyāt al-majāz fī l-Qurʾān ind al-Muʿtazila (Beirut: D al-Tanwīr, 1982, 280 pp.; 4th edn. 1996).

17 Press releases by Amnesty International, 22 August 1996; and by Human Rights Watch, 12 August 1996. The names of the defendants, from the AI press release: Mohammad Mahdi ‘Aqef, a 68-year-old former member of the People's Assembly (parliament), Dr ’Abd al-Hamid al-Ghazali, a 59-year-old lecturer at the Faculty of Economics - Cairo University, Mostafa Tāhir al-Ghunaymī, a 40-year-old medical doctor working at Samannud Hospital, Mohammad Ibrahim ’Abd al-Fattah Badawi, aged 59 and professor of Arabic, Dr Mahmoud ‘Omar al-‘Arini, a 72-year-old lecturer at the Faculty of Agriculture - University of al-Azhar, Mahmoud ‘Ali Abu-Riya, aged 74 and a publisher in al-Mansourah, Hassan Gawda ’Abd al-Hafiz, a 67-year-old former member of the People's Assembly and head of an Islamic charitable organization in Bani Sueif, were sentenced to three years' imprisonment. ’Abd al-ʿAzīm ’Abd al-Maqīd al-Maghribī, a 68-year-old former member of the People's Assembly, received a suspended sentence of one-year imprisonment. Abu al-ʿAlā Madhi Abu al-ʿAlā, aged 34 and Deputy Secretary General of the Engineers' Syndicate, Dr Is̄smā Hilī Hashish, a 46-year-old lecturer of mechanical engineering at Cairo University, Magdi al-Faruq Anwar, a 39-year-old engineer, Dr Gamal ’Abd al-Hadi, a lecturer in Islamic history at the University of al-Azhar and Dr Rashad Mohammad al-Bayoumi, a 61-year-old lecturer at the Faculty of Sciences - University of Cairo, were acquitted. The first three were reportedly arrested in connection with the newly formed al- Wasat Party which applied for legal status at the beginning of this year.
not against the Brotherhood but against militants of the Gihād movement, has been initiated on 1 September 1996 when state prosecutors filed charges against 65 Islamic activists (all detained since 1994), in preparation of what a police official called “the largest trial since the hearing into the assassination of former president Anwar al-Sādāt in 1981 when more than 100 members of the Gihād were charged”.

The trial of civilians before military courts had begun in October 1992 in connection with a clampdown on Islamist activists. It was justified on the basis of the state of emergency which continues to be in force in Egypt since the assassination of al-Sādāt in October 1981. The avowed purpose is to circumvent the civil courts (which have a long tradition of judicial independence from the government) and to speed up the procedure, especially “in cases where evidence against [the defendants] is weak or nonexistent”. No appeal is possible against the decisions of military courts. Since 1993, they have pronounced 76 death sentences, of which 54 have been carried out.

Some of this year’s defendants are associated with the Wasaṭ (Centre) Party, which applied for official recognition in January this year (1996) in an attempt to create a legal basis for the Muslim Brotherhood’s political activities. The application was turned down in May; an appeal against this will not be heard before December.

But courts — even military courts — are not the only means the government uses to fight the Islamists. In 1990 [9 Sep], Dr. ʾAlāʾ Muḥyī al-Dīn, a spokesman for the militant Islamists, was assassinated in Cairo after failing to comply with an order to leave the city. In [April] 1994, an Islamist lawyer, ʾAbd al-Ḥārīth Madani, died in police custody just after his arrest. “The Government stated that it had completed the investigation into his death but declined to publicize the results”. ʾAbd al-Ḥārīth had just conveyed an offer of truce to the authorities from the militant Ǧamāʿīt, and it is generally suspected that he died under torture when pressed to reveal information about his contacts in the Ǧamāʿīt. His widow was later [Feb 1995] also arrested and apparently frightened into making statements supporting the Government. According to Human Rights Watch, officers of the State Security Investigation have been actively intimidating journalists who reported on such cases or who had contact with international human rights organizations.

“Perhaps due to such pressure, the military court trial and the Wasat Party case have not been the focus of in-depth media coverage and vigorous advocacy inside Egypt. ‘People are afraid,’ one Egyptian intellectual told Human Rights Watch. The perception is that ‘anyone can be taken to the military court, tried in a case without evidence, and imprisoned for five years,’ he added. ‘People speak privately, but publicly they are afraid.’”

---

18 Human Rights Watch, loc.cit.
20 Burgat, *L’islamisme en face*, 149.
22 Human Rights Watch, loc.cit.
An Egyptian human rights group estimated that around 15,000 ‘suspected terrorists’ are in detention. “This estimate does not include the undetermined number of detainees who have not been officially registered in the prison system.”\textsuperscript{23} Just for comparison — the number of political prisoners in Algeria is 34,000.

The Abũ Zayd case and the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood are just two examples of the increasing violence and intolerance that characterizes the Egyptian public scene today. But beneath the bloody ideological confrontation there are structural issues of political participation and economic development that must not be ignored if want to understand the intensity of the confrontation. The ‘battle for Egypt’s soul’ is clearly not only about ideas.

1. **Democracy? A flower without a fruit!** (Burgat). There is a rhetoric of, and thus a promise of, democracy — but this promise is in suspense, causing ever more frustration for those to whom real participation is held out but never really granted.

The government and the ruling party dominate political institutions at all levels, the mass media, the large public sector of the economy, and even private organizations to such an extent that “citizens to not have a meaningful ability to change their government”.\textsuperscript{24} Elections are regularly held, but none are free and fair. Voter turnout is consistently low; estimates generally range between 5 and 15%. Electoral registers, not published since 1956, are rumoured to include only 15% of those theoretically eligible to vote. It is therefore slightly ironic when president Mubãrak declared himself “touched by the unprecedentedly high participation” in the 1993 referendum when he — the single candidate — was re-elected for a third term in office with 96.28% of votes.\textsuperscript{25}

There are widespread and credible reports of irregularities and vote rigging. By the end of 1995, the results of almost a quarter of the 444 constituencies of the parliamentary elections in Nov. 1995 had been contested in court. Many results have meanwhile been declared invalid.\textsuperscript{26}

The Govt is gracefully willing to consider further democratisation if and insofar the people prove their maturity: Usãma al-Bãz, top adviser to the President, proposed that


\textsuperscript{25} In the 1992 [local] elections, for example, it reached “a high of only 15 percent in rural areas and a low of 5 percent in urban areas” (Sana Abed-Kotob, “The accommodationists speak: goals and strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt”, in *IJMES* 27 (1995), p. 328, based on “Parties and political Power”, in *Arab strategic report: 1992*, Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 1993, p. 320). This corresponds to the picture generally also given for legislative and presidential elections. Reuter, for example, estimated the turnout for the presidential referendum (4 Oct. 1993) at less than 5%. Cf. Burgat, *L’islamisme en face*, p. 145.

\textsuperscript{26} For example, in June a court ruled that the election of 38 candidates was invalid, while dismissing the appeals of 17 other candidates (*al-Wafd*, 11 June 1996).
political reforms might usefully be implemented around the year 2005 when “the social and economic reforms” currently underway have produced “the right environment”. To introduce political reforms at an earlier stage would, in the Govt.’s view, only allow a minority of misguided individuals to “exploit them for their own ends” and thus “to usurp the rights of the majority”. That the current situation may be described in exactly these same words lends some irony to the argument of al-Báz. It is clearly a minority that manipulates Egypt’s political system now; even village mayors are meanwhile no longer elected but appointed by the Government (for further details, see Burgat).

2. **The state is perceived as abandoning society.** While maintaining an unbroken grip on the political level, the state is in open retreat from areas where it was long perceived as offering valuable services: in particular, social security, health, education &c. In all these areas, voluntary associations have stepped in to fill the gap and offer support where the state, or the government, is obviously failing. These voluntary organizations are, in their great majority, ‘Islamic’ organizations, and their services are much appreciated by the population who see them as something in-between private and public, as combining the good aspects of both, the independence and flexibility and quality of self-run organizations with the ‘objective’, open-to-all, and not-for-profit aspect of the public sector. The social and medical services rendered by the thousands of such Islamic voluntary associations all over Egypt are meanwhile so indispensable that even the Government has to encourage and support these groups.

3. The established system is thus widely perceived as having utterly failed. It has no legitimacy, and it holds out only empty promises to the people. Whether this is due to personal or to structural factors, to corruption or to the basically unjust, jähili, nature of the system, there is broad agreement that the way things are done in Egypt, the way Egypt is run, must be changed radically and fundamentally.

4. The government is always ready to agree to a degree, to say, yes yes yes, we’re going to reform things — but then they always stop short of offering what would be seen as real reforms. Reforms that would really threaten the established political and economic elites are not being considered.

This is why the “national dialogue” that the government initiated in 1993/4 broke down — influential circles were not favourably disposed towards a proper dialogue which could lead to a real exposure of the rampant corruption and “a social contract basically reduced to baqshish”.

5. In this situation of increasing polarisation between state and society, the opposition has managed to a very great extent to identify ‘society’ with ‘Islam’, ‘Islam’ being ‘the

---

27 *al-Ahrām*, 8 July 1996.
religion of the people’. While we may analyse this in terms of hegemonizing or monopolizing a discourse, or — as the Government does — of ‘exploiting religious sentiments for partisan political ends’, I believe that there is a danger of falling victim to theories of ‘manipulation’.

- For on the one hand, symbols — including religious symbols — are always drawn upon, handled, or if you will, manipulated, in a particular context and for particular ends. Militant Islamists are clearly not the only ones who do so. When the government uses the Shaykh al-Azhar to legitimate whatever policies happen to be the order of the day — socialism or economic liberalisation, the fight against the Zionist entity or peace with Israel — it has no qualms about ‘using religion for political ends’. The question therefore becomes really one of who acts and how, rather than what is said.

- And on the other hand, I think it is equally important to realize that religion is not only used and manipulated in such ways, but that there are also genuine feelings, that many people are driven by a genuine concern for Islam, that they identify with Islamic interpretations of the world and are moved by a fear for Islam much as strong as, or stronger than, the fear of Islam evinced today by many people in the West.

6. As the gap between state and society widens, growing numbers of people are ready to interpret this gap in terms of a polarization between Islam and non-Islam, that is between a just order and an unjust order. The just order has a name: al-shari‘a. The unjust order is sometimes — not always — called, al-jāhiliyya. Those in power may say this is simplistic. Their standard argument is: al-shari‘a al-shari‘a is but an empty slogan, what does the shari‘a say about the debt crisis, the water scarcity, the population explosion etc. ?? In other words: ‘if you were in power, you would face the same problems, and you would do no better than us!’ But as long as such words are repeated in the complete absence of any real chance for a change of government, for a replacement of those in power, they must necessarily ring very hollow.

On 23 April 1996, al-Ǧumhūriyya came out with the following headline: “Education Ministry to find work after ‘Id al-Adhā for 120,000 graduates who left university in 1984 and 1985” (emphasis mine). These graduates have been waiting for a job for the past 12 years! And the government had not even met its self-appointed goal of … 8 years — why should it be trusted now? It is precisely such people — highly educated, highly motivated, highly frustrated — that you will have to argue with if you maintain that the existing secular system is really the best for Egypt.

Egypt’s economic situation has been difficult for decades, but for all its faults, the large public sector established by Ǧamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir and the subsidizing of basic goods effectively served as the country’s primary social security system. This has been gradually eroded since the 1970s; but until the end of the 1980s, the negative effects of liberalisation were partly offset by integrating the “Islamo-conservative, urban, lower middle class” and using them to appease “less wealthy and potentially more turbulent groups through the
employment, services, and charitable activities created by their socio-economic network”. This came at a price, of course — the increased Islamization of the public sphere, and Islamo-conservative censoring of published opinion — but it helped to maintain a manageable degree of social stability.

This delicate balance was radically upset after 1991, however, when the government committed itself to dismantling the subsidies and ending the employment guarantees for graduates in the public sector. This change of policy has had a disastrous effect on the living standard of the vast majority of Egyptians. Between 1991 and 1995, prices of key items — food, energy and transport — increased by … no less than 680%! With poverty officially defined as a total income of less than $35 a month, “the proportion of the population living in poverty has risen from 20 [or] 25% in 1990 to about 33% today”, that is, one third of all Egyptians. Of those official poor, 41% live in Upper Egypt, which accounts for only 29% of the whole population. According to the World Bank, between 75 and 80% of all Egyptians live below or just above the poverty line, with incomes of less than $50 a month. Unemployment hovers around 20%; underemployments affects one third to one half of all workers.

These are horrendous figures in and of themselves, but I think it is above all the sudden and dramatic deterioration in the living-standard after 1991 that was the spark that set off the fire of violence in 1992.

I want to end precisely here, with this very material point. For I believe that questions about ‘identity’ and such can never be meaningfully tackled in abstractu. Whose Islam, and whose nation, that is what we have to ask. And that is also, under much more arduous conditions than ours here, what more and more people, with growing impatience, are asking in Egypt today.

---

30 On the other end, there is an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. About 5% of the population are estimated to be “affluent by American standards”; about 2% “are exceptionally and often ostentatiously wealthy” (EIU Country Profile Egypt, 1995-96, p. 22). About 73,670 Egyptians are said to own more than 5 million US$ (Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, “Menaces sur l’Egypte”, Le Monde Diplomatique, mars 1995, p. 11). The figures were given by Muhammad Husayn Haykal in a speech at the Cairo International Book Fair, 18 Jan 1995. They are broken down thus: 50 own 100-200 mio $; 100 own 80-100; 150 own 50-80; 220 own 30-50; 350 own 15-30; 2800 own 10-15; 70000 own 5-10 mio $.