Chapter 6
The Clash of Civil Religions in Post–Revolutionary Egypt

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ABSTRACT
The 2013 counter-revolution that led to the removal of President Mohammad Morsi and the election of former military chief, ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, as president indicate that Egypt has chosen the unifying framework of Egyptian nationalism and rejected the Islamic one proposed by the Muslim Brothers. These dichotomous categories obscure more than they reveal, because Egyptian politics after the 2011 revolution is also polarized between different visions of the ‘civil state’. The civil religion paradigm and the conception of the clash of civil religions as analytical models will be used to enhance our understanding of the relationships between the religious and the civil models and to identify certain characteristics of one of the most striking outcomes of this revolution: the clash between civil models and, more precisely, the clash of civil religions.

INTRODUCTION
Nearly four years after the 25 January 2011 revolution that brought an abrupt end to Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule and one year after the June 2013 counter-revolution that led to the removal of President Mohammad Morsi, Egypt has chosen as its
president the former military chief, ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, who reflects in his poli-
cies the same regime that Egypt renounced in the 25 January 2011 revolution.

Apparently, the counter revolution and the election of al-Sisi indicate that Egypt
has chosen the unifying framework of Egyptian nationalism and rejected the Islamic
one proposed by the Muslim Brothers. Indeed, these dramatic events have brought
to the surface the struggles over Egypt’s authentic identity. Once again the question
of the relation between state and religion has gained urgency. The uncompromising
struggle waged by the national camp against the Muslim Brothers has left Egyptian
politics polarized between these two influential forces that hold competing visions
for the future of Egypt. Each one of these two forces – one holding the vision of
a national civil state and the other a vision of an Islamic state - views the struggle
as existential.

Despite the severity of this struggle, one needs to go beyond this dichotomy in
order to avoid being misled by the highly visible dividing line between the Islamic
and the civil state. This division is mainly political, but throughout the years these
competing visions were not so distinct. Modern Egypt was hardly secular and the
concept of absolute secularism has a marginal presence in the public. For Egyptians,
secularism and the Muslim Brothers’ Islamism are not the only two options they
have with which to organize their political life; the question is not whether religion
must have a role in the political system but how this role should be managed and in
what areas it should have influence (El-Houdaibi, 2012).

When analyzing Egyptian politics after the January 2011 revolution, these
dichotomous categories of Islamic and civil state obscure more than they reveal.
Egyptian politics is also polarized between different visions of the civil state, each
one of which embodies a different concept regarding Egypt’s cultural and politi-
cal identity and which represents a different set of values and ethical principles.
This struggle over defining authentic nationalism and Egypt’s identity is not a new
phenomenon nor is it solely a product of the revolution. Actually, it has been an
inseparable part of Egyptian reality ever since the idea of Egyptian nationalism
emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it represents another phase in
the struggle over Egyptian identity and its relation to Western spaces and models.
The attempts by different rulers to promote their own interpretations of the national
narrative and foundational myths as a means to solidify their own legitimacy have
always met with difficulties, in the form of alternatives presented by society. Even
when certain leaders, such as Gamal ‘Abd al- Nasser managed to gain a monopoly
over cultural production and the determination of political and social identity – they
too never succeeded in creating a consensus on these issues, mainly because the
narratives they promoted never managed to meet the expectations of the various
forces in Egyptian society. This struggle over Egypt’s cultural and political orienta-
tion rose to prominence following the January 2011 revolution, which also allowed
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