

Al-Azhar stands for moderation of thought

Published in: New Straits Times, Friday 02 March 2018

By Mohammad Hashim Kamali

Source : <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2018/03/340471/al-azhar-stands-moderation-thought>

AL-Azhar is the oldest and largest institution of higher learning in the Islamic world with over half a million students and 15,000 staff. It is internally diverse with currents of opinion that represent the purist, modernist, and liberalist camps on Islam. Al-Azhar's towering figures of modernism and reform have opposed liberalist hermeneutics and their positions on many other issues of concern to Islam. The success of modernism within al-Azhar is due partly to its pragmatism and moderation.

Following Egypt's 2011 revolution that brought former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi to power, al-Azhar asserted its influence with renewed vigour. The Shaykh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib, opposed the purists, calling them "modern day Kharijites," a reference to a violent group that was responsible for much bloodshed in the early years of Islam.

He also severely criticised the attacks in March and April 2011 against shrines, and blamed the purist Salafi elements for them.

Al-Azhar also took a modernist stance in the debates on Islam and state in Egypt. In June 20, 2011 document entitled *Wathiqat al-Azhar Hawla Mustaqbal Misr* — al-Azhar's document about the future of Egypt — al-Azhar leadership advocated moderation in Islamic thought (*al-fikr al-Islami al-wasati*) that drew inspiration from famous Azharite reformers, including Hasan al-'Attar, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Muhammad 'Abduh, Mahmud Shaltut, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others. The document also pays tribute to non-Azharite Egyptian intellectuals, philosophers, lawyers, and artists who contributed to the evolution of Egypt and the Arab world. On the relationship between Islam and state, the document calls for the establishment of a modern state (*dawlah 'asriyyah*), democratic transformation (*al-tahawwul al-dimuqrati*), prevention of extremism (*ghuluw*), misinterpretation (*su' al-tafsir*), and deviationist currents (*at-tayyarat al-munharifah*) that rely on sectarian and immoderate religious rhetoric.

The document is supportive of a constitutional democratic state that guarantees the separation of powers, and grants the people's representatives the right to legislate in accordance with the precepts of "true Islam," a religion that has never throughout its history experienced a theocratic state. The document supports the decisions of an elected legislature but adds "provided that the general principles of Islamic syariah are the main source of legislation."

Many purist leaders called for changing "general principles" to the "rulings (*ahkam*) of Islamic syariah," as they argued that general principles can refer to general values such as equality and justice in a way to avoid instituting Islamic substantive law. The Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) ruled that the state should only uphold rules that are considered apodictic with respect to both authenticity and meaning. The document's signatories also agreed that "Islamic principles" refer to "a number of

comprehensive concepts, derived from syariah texts that are apodictic in their authenticity and meaning.”

After the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafis controlled over 70 per cent of the People’s Assembly. When an issue arose over the validity of khul’ (divorce), the Assembly consulted al-Azhar on the matter, and al-Azhar took the view the khul’ law was fully in accordance with the syariah. The khul’ law which empowers the wife to initiate a divorce, clearly represents a modernist approach to women’s divorce rights.

Because of these developments, as well as the university’s efforts in countering purist rhetoric, al-Azhar has been seen as the voice of moderation. Even Egyptian Christians, who were concerned about their freedoms in a state dominated by political Islam, have largely considered al-Azhar as the voice of moderate Islam.

After the (now defunct) revolution, Ahmad al-Tayyib wasted no time to draft a new bill to amend a 1961 Law which empowered Egypt’s President to appoint the rector of al-Azhar. The bill was passed into law in 2012 guaranteeing al-Azhar’s independence, as well as reviving the Supreme Council of Ulama’ (SCU) (*Hay’at Kibar al-Ulama’* — that was abolished by Nasser in 1961). The 2012 law stipulates that SCU members must be drawn from the four Sunni *mazhabs*, just as they were also charged with electing the Rector of al-Azhar. This reference to the four *mazhabs* clearly excluded the liberalist doctrines and positions on *mazhabs*.

Al-Azhar’s role as a source of guidance on matters of syariah appeared in Article (4) of Egypt’s 2012 Constitution, which stated that “the opinion of al-Azhar’s Supreme Council of Ulama’ must be taken in matters related to Islamic syariah.” Commentators raised questions, however, as to whether this was binding or optional. Al-Azhar’s gain in this respect was consequently short-lived, as the 2014 Constitution removed this article altogether.

Mahmoud Azab, Professor of Islamic Civilisation at Sorbonne University in Paris, explained that since Ahmad al-Tayyib was inaugurated in April 2010, he revamped the curricula taught at al-Azhar higher education institutions that are crucial to the religious society in Egypt.

Al-Tayeb also established Bayt al-‘Aela al- Misriyyah, an institution that brings together sheikhs from Al-Azhar, prominent church clerics and civil servants to reform, discipline and refine religious discourse from extremists and solve the issues related to sectarian strife before they occur.

Amr Ezzat, an Egyptian researcher on freedom of expression commented: “Simply put, al-Azhar is not a fan of extremists; its sheikhs pass through screening to ensure they were not affiliated with the Brotherhood or Salafis. That’s why al-Azhar’s leaders mostly belong to a *wasati* school of thought different from that of political Islam.

MOHMMAD HASHIM KAMALI is founding CEO of the International institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia.