

PHARAONISM AND CONTEMPORARY EGYPT: A NEW ‘CIVILIZATIONAL STATE’ *IN STATU NASCENDI*¹

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“Egyptians are religious by nature.”²

Abstract:

In April 2021, Egypt held an extraordinary event in Cairo, the ‘Golden Parade of the Pharaohs’, during which the government ceremoniously moved twenty-two ancient mummies from the Egyptian Museum to the recently established National Museum of Egyptian Civilization. The unprecedentedly spectacular event can be interpreted not only from the perspective of culture or tourism but can actually be perceived as a manifestation of the new Egyptian ideological discourse. At the centre of this is the structure of a civilizational state with its specific cultural, historical, and political tradition. The domestic political, economic, social, and cultural measures of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s³ government, which came to power after the revolutionary period of 2011–2013, show that instead of following the example of a Western state based on liberal values, it is working on Egypt’s statehood by relying on its own religious and moral traditions. In doing so, it practically joins the recently emerging civilizational states around the world, which believe that their systems represent civilizations and must preserve faith, tradition, and heritage (Coker 2019). The article discusses some central cultural, social, and political initiatives, which in their final result sought to contribute to the formation of a highly centralized, hierarchically constructed and morally grounded – Egyptian – ‘civilizational state’.

¹ This paper forms part of a more comprehensive research project, which discusses the peculiarities of the transitional – twenty-first century – Egyptian state structure highlighting the political institutions of the pre-modern empire and the modern nation-state. It is an improved version of a presentation given by the author on 13 October 2023 in Dunaszerdahely (Slovakia), at the 21st International Vámbéry Conference, entitled *Pharaonism and Modern Egyptian Identity*.

² In Egyptian public discourse, the statement that "Egyptians are religious by nature" appears frequently. For the Egyptians, who strive to create a kind of modernity out of a premodern society, this statement falls under a sometimes negative and sometimes positive evaluation, and inevitably recalls the relationship between political and religious forces. It appears in this sense, e.g. in the introduction to Dalia Ziada’s article; see Ziada (2002).

³ No transliteration is used in the article for names.

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The main hypothesis of the present article is that, following the ‘two revolutions’ between 2011 and 2013, the Egyptian government—parallel to the top-down establishment of social stability—has moved to create a ‘civilizational state’. Subsequent to the showdown with the Muslim Brotherhood from the mid-2010s, it has become clear that, with the steps taken to ensure the stability of the formally democratic Egyptian state and an increasing reference to and reliance on ancient Egyptian roots, a new ‘imperial’ autocratic state is in the making, similar to others in the ‘second/third world’.

In recent years, the Egyptian state has initiated a nationalist discourse known as Neo-Pharaonism, advocating for a renewed identification with the Pharaonic era. Neo-Pharaonism constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing not only the establishment of new museums dedicated to Egyptian archaeology and museology, as well as related parades and shows, but also extensive efforts to attract tourists through the restoration of Pharaonic sites. While these elements are integral to Neo-Pharaonism, the primary focus is on the redefinition of Egyptian identity, anchored in the rich tapestry of its ancient civilization. This redefinition aims to inspire imagination and foster commitment, concurrently raising awareness about Egypt’s re-articulated mission. It sheds light on the historical narrative shaping the current Egyptian leadership’s mindset when formulating and implementing government tasks, and on the way this narrative is presented and embraced by the population.

1 After the military takeover

The military takeover, which followed the presidency of Mohamed Mursi, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, was declared by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on 3 July 2013 (Kirkpatrick 2018:Ch 22). General el-Sisi stood alongside representatives of various Egyptian communities, the Sheikh al-Azhar, the Coptic Pope, as well as members from legal, trade union, women’s, and youth organizations. The military intervention, grounded in perceived security concerns and the national interest, was justified not only by the revolutionary sentiments of June-July 2013 and the enduring spirit of the 25 January 2011 revolution but also by the economic shortcomings of the Mursi government and the opposition from the now-deposed Muslim Brotherhood.

The public celebrated the alignment of the populace with the military, apparently viewing Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as a capable, decisive leader ready to act. His images adorned billboards throughout the country. The public was portrayed as holding deep admiration and respect for him, with positive notes widely disseminated in the

media, and songs composed portraying him as the groom with Egypt as his bride and the Egyptian men and women as their children (Naguib 2020). Except for Gamal Abdel Nasser, no Egyptian president appears to have been as universally accepted and recognized in a patriarchal manner.

In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood resisted the military takeover, orchestrating attacks against the armed forces, Christian, and even Muslim institutions. Consequently, a dichotomy of ‘with us’ versus ‘against us’ permeated domestic political thinking, leading to the eradication of all forms of resistance. Journalists and civilians who criticized this process faced similar consequences. A curfew and a state of emergency were imposed, accompanied by strict media censorship, including full control over electronic media. NGOs faced restrictions in their activities, and the number of arrests soared to 60,000. The ‘military republic’ that emerged after the July 2013 takeover governed the country with robust domestic security forces, even more potent propaganda, consolidation of power centres under the presidency, and the suppression of dissenting voices through threats of imprisonment (Milton-Edwards 2016:48–50).

The pivotal moment in a political context occurred with the afore mentioned constitutional amendment in 2019. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi initiated changes to the conditions for the presidency, specifically the eligibility criteria for presidential candidacy. These alterations were structured to allow el-Sisi to hold the office until the age of 80, barring any other disqualifying conditions. The original democratic principle stipulated a four-year presidential cycle, with the option for one renewal. However, the amendment extended the term to six years, resulting in an elongated current term for the President, who initially received authorization for four years. Consequently, el-Sisi gained the opportunity to seek re-election, potentially allowing him to remain in office until 2036.

2 El-Sisi’s political orientation

In his presidential election campaign, el-Sisi proposed to establish a ‘new republic’ (*ḡumhūriyya ḡadāda*) to universally address the political, economic, religious, and social crisis of the 2010s. Upon entering office, he called for short-term sacrifices in exchange for long-term stability (Bower 2023). This seemed like a deal that most of the electorate accepted. Although very little was known about the details, the fact that all measures taken were centralized in the presidential office was clearly reflected in el-Sisi’s unequivocal response to a general question related to religion raised by a journalist: “the president is responsible for everything within a country, even for the situation of religion”. “Yes”, he repeated after a short break – “even for religion” (El-Sherif 2014).

Consequently, el-Sisi took into consideration the deep religiosity of the country. In a paper written in 2006 while in the US for military training under the title *Democracy in the Middle East* (ElSisi 2006), he briefly summarized the points to be

taken into consideration when a Western (liberal) democratic order is introduced in Middle Eastern states. He explains that in order to govern Middle Eastern societies according to democratic principles, secular democratic principles should first be adjusted to Islam. Though not explicitly stated, it is clear that he speaks of the applicability of the democratic procedures. He states that although the order thus established will resemble Western democracies in its balanced nature, it will not be secular because state and religion cannot be separated in Islam. He emphasized that when the tasks and obligations of legislation, execution, and jurisdiction are established, the values rooted in Islamic traditions should prevail. This is a hybrid solution since it instrumentally uses the procedures of liberal – secular – democracy, but at the same time – at least according to its underlying intent – it maintains and preserves the moral strength of Islam. Thus, this model suggests the practical implementation of a specific variant of democracy, which, however, cannot be called liberal anymore.

The latent criticism of Western democracy goes as far as wishing to limit the Western role in East-West practical relations to financial, economic, and military issues, excluding the political and democratization efforts of the West. This criticism claims that the central element of the West's approach, liberal democracy, does not correlate with the spiritual-intellectual mindset of Eastern societies. As a result, it considers Western intervention harmful and damaging.

While Western democracies are founded on the cooperation of individual citizens, Eastern societies lack this concept of citizenship. To elevate the general level of public education, substantial and meaningful education and training over an extended period would be necessary. Democratic transition conditions can only be established through education and cultural development.

El-Sisi's concept highlights the differences between the supposedly rational Western civilization, built on free and independent individuals, and the Eastern civilization, which operates within communities of varying sizes and based on personal relations of trust. This concept directly relates to the sphere of civilizations and sets the stage for the emergence of a new model, potentially a 'civilizational state'.

The following section of the paper will delve into the social initiatives and the civilization-rebuilding project of the envisioned 'civilizational state'.

3 Social initiatives and civilization rebuilding project

Over the past decade (2013–2023), in addition to national security measures and substantial economic investments, significant social and civilizational programs have been initiated to strengthen and maintain political stability. These initiatives materialized in the form of the previously mentioned renewal of religious discourse, the Egyptian National Dialogue, and the Egyptian Family Home programs. There

has also been an increasing reliance on the ancient Pharaonic (Nile Valley) culture in contemporary Egyptian publicity and discourse.

3.1 Social initiatives

The three social programs are closely connected to the religious life and political behaviour of the Egyptian community, as well as to the mutual recognition of the various religious communities comprising the society as a whole. The key stakeholders in these initiatives are the President, the state, religious institutions, and the people. However, it is important to note that the political parties and the modern professional/vocational organizations established after gaining independence, do not engage in discussions on social issues as organized entities. Instead, their participation is through the individual involvement of their members.

In the modern sense, the party system, and the bottom-up articulation of the interests of different social groups are superseded by the government, with the President playing a central role. The government, particularly the President, conducts institutionalized/official (imperial) hearings to gather information on changes in public will and sentiment.

3.2 The renewal of religious discourse (tağdīd al-ḥiṭāb ad-dīnī)

Between 2011 and 2013, Egyptian political life was marked by a sense of insecurity, characterized by the dual threats of religious fundamentalism and the potential return of military dictatorship, alongside a yearning for a liberal nation-state. In the tumultuous aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Arab Spring revolution, the military played a crucial role in maintaining order. In 2012, Mohamed Mursi, the presidential candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, won the election and assumed control. However, his one-year rule resulted in a catastrophic situation, attributed not only to the incompetence of the government but also to activities within the opposition.

On July 3, 2013, citing the ‘demand of the people’ and to prevent a looming civil war, the military, under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who was the Minister of Defence in the Mursi government, expelled Mursi and assumed power. A temporary president was appointed, and a roadmap was proposed, outlining the steps to navigate out of the crisis. The initial task was to confront the Muslim Brotherhood, who viewed the takeover—referred to by many as ‘the second revolution’—as a betrayal, leading to protests against the perceived ‘military coup’.

In the pursuit of restoring rule and order, the el-Sisi government took decisive actions against the Muslim Brotherhood, banning the organization and imprisoning its leaders and numerous members. However, the el-Sisi government, particularly President el-Sisi himself, recognized the profound religiosity within Egyptian society. Anticipating a potential vacuum left by the absence of the Muslim

Brotherhood from the organized and acknowledged political scene in 2015, the government initiated the ‘renewal of religious discourse’.

This program was grounded in the observation that institutions of religious education and places of religious practice, such as mosques, provided ample opportunities to disseminate and acquire knowledge that supported radical views and interpretations. To counter the threat arising from the literal interpretation of religious and *šarī‘a* texts by extremist Islamists, the government conducted searches of mosque libraries, corrected religious texts and curricula, and removed books by known Islamist authors from bookstores and libraries. While these administrative measures achieved varying degrees of success, the government’s attempts to fully co-opt religious institutions faced consistent challenges, largely due to the renewed, traditionally rooted, if adapted to modern rationality, religiosity of the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar aš-Šarīf.

The tension between the government and religious institutions has been evident to the public for years. In this struggle, President el-Sisi appears to increasingly advocate for a rigid, narrowing, and simplified religiosity. In contrast, Ahmad al-Tayyib, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, advocates for a pluralist, *wasafī* (moderate, as compared to extremist) interpretation of Islam. This approach aims to preserve and maintain Islamic values by drawing on both traditions and the modern world, referencing common ideals of humankind and modern international agreements.

The presidential office’s objectives are evident in its efforts to bring certain forms of imam training under its authority, establishing a system parallel to the Azhar. Simultaneously, the Document on Human Fraternity, signed by the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar and Pope Francis on February 4, 2019, in Abu Dhabi, along with related international initiatives, has paved the way for peace among religions. This offers a fresh alternative to the somewhat ‘worn out’ efforts of intra-religious dialogue.

The outcome manifests in a form of double talk, notably observed on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, where the President and the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar express their perspectives with politeness yet consequence. The government signals an expectation of increased commitment and support, while al-Azhar, in line with its self-identification, positions itself as a proponent of “humanitarian values ... and a model of moderate Islam” (Barak 2016:4), as outlined in the so-called Azhar documents.⁴

3.3 *The National Dialogue* (al-ḥiwār al-waṭānī)

At the *ifṭār* dinner marking the end of Ramadan fasting in late April 2022, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, unexpectedly and under increasing pressure, called for a

⁴ The so-called *al-Azhar Documents* (*Waṭā‘iq al-Azhar*) was a series of theoretical views published since 2011, by the leading scholars of al-Azhar and the representatives of secular intellectuals elaborated together concerning significant social issues.

National Dialogue to involve the entire society. Concurrent with the call, forty political prisoners were released, with assurances of further small groups being freed through an expedited procedure.

The call for dialogue received widespread coverage in the media, emphasizing that over the past eight years (2014–2022), President el-Sisi had confronted serious challenges, including terrorism, economic crisis, inflation, and the global pandemic. Despite these challenges, there were significant investments and infrastructure developments aimed at realizing the vision of the new republic set during his presidential election. President el-Sisi clarified that the success of the dialogue depends on the Egyptian society, particularly the fresh perspectives and strength of the youth. Although 2022 and 2023 were mainly focused on organizational aspects, initial steps were taken.

Initially, some opposition parties viewed the National Dialogue as a governance manoeuvre, perceiving it as an attempt to align with external expectations, especially to meet the requirements related to the IMF loan planned for the end of 2022. There were even suspicions that the dialogue was a tool to manage legal representatives, with the release of those held without charges coinciding with the launch of the dialogue.

The majority of opposition parties quickly joined the initiative, with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was excluded from participation due to its terrorist activities in 2013, leading to its ban. The government allocated funds, establishing a comprehensive network wherein any Egyptian citizen could submit political, economic, and social questions or proposals. These submissions would be evaluated and collected by various sub-committees and could potentially be formulated into law. The proposals approved by experts would then be presented to Parliament with the support of the President, with a primary focus on engaging the youth and encouraging their participation in public policy.

State-controlled media closely follows the development and establishment of the institutions of the National Dialogue, featuring experts in the committees and publishing their interviews and photos—sometimes inundating the media, sometimes remaining quiet for weeks.

In May 2023, discussions on the political, economic, and social issues of the first package commenced, with the results submitted to the Presidency in August. However, due to the upcoming presidential elections,⁵ further work in the National Dialogue was postponed (*Ahram Online* 2023).

⁵ In 2019, the Egyptian constitution was amended, 1) the duration of the presidential term was increased from four years to 6 years, and the number of terms of office was increased from the original two to 4. El-Sisi's first presidency was between 2014-2018, the second lasted from 2018 to 2024 with the amendment of the constitution. In the second half of 2023, the presidential election due in 2024 was announced for December 2023. President el-Sisi won the election, his third presidential term lasts from 2024 to 2030.

3.4 *The Egyptian Family House initiative* (bayt al-‘ā’ila al-miṣriyya)

One of the most sensitive issues regarding Egyptian security is the peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians. Terrorist attacks, potentially targeting the Orthodox Coptic community and institutions, pose a serious existential threat to the minority religious community. In January 2011, Ahmad al-Tayyib and then Coptic Pope Shenouda III raised the idea of a long-term cooperation and confidence-building program. Their joint proposal was approved by the Egyptian government in the second half of 2011, resulting in the idea of a common Egyptian family home. The program itself was named “The House of the Egyptian Family” (*bayt al-‘ā’ila al-miṣriyya*).

The Egyptian Family House with the cooperation of Muslim religious personalities, the religious representatives of the Christian minorities, and secular intellectuals, appears to be a genuine civilian initiative with the declared aim of settling the relations among the different religions and religious communities peacefully.⁶ Ahmad al-Tayyib expressed, “It is impossible that everyone in this world should belong to the same religion”.⁷ He believes that conditions can be established under which people can live together in peace.

The project signifies the desire for and expectation of mutual understanding and acceptance. Instead of engaging in theoretical religious debates, it advocates for the promotion of peaceful programs based on tolerance. The project primarily utilizes tools of education and information, with a focus on understanding each other’s worlds and rituals, presenting humanitarian values, and sharing one’s own

⁶ See Fahmi 2016:201–205.

⁷ In recent years, inter-religious dialogue has played an increasingly prominent role in Middle Eastern politics, and it has become a matter of public discourse that a ‘new Abrahamic religion’ is being created from the convergence of the three historical Abrahamic religions (Judaism - Christianity - Islam). The Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib, strongly rejected this idea in a solemn meeting of the Egyptian Family House (at-Ṭayyib 2021, translation of L.T. from the original Arabic):

“Al-Tayyib said, “*The call to bring together the heavenly religions under the shadow of the so-called Abrahamic religion is rejected, and it is a confiscation of religious freedom, differences in belief, and human freedom to choose, and it is a call that is far from being understood.*”

Then he added: “*It is impossible to unite created people (ḥalq) on one religion, based on the nature that God created people with differences in colours, beliefs, minds, and languages, (‘And if your Lord had willed, He could have made people one nation, and they would not continue to differ’ [Q. 11:118]), and this difference will remain among people until the Day of Resurrection.*” He continued: “*This claim is like the claim of globalization, the end of history, (universal ethics), and others, although on the surface it appears to be a call for human unity, unification, and the elimination of the causes of its disputes and conflicts. However, it is itself a call to confiscate the most precious things that human beings possess, it is (freedom of belief), freedom of faith, and freedom of choice.*”

worldview. As a result, active participation in the daily lives and celebrations of others becomes a natural aspect, resembling the dynamics of a family home. This approach helps prevent extremist religious forces or political actors from exploiting religious differences to create conflict between communities.

4 The civilization rebuilding project: Ancient Egyptian culture in contemporary Egypt

In recent years, the Egyptian state has invested significant efforts in promoting and preserving the cultural and historical memories and artifacts of the Pharaonic era. The goal is to generate and sustain national (Egyptian) and international interest in ancient Egypt. This effort encompasses the historical, cultural, and academic / scientific achievements of the Pharaonic era (*al-'ahd al-fir'awnī*). In Arabic, this phenomenon is collectively termed *fir'awniyya*, signifying “the interest in Pharaonic civilization/culture and related activities”, or, in a similar sense, Pharaonism. The term Neo-Pharaonism is employed to describe modern Egyptian architecture dating from the first half of the 20th century that incorporates symbols from the ancient Pharaonic culture (Gershoni – Jankowski 2004, Reid 2015).

The acknowledgment and embrace of ancient Pharaonic culture initially gained prominence during the search for an indigenous identity spurred by the 1919 Egyptian revolution and the establishment of the quasi-independent Kingdom of Egypt in 1922. The discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922 provided an additional boost. However, starting from the 1930s, references to the Pharaonic past were somewhat relegated to the background, persisting through the eras of the liberal kingdom, the Nasserist republic, and the presidencies of Sadat and Mubarak. The resurgence of Pharaonism in the second and third decades of the 21st century can be viewed as a renewed effort or experiment to explore the connection between contemporary Egypt and the ancient Nile Valley. This resurgence aims to leverage this historical linkage for legitimacy purposes.

As a result, various pharaonic presentations were arranged throughout 2021.⁸ The series of events commenced with the transfer of twenty-two royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square to the newly inaugurated National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Fustat on April 3rd, 2021. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi oversaw the parade and personally received the royal mummies. In another nationally broadcast event on August 6th, the Sun Barge was relocated from its temporary storage behind the pyramid of Khufu to the Great Egyptian Museum situated beside the pyramids. Then, on November 25th, a parade was organized to ceremoniously open the road connecting the great temples of Karnak and Luxor. This parade was structured following the pattern of an ancient Opet celebration.⁹

⁸ These were later posted on various online channels.

⁹ Again, posted on online channels later.

The host of the celebrations was Minister of Tourism Khalid al-Inani. Despite the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, the President, accompanied by his wife and several cabinet members, actively participated in the several hours-long events, with all spectators wearing masks. In contrast, the actors and presenters performed without masks. Thus, beautifully painted actresses, actors, Cleopatra impersonators, and dancers, amid colourful scenery, attended the royal mummies and other events.

The focal point of the royal mummies' parade was the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, where President el-Sisi walked alone to the gate to receive the royal personalities. The accompanying programs in the vast concert hall were not only attended by the President but also by several other leaders of the country. Films, musicians, singers, and dancers collectively presented the richness, exceptionality, and unique nature of Egyptian heritage.

These grandiose celebrations present at least two distinct scenarios. On the one hand, the pharaonic narration is certainly aimed at foreigners, intending to restore and boost the tourism industry. This industry had declined initially due to domestic political developments (two revolutions), economic crises, and the global pandemic. New museums, such as the already mentioned National Museum of Egyptian Civilization and the Grand Egyptian Museum, are opening in modern and well-equipped buildings. Additionally, considerable efforts, both technical and financial, are being invested in providing access to open-air excavation sites, reconstructing them, and ensuring their maintenance.

In texts showcasing ancient monuments, recurring elements contribute to a broader message: the Nile Valley stands as one of the cradles of human civilization, a source of national pride for the people and political leadership of Egypt. They graciously provide the opportunity for visitors to explore these significant sites. In one of the most successful songs of the ceremony, the narrative of Egypt as "the most beautiful country in the world" (*ahlā l-bilād*) emphasizes the people's love for their home, emphasizing the prevailing peace and security. Egypt, according to this portrayal, is unparalleled, offering religious freedom where various communities coexist peacefully. The ongoing discoveries of historical sites, led by Egyptian archaeologists, contribute to the heritage of the nation's forefathers. The broader foreign policy aim is evident: to restore Egypt's reputation, presenting stability and successful governance to facilitate access to new loans and address financial deficits.

Simultaneously, celebrations and constructions associated with the symbols of the Pharaonic era serve to raise awareness among the Egyptian population of their ethnic and territorial identity. The magnificent historical past becomes an essential legitimacy tool for the government, fostering identification, commitment, and pride among the populace. The orchestrated choreography behind these events is evident, as exemplified by the President's wife expressing her "pride in belonging to an ancient civilization" (Anderson 2021).

Conclusion

Egypt has traversed a challenging decade, marked by the (early) presidential elections of 2023/2024, which extended President Sisi's tenure. As outlined above, we presented the conditions and political significance of Egyptian social initiatives and the revival of Pharaonic heritage, elements that we interpret as part of a deliberate policy framework. Under the leadership of Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt is progressively moving towards the establishment of a centralized state model that draws on its own cultural, often archaic, traditions.¹⁰

Critics of this regime find themselves perplexed as they witness an autocratic leadership eliminating opposition, coercing political parties into quasi-corporate formations, asserting control over trade unions, nationalizing the media, amending the constitution, restricting the operations of judicial courts, and deviating from the previously envisioned model of a liberal state. Through the tools of its civilization and past, Egypt is actualizing its newest empire—the 'civilizational state'.

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¹⁰ As President el-Sisi emphasized in his address to the nation after the announcement of the results of the election: "I renew with you the pledge to exert every effort to continue building the new republic we seek to establish, based on a shared vision. We aim for a democratic state that gathers its citizens within a framework of respect for the constitution and the law, advancing steadily towards modernity and development based on science and technology, preserving its identity, culture, and heritage, prioritizing human development, and striving to provide a decent life for all" (Mabrūk – Rāḡib 2023).

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