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The Sociopolitical Implications of Secularism in Egypt: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in a Post-Revolutionary Context

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1. Introduction

Secularism was a conviction that it was proper and acceptable to separate religion and governance. It has had a very strong influence on Egyptian political and social life. This paper explores the way in which secularism has impacted Egypt and how this country still struggles to balance its religious traditions and modern political arrangements. In several theories, secularism leads to the gradual decline of religion in public life—as in the West—but the Egyptian case is more complex. In fact, the country does not fit into these neat categories in its approach to secularism; it reflects what has been termed “negotiated secularism” (Bhargava, 2006)¹⁾. Negotiated secularism is one of those political-theories and sociological ideas through which one can, in a highly flexible and contextual manner, deal with the relation of religion and the state. It bases itself on the recognition that secularism could be very different in different societies given the respective historical, cultural, and political contexts.

“Negotiated secularism” insists that separation of religion from the state is never a single model but a flexible, context-dependent process which may take various shapes according to the cultural, political, and historical background of the country.

In a nutshell,

1) It is a term popularized by political theorist Rajeev Bhargava, especially through his work on Indian secularism.

- Secularism Negotiated: That is, in practice, the relation of religion to the state is always debated and adjusted, never imposed.
- Context: While strict secularism tries to keep religion as far away from the public domain as possible, negotiated secularism allows religious influence but must be in consonance with democratic principles²⁾.

The result, if it was going to be modernization in Egypt, was to be of a very particular kind-somewhat different from anything like Western secularism. It is a hybrid system in which religion and secular governance often overlap, creating an endless process of negotiation between ancient traditions and new pressures. Full of challenges and opportunities, religious-secular tensions reshape the country's identity. Key dynamics of Egyptian secularism include:

(A) Islamic Principles of Law: Even though Egypt has instituted measures to make governance more secular, Islamic principles, especially those touching on personal laws regarding marriage and inheritance amongst others remain very influential.

(B) The relation between the state and Al-Azhar: As early as 2012, Al-Azhar continued to develop in ways that gave it a measure of autonomy from the state; this does not mean complete separation or conflict but rather an aspect of power dynamics between them. However, nowadays, Al-Azhar enjoys more self-management in administration and the issuing of decrees, even as the state still influences matters through legislation, providing finances, and making key appointments. Relations are therefore one of cooperation and contestation within which both parties negotiate their respective roles in framing religious discourse.

(C) Public Religiosity: Religious symbols, media, and debates around public education generally appear in a society where religion is impossible to escape. These discussions, along with debates about the role of religion in schools and how and what to teach, consistently remain high in public discourse and often as a counterbalance to the secular elements within the state.

2) This relation of secularism and religion becomes far more important in countries that are not democracies. While in democracies, negotiated secularism has sought to reach some negotiated balance between religious influence and democratic precepts, in nondemocratic regimes, manipulations of religious institutions have been done to entrench their rule.

These dynamics, therefore, show that secularism is a constant negotiation and portrays the unique way of the country toward modernity. This paper will discuss how this fact contributes to the broader discussion concerning how societies outside of the West, such as Egypt, generate a relation to the concept of secularism. The discussion will focus on the following topics:

- (1) The development of secularism in Egypt, including contemporary trends and conflicts with religious leadership.
- (2) Legal Framework: A look at how Egypt's laws and constitution balance between Islamic law and civil legislation.
- (3) State and Religion Relations: How the state has tried to reform religious institutions and what challenges remain.
- (4) Social and Cultural Implications: How secularism affects women's rights, religious minorities, and public expressions of faith.

The analysis to be presented will throw light on the complexity of secularism in Egypt, indicating that the process of secularization is not a smooth one. I will also show how religion and governance could co-exist in a way different from what was specified by classical theory, but such interactions have conflicts and violations of human rights, as seen in the present paper. This discussion is relevant not only for scholars but also for policymakers and activists working to navigate the intersection of religion and governance in diverse societies.

2. Negotiated Secularism in Egypt: The Past and the Present

It will show how the approach to the balancing of religion and secular governance in Egypt changed with time and bring yet another insight into the country's experience. While the very concept of "negotiated secularism" is not new in academia, its application to Egypt will serve to show how this delicate balance between religion and state works in real life.

Most versions of the secularization theory predict a natural decline of religious

influence with modernization (Berger, 1967). The complication in Egypt's case lies in the fact that the country has constantly readjusted, tacking back and forth between modern, secular forces and religious traditions deeply entrenched. This is often in response to shifting political and social pressures and shows just how fluid the relation between religion and governance could be. The following are a few basic features of “negotiated secularism” in Egypt:

- Contextual Changes: Egyptian secularism isn't a given model but one that is constantly altered and changed so it could move with the pace of the political, cultural and historical processes working in the country.
- The blend of a system is far from complete separation. Egypt is the latest case study of how religion and government may seek common ground on which to coexist, at least in tenuous balance.
- Ongoing Flexibility: Instead of a fixed solution, Egypt's approach to secularism is dynamic, changing as the country's political and social landscape evolves.

These three historical junctures in Egyptian history shall be used to explain how such a negotiation between religion and secularism came about.

Egypt in the recent past is discussed here, mainly post-Arab Spring. Even today, Egypt is still trying to find a way to manage the redefinition toward a new political and social reality when it comes to its relationship with religion.

Besides, the notion of “negotiated secularism” allows recalling another vision of Egypt, since definitely the process of secularism is not a one-way street but an elastic and ever-changing one, deeply shaped by local traditions, cultural values, and needs of society. Opening another path for an understanding of how the interaction between religion and governance may proceed in the non-Western societies, the Egyptian experience questions the theory of modernization that implies a progressive decline of religious influence.

2.1 Initial Foundations: From Muhammad Ali to the British Occupation (1805–1952)

The era from Muhammad Ali Pasha's governance until the conclusion of British occupation signifies the initial phase of what is presently recognized as negotiated

secularism in Egypt. During this period, modernization initiatives commenced to contest the conventional position of religion in governance, establishing the groundwork for the intricate interplay between secular and religious forces that would influence Egypt for decades.

The Modernization and Initial Reforms of Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848) commenced a series of measures to modernize Egypt. Although his politics did not exactly recommend secularism, Ali Pasha introduced a difference in the relations between religious bodies and the state whereby the Christian populace was allowed legal treatment as if they were the equal of Muslims—with service in the military even open to them—a first in Egyptian history. Ali also took up European models in structuring the secular educational system and reformed the military and government. These changes were particularly significant within a society where religious bodies had long occupied a place at the heart of life (Fahmy, 1997).

Of greater significance regarding Ali's reforms was his attempt to legislate a system whereby people of all faiths were treated as equals. This was a radical departure from the previous reliance upon religious codes of law. Inasmuch as these reforms introduced elements of secularism into the practice of government in Egypt, they also fostered continuing debates between the emerging secular authority and the country's strong religious heritage. More than clear-cut division, such development would require a constant balancing of scales between modernity and tradition.

British Colonization and the Dual Governance Framework

The British occupation (1882–1952) introduced an additional layer of complication to Egypt's developing secular-religious dynamic. The colonial rulers preserved a fragile equilibrium: although they implemented secular legal codes and educational frameworks, they were cautious not to jeopardize Islamic institutions, which were essential for sustaining social stability. It thus formed a system of dual authority within the system of Egypt: that of secular and religious frameworks, often co-existing rather than replacing each other.

The British administration did not seek to weaken Islam but let the secular developments run parallel with the religious way of life. This configuration exemplifies an initial manifestation of Egypt's negotiated secularism, wherein governmental modernization initiatives were undertaken without entirely marginalizing religious authority. The cohabitation of these two systems necessitated continuous negotiation, as the British depended on both religious authorities and secular reforms to uphold order.

Islamic Reformers and the Details of Secularism

The appearance of Islamic reformers, above all Muhammad Abduh, in this period reflects the complexity of negotiated secularism. Abduh searched for an accommodation of Islamic philosophy with the modern spirit of secularism and advanced reforms which would relate religious doctrines to the needs of a modernizing world (Hourani, 1962; Gasper, 2009). In this respect, his judgment that interest on bank savings can be permissible under Islamic law was an effort to bring religious doctrines into alignment with modern reality (Hourani, 1962).

Abduh's writings also reflect the essential paradoxes of the process under way; as free-thinking on most matters he had strongly advocated various legal and educational reforms but in matters pertaining to specific religious traditions, like the issue of the veil (hijab) and women's rights for example, he feels strictly bound by what an Islamic perspective allows and prohibits: "if the veil were somewhat obsolete, still if the principles of the law demand it, there would be no reason to object to its use". Actually, this skirmish is more indicative of the tensions lying beneath what is Egyptian negotiated secularism, pitting modernist forces against religious conservatism.

Gender and Religious Norms

Abduh's attitudes toward women's rights reflect a bit of a problem treading the path of secularism. Although he showed support for boosting women's education and status within society, conventionally he was quite firm in his view of gender roles: "Women were inherently dependent on men, especially during such risky times as pregnancy and childbirth" (Al-A'mal Alkamela, part2, p. 67). This illustrates that, even among progressive

reforms, restrictions were influenced by enduring religious norms.

These difficulties illustrate the principal theme of negotiated secularism: the endeavor to reconcile the demands of modernity with fidelity to religious heritage. Reformers such as Abduh advocated for reform yet were limited by the overarching religious frameworks in which they functioned.

Negotiated Secularism: A Developmental Stage

This article looks upon the period extending from the Muhammad Ali regime to the end of the British occupation as the formative phase of negotiated secularism in Egypt. The secular institutions began to take shape; religious traditions needed reworking in the light of modernity, and the efforts at reconciliation began to work. Secularization in Egypt did not follow a linear pattern of development but instead the two spheres-secular and religious-continued to coexist with the ongoing processes of negotiation and renegotiation.

That duality-secular changes being implemented with the failure of fully replacing religious authority-created the grounds for Egypt's version of secularism. The history of the nation at this time indicates that modernization and religious tradition can function together, though tensely, in a world of constant negotiation. This has been the insistent dynamic factor in the political and social life of Egypt during the 20th century and afterward.

2.2 Secularist settlements in the republican era: from Nasser to Mubarak (1952–2011)

The post-independence period has many rulers who attempted several means to get round secularism. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970) is generally considered a representative of the kind of Arab Socialism, which was quite secular in its form, but here, too, the closer one examines the realities, yet another *modus operandi* comes out. The pronouncements of Nasser reveal that his method was one of employing religious symbols for political motives:

The Hajj is to become a source of tremendous political power and is to be covered

widely by the international media, not as a rite or rituals which present a panorama for the readers of newspapers, but as a periodic political convention. (Nasser: 79)

The view, therefore, converges with that advanced by Zubaida (1993) of “religious nationalism,” whereby religious symbols are mobilized to support nationalist and political objectives without necessarily advancing the cause of Western-style secularism. Nasser’s approach was thus one of eliminating autonomous religious groups while centralizing religious symbolism in the political domain (Kassem, 2004).

Successive presidents continued the dialogue between secular authority and religious accommodation. The “Corrective Revolution” unleashed by Anwar Sadat opened new spaces for religious expression and political contestation (Kürzmann 2004). During the period under Hosni Mubarak, there was a balancing act of secular rule and Islamic accommodation, an act which Shehata 2009 describes as “durable authoritarianism.”

The permanent negotiation between secular and religious influences in Egyptian politics can be shown by these techniques. Indeed, each leader adapted his strategy to the evolution of internal and external challenges, confirming the resilience of negotiated secularism.

2.3 Contemporary Dynamics: Negotiated Secularism Post-Arab Spring (2011-present)

The 2011 Arab Spring dramatically altered the political landscape in Egypt—including its longtime marriage of religion and the state. The short-lived presidency of Mohamed Morsi—from 2012 to 2013—was probably the most serious break with the former regimes, symbolizing the beginning of explicitly Islamist government. Morsi’s tenure in office contested traditional perceptions on the incompatibility of Islamism and democracy, indicating that the two may coexist, at least for a limited duration (Hamid, 2014).

Following Morsi’s removal, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s administration initiated a new chapter in Egypt’s persistent discourse between secularism and Islam. His policy is two-way, whereby:

(1) The heaviest repression of Islamist organizations, above all the Muslim Brotherhood—that would be the final ‘no’ to Political Islam.

(2) Advocacy for the movement of enlightenment with more scrutiny of Islamic heritage to create public debate and multiple representations.

In fact, this dual approach has remarkably changed Egyptian public discourse: while it has freed up space for more diversified voices, thus allowing more critical reflections on religious behavior and tradition, at the same time, it carefully policed religious groups to keep the state as a leading player in shaping not only public but also religious life (Okail, 2018). Sisi’s approach has been toward the remaking of Egypt’s intellectual landscape with an Islam that is—more importantly against Islamist ideology—moderate and regulated by the state.

Nonetheless, this ostensible liberalization is accompanied with contradictions. Although Sisi advocates for restricted reforms and a more open discourse on religion, these alterations occur within the parameters of an authoritarian state. This prompts significant inquiries regarding the authenticity and sustainability of these ideological transformations. Or is this a proper transition, or just one where the regime merely prepares itself behind a veneer of modernity?

Put differently, Egyptian “negotiated secularism” befits a story of continuous reinvention—from the reformist dictation of Muhammad Ali to the present policies of Sisi—each period having its varied method of balancing modern governance with Egypt’s entrenched religious traditions. This history contests both orthodox secularization theory, which presumes a continuous diminishment of religion in public life, and the notion of Islamic exceptionalism, which asserts that Islam is intrinsically resistant to secular rule. Egypt’s experience demonstrates that secularism has been influenced by ongoing negotiation rather than a linear or inevitable development.

With the Sisi leadership, the negotiated secularism of Egypt is confronted with an uncertain future. For the leadership has allowed the criticism of certain aspects of Islamic history and it endorses a controlled sort of liberalization within a framework of robust authoritarianism. Instinctively, one wonders whether such an unstable balance will be workable in the long run: would a further modernization of the state be possible together

with respect for the deep-seated religious traditions that characterize Egyptian society? Will the forces of modernization conflict with such traditions in overly powerful ways, necessitating an ideological change on broader dimensions?

The future secular-religious balance in Egypt will likely be shaped by changes in regional geopolitics, by the rising tide of youthful activism, and by larger global trends in politics and religion, all washing over how Egypt deals with strong and persistent tensions. This is a story whose next chapter remains to be written, since this hard-won precarious balance could prove durable or give way to novel arrangements of governance and religious life.

3. Negotiated Secularism in Modern Egypt: Emerging Dynamics and Conflicts

The post-revolutionary period in Egypt gave a completely new dimension to the already fragile balance between the secular and religious camp. This section looks at how negotiated secularism in Egypt has been shaped and reshaped by its historic context and current social transformations. The aftermath of the 2011 Revolution, Education, Changing Personal Status Laws, Media Control—all give glimpses into the emerging contradictions defining the modern Egyptian practice of secularism.

Legacy of the Revolution, 2011

The 2011 Revolution had a dramatic effect on the political arrangement of Egypt, yet the consequence for the relationship between religion and state has been gradual since then. Immediately following the revolution, political Islam came to the fore—sometimes dramatically, as under the brief rule of Mohamed Morsi—after which the transition under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi returned Egyptian politics to a more managed, authoritarian politics of religion in the public sphere. This exchange epitomizes how the secular administration and religious authority have constantly negotiated a settlement, neither completely triumphing over the other, each keeping its immediate influence on public life.

Education as a Domain of Negotiation

Education continues to be a vital domain in which the secular-religious equilibrium is manifested. The state's regulation of educational curriculum, especially in religious studies, exemplifies the government's attempt to manage religious influence while advocating a more "enlightened" interpretation of Islam that corresponds with national objectives. Reinterpretation of curriculum contentiously wraps up the larger process of restructuring of social values and practices. The campaign equally faced resistance from conservative religio-political groups that saw the reformist stance as an encroachment on Islamic history and cultural identity. That this would constitute a clash suggests how education is a highly contested site in Egypt's negotiated secularism.

Personal Status Laws: Indicators of Entrenched Conflicts

Personal status laws, dealing especially with marriage, divorce, and inheritance, are still a reflection of sharp clashes between secular legal initiatives and religious traditions. Though reform movements have been constant, especially regarding women's rights and gender equality, the strong influence of Islamic law, or Sharia, has remained in these fields. It has tried to reform these laws in keeping with the judgment of contemporary society; yet it is a painfully slow process and often opposed by religious leader's judgment. This aspect of jurisprudence is representative of the state struggle between modernization and retention of traditionalist religious values.

Regulation of Media and Public Discourse

The case in Egypt epitomizes the attitude of the state towards secularism. The Sisi government started to implement greater censorship against the use of religious content in media outlets; it was mainly Islamic television programs and sermons. While the government makes use of state-controlled media for "moderate" Islam, it represses any voice which may be heard to advocate for political Islam or the ideology of violence. This supervision of the public discourse constitutes part of the greater effect of the narrative about religion; at the same time, though, it raises some questions with respect to freedom of expression and to what extent a state can control religious practices.

Coming Tensions and Adjustments

The interaction between the secular and the religious along the history of the Egyptian state is a basic feature of the latter's governance. Each novelty—a political, legal, or cultural one—introduced tension that required an adjustment. The state's approach was thus in continuous movement, changing along with changing internal and international challenges. This dynamic process illustrates the challenges of balancing contemporary administration with entrenched religious traditions in a swiftly evolving society.

An analysis of these critical regions provides insight into the operation of negotiated secularism in contemporary Egypt. The contradictions between secularism and religion are not merely opposing forces but rather interconnected components of a broader societal framework that persistently influences governance, societal norms, and public discourse. Egypt's current engagement with negotiated secularism highlights the dynamic interplay of the state, religious organizations, and civil society as they perpetually renegotiate the demarcation between the sacred and the secular.

3.1 The Landscape after the Revolution: Ideological Transformations

Although the 2011 Revolution of Egypt did not attain everything it got its population into the streets for—"bread, freedom, and social justice"—far-reaching changes did take place in the intellectual landscape, particularly in the debate over the role of secularism. The political upheaval and the changes this period ushered in finally allowed repressed opinions to emerge and spurred further debate and discussion over the role of secularism in Egyptian society.

A critical example of that is the creation of *Almaniyun*: the secular salon that came afterward into the revolution. This is one intellectual space which has turned out to be an important site for discussing and propagating secular discourses that directly challenge the historical hegemony of religious discussion within Egypt's public sphere. *Almaniyun* allows free and inclusive discussions of secularism, thus helping unleash streams of innovative and sometimes provocative ideas repressed or ignored until then.

This trickled down from the intellectual elite to the larger Egyptian society as well. A large section of Egyptians, even those earlier holding radical ideological views—be that

religious or political-started holding these forms of secular discussions. Eventually, the freedom of debate and the exposure to secularist ideas made many of these people secular. This intellectual openness does indeed suggest that, although the revolution did not produce rapid political reform, it nevertheless succeeded in pushing the boundaries of acceptable public speech in Egypt.

The capacity of individuals with entrenched beliefs to reevaluate and embrace secular viewpoints highlights the transforming potential of conversation. This transition signifies a new phase in the continuous negotiations between secular and religious factions in Egypt. The parameters of public discourse are being redefined, as emerging voices shape the dialogue, resulting in a more dynamic and inclusive interchange of ideas.

However, irrespective of these political reversals, the transition that came about was even more cultural in nature. To allow peripheral voices to be heard opened up the blossoming of secular ideas in ways unimaginable earlier. A shift in the tenor of public discourse still informs how secularism is understood in Egypt today and epitomizes broader changes: it is this revolution that changed ways of living, not just politics.

3.2 Secularism in Conceptualizing the Case of Egypt

Any given understanding of Egyptian secularism thus requires an understanding of a rather atypical cultural and religious dynamic. In light of this, the paper is going to present a three-item framework for conceptualizing Egyptian secularism, each one of them representing a different way to balance secular government and religious tradition.

Islamic Secularism: Where Religious Law Meets Modern Governance

With all these developments, however, secularism in Egypt has remained drastically different from the classical western notions of separating religion from the state. As a matter of fact, the Islamic faith managed to inbreed history into various facets of life, whether it is social, legal, or political. This has brought into view the tight interplay between secular governance and Islamic law, particularly with respect to Sharia's legislating role.

Modern Egypt gives examples of how Sharia was accommodated in order to make it

agree with current societal values. Probably the best example is slavery. Whereas Sharia allowed this, it has since universally been condemned and prohibited throughout the Islamic world. That again proves that Sharia may change with society. In contemporary Egypt, too, legal reforms introduced contemporary ideas of human rights, especially in respect of the rights of women, within a wider Sharia framework.

This begets some very serious questions: Were the Sharia capable of reform through an entrenchment of modern values, why keep it as a source of legislation? This ongoing negotiation between preserving religious traditions and adapting to modern governance is a key feature of Egypt's version of negotiated secularism. The flexibility in applying Sharia demonstrates that secularism in Egypt is not about fully separating religion from public life but about continually negotiating the boundaries between religious law and modern governance.

Semi-Secularism: Abdelwahab Elmessiri's Model

Another variant of the theory of secularism in its Egyptian context comes from Egyptian scholar Abdelwahab Elmessiri. In his book, titled *Al-'Almaniya al-Juz'iya wal-'Almaniya ash-Shamila* Partial Secularism and Comprehensive Secularism 2002, Elmessiri brings forth two kinds of secularism:

1. Partial Secularism: The separation of religion from state institutions is maintained, but religious values are still a part of social habit and public morality. In that case, religious tendency provides the basis for guidelines in ethics and social behaviour but does not determine political guidelines.
2. The "comprehensive secularism" model is the Western kind, meant to banish religion not only from the state machinery but also from the community. Elmessiri protests that this model is incongruous with Egypt's still-living culture and religion.

Elmessiri's concept of semi-secularism presents a middle path between a theocratic state and complete secularization. His model advocates for maintaining religious influence over social values while removing it from political institutions, offering a version of negotiated secularism that respects Egypt's unique cultural and religious environment.

But this model does have intrinsic setbacks. The emphasis on Egypt as an exception to the norm in terms of faith and politics does present certain risks of cultural exceptionalism, thus ultimately obscuring debates on basic rights and the rule of law. Ambiguity in the framework erected by Elmessiri does present an incentive for multiple understandings of permissible religious input into governance and further complicates the establishment of boundary markers that might define what is and is not secular.

Approaches to Comparison: Partial Secularism versus Negotiated Secularism

Partial secularism, as advanced by Abdelwahab Elmessiri, has many points in common with the broader concept of negotiated secularism but also some very important differences. Indeed, both provide innovative ways of balancing secularism against societies where religion is at the forefront. Below is a comparison of the two models:

- Similarities: Partially, the middle ground approach towards handling the religious influences on governance is negotiated secularism. Neither of them aspires to fully keep the public life free of religious influence but to provide room for accommodation with respect to the cultural and religious contexts.
- Cultural sensitivity: In this regard, both models are pitched on cultural and religious dynamics of society. Though the partial secularism of Elmessiri targets Egypt alone, the Negotiated model of secularism can fit into the required cultural and religious context.
- Religious Influence on Social Norms: Religion, set apart from the political government, forms part of social norms and public morality in both models.
- Differences:
- Secularization Scope: Partial secularism, according to Elmessiri, spells out the difference between partial and comprehensive secularization. In the first variety, the influence of religious influence can be seen in social media but not in government functioning. In the second kind, there is a complete divesting of religion both from the state machinery and public life. Negotiated secularism does not divide secularization along these lines but seeks an operational compromise in any given situation.
- While partial secularism's uniquely cultured and religiously informed model

applies primarily to Egypt, negotiated secularism has wider applicability across many cultures and religious persuasions.

- Ambiguity: The principle of Elmessiri does allow for interpretation that there might be different levels of religious influence acceptable in governance; thus, it is at risk of not having clear-cut boundaries between the secular and religious sphere. Negotiated secularism faces similar challenges; it is, however, more flexible since its principle is based on continuous dialogue and adjustment to local conditions.

Both models aim to balance religious influence with secular governance, respecting the cultural and religious realities of a society. However, Elmessiri's partial secularism is more specific to Egypt and categorizes secularism into two distinct forms, while negotiated secularism is a broader, more adaptable concept. While they both face challenges in setting boundaries as to how much religion can take part in governance, compromises, in conjunction with an emphasis on cultural sensitivity, make them essential implements in the attempt to understand certain complexities around secularity.

Secularism in Egyptian Thought: From Modernization and Identity to Religious Sentiment

This further distorted the meaning of secularism in Egyptian minds since this concept has been stigmatized by religious bodies. Associating secularism with atheism or abolishing religious identity is false; still, it has become a misconception among most Egyptians. In order not to stir up that fussiness that the word “secularism” — *almaniya* in Arabic-sparks, liberals use the term “liberalism” — *al-libraliya* in Arabic- or “civility” — *madaniya* in Arabic-interchangeably.

This rewording represents a deeper problem in Egyptian society, entangled in its history with colonialism, to attain a strong sense of national identity, and even more ambiguous with Western political thought. In particular, religious leaders have made it sound like secularism is something against Islamic values. Lumped in it with atheism, it was an enemy to Egypt's religious and cultural identity.

Because of this, debates on the place of religion within governance often reflect a spurious polarized debate in which secularism is “anti-religious.” This manner of thought—for example, what is not white must be black—makes further considered deliberation on

how religion and state can relate to each other in a modern society exceedingly difficult. Rather, it transposes into a debate between two fighting “religious” and “anti-religious” camps, overshadowing more nuanced discussion that must occur to strike a balance.

Ongoing modernization at variance with religion and identity begets the framing and debating of secularism within Egypt. Consequently, it affects policymaking. It is how the framing and debating of secularism in Egypt affect Egypt’s ways, as with any other country, of how to modernize without losing the religious and cultural identities. It is mirrored in the negotiation of secularism: the orientation of the country into the modern world without losing its ties with the past.

3.3 Practical Implementation of Negotiated Secularism:

Principal Policy Domains

The negotiated secularism in contemporary Egypt may be judged as a continuous process of interaction between secular and religious influences in the different critical domains of policy and their reshaping course in the governmental and social framework.

Education: The Conflict Regarding Curriculum Reform

Education serves as a pivotal battleground in the conflict between secular and religious influences. The Egyptian government has undertaken significant initiatives to modernize the curriculum by integrating more secular material, especially in disciplines such as physics and history. Simultaneously, it has sought to diminish the significance of religious education. Nonetheless, these reforms encounter significant opposition from influential religious entities, particularly Al-Azhar, which maintains extensive authority over Islamic education in the nation.

This conflict between the state’s advocacy for secularization and the preservation of religious traditions illustrates the wider cultural discourse on the role of religion in public life. This forms the debate of the predominance of worldly knowledge over religious knowledge in educational systems and shows the complicated balance involved in Egypt’s negotiated secularism. Hence, the educational system forms a miniature regarding the struggle of modernity against religious tradition in Egyptian culture.

Personal Status Legislation: Gender Rights in Opposition to Religious Doctrine

Personal status rules, which regulate issues such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, are profoundly entrenched in religious theology. Initiatives to amend these laws, especially to enhance gender equality, have sparked intense discussions. A ban on polygamy or a call for equal inheritance by females is a good example of the conflict between traditional religious acts in contravention of the modernist legal reforms by international human rights standards.

The debate on marriage mirrors the broader legal landscape in Egypt, where Sharia forms the basis of legislation on personal status legislation, whereas there have been more vocal calls to reform such legislation amidst a shift in attitudes towards questions of gender and equality. Personal status laws represent one of the fiercest sites of contestation in the wider battle to define the secular state's scope as it relates to religious authority. How this aspect of jurisprudence is taken up by Egypt will say much about its legal future and social mores.

Media Regulation and Religious Discourse

Meanwhile, the Egyptian media have become one of the most important arenas for the negotiation between secularist and religious forces. The state still has huge influence on the media, especially regarding regulation of religious content. In line with its policy of secularization, the government is seeking to regulate religious expression by providing what it describes as “moderate” interpretations of Islam while suppressing alleged radical or politically sensitive information.

This management of religious discourse in the media illustrates how the Egyptian state employs negotiated secularism to uphold social order while advancing secular principles. It exerts this power in religious and secular domains simply to regulate the kind of religious narratives reaching the public. This meddling underlines the complex interrelationship that exists between secular government and Islamic influence within Egypt's public sphere, where the state must bargain with others continuously on the limits of permissible expression.

The Prospects of Negotiated Secularism in Egypt

The future of negotiated secularism in Egypt is precarious, to say the least, determined by domestic trends and global factors. Youth in Egypt have become noisier, most especially on digital platforms, in their demands for increased freedom and changes. The younger generation, being much more attuned with global discourses on human rights and democracy, might challenge the status quo between secularism and religion in ways their parent generation could not.

Yet, there is that telling context of the regional dynamics. In this fast-changing Middle East geopolitics, together with the resurgence of conservative religious forces in other Arab countries, new tests may be pitched for Egypt while doing its tightrope walk. It is in balancing the external forces against internal pressures for modernity that the Egyptian leadership must be deftly managed, always keeping their finger on the pulse of religion.

Negotiated secularism in Egypt is, prospectively, supposed to keep moving as an interactive process. Consequently, the ability of the state to maintain a sustainable balance between secular management and religious tradition will determine whether political stability and social cohesion can be upheld in a progressively complex environment. The challenges are how modern human rights values balance out long religious tradition, foster more diversity in public expression, and answer the increasingly expanding needs of the digital native, world-conscious generation.

This creates an ongoing dialogue between secular and religious factions and dramatizes how difficult it is to rule a religiously pluralistic society like Egypt, setting into larger perspective the flexibility of secularism within different cultural contexts in the 21st century. In the case of Egypt, it underlines the view that adjustment and active debate are the ways toward the fate of secularism in cultures where religion is a strong force.

4. The political consequence of secularism in Egypt: A balance between tradition and modernity in the post-revolutionary context

It was this interaction of secularism with Islamism that defined the political trajectory

taken by many Muslim countries; maybe Egypt is one of the best examples after the uprising in 2011. In Egypt, secularism is not merely imposed or opposed; it is perpetually redefined within the context of the nation's entrenched religious traditions.

This section examines the political ramifications of Egypt's distinctive negotiated secularism, emphasizing the impact of the conflict between secular and religious entities on critical domains such as party politics, electoral mechanisms, and constitutional evolution. Through the analysis of these dimensions, we acquire a more profound comprehension of Egypt's efforts to reconcile its religious history with the exigencies of a contemporary political framework.

The political system of Egypt, particularly after 2011, illustrates the persistent challenge of harmonizing tradition with the demands of modernization. Secularism in Egypt is not a fixed notion; it evolves and transforms according to the political and social milieu. Religious parties have significantly influenced political discourse, concurrently, efforts have been made to construct a more secular governmental framework through constitutional revisions.

The examination of these political factors reveals that Egypt's encounter with secularism is intricate and multifarious. The relationship is not merely a binary opposition between secularism and Islamism; it is an ongoing negotiation that influences legislative formulation, electoral competition, and the positioning of political parties. This is an ever-evolving interaction of forces—secular and religious—that influences the course of politics little different from the unique history and social mores of Egypt.

This section develops a general conflict between tradition and modernity in Egypt, focusing attention on the political processes, underlining the greater implication appearing in many other Muslim-majority countries facing those very challenges, and, hopefully providing insight into how secularism adapts to different cultural and theological contexts.

4.1 The Reshaping of the Political Landscape:

Party Politics and Electoral Dynamics

Ideologically, the divide between secularism and Islamism has distinctly marked Egypt. Running alongside that is the renegotiation of secularism continuously by the political

actors because of the prevailing religious and secular interests to attain social stability and political power. Regarding Egypt, while political parties and the electoral system have undergone major development, there has been the rise and fall of Islamist political power, the dispersion of secular political forces, and movement toward an authoritarian model.

Rising and Falling of Political Islamist Power

The Islamist groups had never been better positioned to influence the future of Egypt politically, especially the FJP, which was the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, following the 2011 revolution. This was a historic moment: the sweeping FJP win in the post revolution legislative elections, along with the election of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's first democratically elected president in 2012, had put for the first time into actual political power Islamist forces suppressed by secular-oriented regimes.

This transition marked a cardinal turn of events in the balance of power between the secular and religious forces at work inside Egypt. Yet, robust resistance by the variety of forces—including the secular political forces, the Coptic Christians, the military elites, and sizeable segments of the society—opposed Islamist authority. Many had feared that Islamist dominance would erode individual freedoms and drive Egypt toward a more theocratic form of governance.

What followed was a high-octane, preliminary succession of efforts to call the government of Morsi on the carpet for centralizing control and making decisions based on fundamentalist Islamic precepts. As part of a broader effort, his approach has indicated a wider campaign to remake Egypt's political system according to his religion, breaking a fragile long-standing balance. This administration of Morsi bypassed judicial oversight and pushed through an Islamic-influenced constitution, thus alienating a broad alliance of secularists, liberals, and some moderate Islamists. Wholly brought about by Morsi's moves to consolidate power and implement Islamist principles, this division further translated into mass rallies urging him to resign—a sure sign of the true limits imposed on Islamist rule by the strong grip of secularism in that country.

In July 2013, the military, touted to that point as the guarantor of stability in Egypt, was called upon to intervene and remove Morsi from power. Traditionally, the military has

intervened to take Islamist groups down a peg when the latter became perceived to pose a danger to state authority. Events that framed this as an attempt to return to a balance between the religious and the civilian government, however, were also part of the bigger negotiation between the secular and religious forces in Egypt. The latter sprang quickly, after the fall of Morsi, to crush Islamist political groupings; the military announced the terrorist nature of the Muslim Brotherhood, forbade its members from any political activity, and usually consolidated all secular groupings as a grip on Egyptian politics.

The Fragmentation of Secular Political Entities

It was thus no surprise that the secular and liberal parties of Egypt as well found it tricky to negotiate with the Islamist groups when the latter were facing repression systematically. A majority of Egypt's secular parties had hailed the 2013 military intervention as necessary to save Egypt from an Islamist-ruled country. Confidence was not going to last long. In its bid to consolidate its power, the military-backed government started marginalizing those very secular parties. While this emphasizes reduced political plurality and the consolidation of government control over the political sphere, it has also meant that previously supportive secular and liberal factions found themselves sidelined by the new power structure.

March into Authoritarianism

The rigors of authoritarianism are usually attacked on the grounds that they suppress political freedom and opposition. Certainly, in many contexts it merits its reputation as a retrograde influence. But in countries such as Egypt, with an entrenched presence of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood at levels both societal and state, untrammelled democracy has sometimes produced results not intended or anticipated. In these situations, extremist groups can take advantage of a democratic regime to achieve predominance, as occurred in Afghanistan.

From this perspective, Egyptian authoritarianism protects the state against the rise of extremism as a menace to the nation's secular entity. Such a position is not devoid of controversy at least for those living in democratically entrenched atmospheres, but again

it speaks to different challenges some countries have faced, with their radical ideologies arguably tending to dismantle governance and social cohesion. It would mean that, at all costs, some form of authoritarian authority may become imperative to save fundamentalist elements from blowing asunder the fragile religious secular balance that keeps the country intact. his viewpoint is founded on multiple considerations:

(i) The Threat of Islamist Domination via Democratic Processes: Egypt's experience under President Mohamed Morsi's tenure exemplifies how Islamist factions can exploit democratic mechanisms to consolidate authority and promote agendas that may jeopardize individual liberties and secularism. His regime had been accused of bypassing democratic principles to implement hardline Islamic policies, hence the reason for his removal by the military.

(ii) Authoritarianism as a Stabilizing Force: It is undemocratic authoritarian governance that avoids the rise of such fundamentalist groups into political authority through democratic polls in which they have considerable grass root following or have gained a powerful influence in state organs, as in Egypt. This mirrors circumstances in nations such as Afghanistan, where democratic structures were manipulated by extremist factions to seize power, resulting in societal instability.

(iii) Equilibrium Between Religious and Civil Authority: Egypt's military-supported regime, despite its authoritarian nature, asserts itself as a stabilizing entity that upholds a fragile equilibrium between religious influence and civil administration. This style of control inhibits Islamist forces from seizing state institutions or altering the government in ways that could significantly curtail freedoms for minority groups, women, and secular citizens. The military monitors the influence of Islamist movements to prevent any singular ideological organization, especially those with religious ambitions, from dominating the state's political and social processes.

Military's Role in Negotiated Secularism

The fiddly balance between the religious influence and civilian governance now lies with the Egyptian military. Quite often, the military has framed itself as the defender of

state institutions against the possible rise of Islamist groups. Still, the approach of the military is not one of strict secularism in the Western sense but manages this tension between the religious and civilian forces in order to work toward stability, national unity, and protection of its political influence.

Negotiated secularism allows Egypt's military and political heads to offset religious authority against secular governance. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has gone as far as making several high-profile moves to push Egypt toward a more secular leaning in its legal system, through the advocacy of reformist changes in the traditional religious norms. He has, for example, advocated that a restriction be placed on verbal divorce, as practiced under Islamic law, and lent his support to reform to allow Christian divorce, thus challenging long-held religious traditions for both Muslims and Christians.

These steps of modernization have faced severe opposition from religious authorities. Thus, Al Azhar and the Christian Church have opposed such reforms on the ground that it would undermine religious tradition and perhaps weakened their hand in the administration of personal status laws. What this opposition shows very clearly is the negotiated nature of secularism in Egypt—the government's attempt at applying secularist reforms pitted against a high degree of power among the religious bodies which see such changes as threatening their autonomy and tradition.

These reforms represent an attempt on the part of President el-Sisi to modernize the legal system in Egypt and to advance the cause of secularism, but the well-entrenched authority of the religious leaders suggests real limitations in that process. The thrust toward secular governance is very often constrained in a country where religious traditions greatly intermingle with both personal and public life and where strong resistance emanates from religiously controlled bodies playing a commanding role in shaping the legal and social landscape of Egypt.

This pervasive tension illustrates how negotiated secularism operates within Egypt: while the government is attempting to move toward a more contemporary, secular structure, it must confront the recurrent power of religious institutions that work against such reforms perceived as injurious to their grip on significant aspects of Egyptian life.

4.2 The Impact of Legal and Constitutional Development

This continuing development of the legal and constitutional framework of Egypt reflects the permanent struggle that this nation faces to strike a balance between secular ideals and Islamic law. It finds its dramatic reflection in several constitutions which Egypt has had with major changes regarding religious freedom and the incorporation of Islam into government. These changes to the constitution underpin how elaborate the modernity-versus-tradition debate have been in Egypt, showing the eclectic balance between secular and religious influences still evident in the country's legal and political frameworks.

Evolution of Historic Constitutions

This constitution was devised in 1923 after Egypt's nominal independence from British rule and is at times considered a landmark in Egypt's constitutional history because it enshrined religious tolerance. While it declared Islam as the national religion, it guaranteed at the same time freedom of religion, hence allowing other peoples of different faiths to practice their respective religions without any deterrent. This new structure provided the pattern for the secular administration in Egypt and symbolized a bright vision of the future. Still, this position vis-a-vis religion did not hold when later constitutional changes were considered and Egypt's relation with religion became very complex. This radically changed under the 1956 constitution during the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The 1956 constitution made wide departures from the already wide freedom of religion as stipulated in 1923. Under Nasser, the constitution recognized only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, thereby restricting the ambit of religious freedom and embodying the wide-ranging Arab nationalist ambition of Nasser and his desire to have greater government control of religious groups, as part of his plan for centralization of power.

This trend persisted under Anwar Sadat's 1971 constitution, which further solidified the importance of Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt's legal framework. A significant advancement was the enactment of Article 2, which clearly articulates, "Islam is the state's religion, Arabic is its official language, and Shari'a is the primary source of legislation."

While the very concept of state religion fitted as it did into the Egyptian cultural

landscape, it is basically a contradiction in terms. Religion is essentially a human belief, held by the people and not to be possessed by an impersonal institution like the state. The state should stand neutral, treating all its inhabitants alike irrespective of religious belief. In fact, it institutes a religio-schismatic bias in the rule of law through article 2, which invokes the equal rights of all people and secular governance.

The most contentious single feature of constitutional debate in Egypt has been Article 2. It introduces into the law a religious bias, which is a basic obstacle to any conception of a neutral state serving equally for all its residents irrespective of their religion. The clause has introduced heated debate on the degree to which Egypt can balance her Islamic character with more modern, secular conceptions of governance.

This entrenchment of religious influence within the operation and administration of government represents one of the important compromises with Islamist groups that was made by Sadat in his 1971 constitution and contrasts dramatically with the far more secular outlook of the 1923 constitution. Yet, however greater the emphasis on Islam now, Sadat's constitution still preserved some key features of secular government.

It retained the separation among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches—a typical feature of all secular political dispensations working toward ensuring checks and balances in government.

Egypt retained this civil law system, with heavy borrowings from European legal traditions, and did not develop an Islamic legal system, *per se*.

This enabled the nation to function under regulations that were not exclusively religious.

Secular state institutions: Principal state entities, such as ministries, the educational system, and the military, predominantly maintained a non-religious framework, preventing the state from being entirely ruled by religious regulations.

The constitution allowed for a mixed economic system, where public and private sectors could function side by side without being strictly tied to any religious economic principles. Secular elements existed alongside the growing influence of Islamic law, creating a hybrid system that continuously balanced between secular and religious principles.

This blend reflected the complexity of Egypt's legal and political landscape, where efforts to modernize while preserving religious traditions required careful balancing.

Post-Revolution Constitutional Reforms

The Arab Spring of 2011 triggered major political and constitutional changes in Egypt. After the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the country entered a phase of intense political transformation, which resulted in the drafting of two distinct constitutions in quick succession: the 2012 constitution under President Mohamed Morsi, and the 2014 constitution following Morsi's ouster. The two documents paint very different pictures, especially in terms of the balancing between Islamic principles and civil rights.

The 2012 Constitution was heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and sought to elevate the status of Islamic law within Egypt's legal hierarchy. One significant element was Article 219, which explicitly linked Islamic law to traditional Sunni jurisprudence, giving religious doctrine a central role in governance. However, after Morsi was removed from office in 2013, Egypt adopted the 2014 constitution, which attempted to resolve the issues of the 2012 document by creating a more inclusive legal framework. The 2014 constitution aimed to appeal to a broader segment of Egyptian society while still retaining Egypt's Islamic identity.

A closer comparison of the 2012 and 2014 constitutions reveals key differences in their approach to the role of religion and civil rights.

The 2014 constitution signified a distinct transition towards a rights-oriented framework, embodying Egypt's overarching attempts to reconcile its Islamic character with contemporary administration. For example:

The prohibition of the niqab at educational institutions signifies an effort to foster a more neutral public realm in particular contexts.

This would make acknowledging atheism as a personal right a progressive change toward greater individual freedom, even though such freedoms would be heavily circumscribed.

These changes reflect Egypt's chronic struggle to weigh its Islamic heritage against the need for secular governance. The constitution of 2014 was a well-weighted compromise

Table 1: Key Differences Between the 2012 and 2014 Constitutions

Element	2012 Constitution	2014 Constitution
Interpretation of Sharia	Article 219 provided a specific definition of Shari'a, linking it to traditional Sunni jurisprudence.	Removed Article 219, leaving the interpretation of Shari'a more open and flexible.
Role of Al-Azhar	Article 4 gave Al-Azhar a formal consultative role in Islamic matters.	Maintained Al-Azhar's independence but removed its formal consultative role in Shari'a matters.
Blasphemy Clause	Article 44 prohibited insults against prophets and messengers.	Removed this clause, though general prohibitions on insulting religions remained.
Women's Rights	Article 10 framed the protection of women's rights within the context of Shari'a.	Article 11 emphasizes equality and protection from violence, without specific reference to Shari'a.
Freedom of Religion	Article 43 limited religious freedom to followers of Abrahamic religions.	Article 64 introduced "absolute freedom of belief," broadening the scope of religious freedom.
Political Parties	Did not explicitly prohibit religious-based parties.	Article 74 explicitly bans the formation of political parties based on religion.

against the ambition of both secular reformers and religious conservatives.

While the constitution of 2014 marked a step forward for an inclusive and rights-based form of governance, it certainly does expose remarkable sway of the state's religious function. Constitutional reform in Egypt epitomizes how negotiated secularism compels the state continuously to balance modernity against tradition. With those changes continuing to come, this juggling act likely will continue well into the future and underline the dynamic, sometimes contentious relationship existing between religious identity and secular government within the country's legal and political frameworks.

4.3 Islamist Movements and the Challenges to Secular Governance:

An Alternative Framework of Negotiated Secularism

The "Multiple Modernities" paradigm devised by S.N. Eisenstadt in the year 2000 would put the two parallel strands of secularism and Islamism into proper perspective. According to this theory, the process of modernization is not uniquely Western; rather, it takes on different hues with respect to a country's unique cultural and historical

background. In the case of Egypt, this takes the form of a negotiated secularism in which the state *de facto* works a balance between religious authority and secular governance without any obligatory separation of religion from the state.

The “Multiple Modernities” framework allows us to transcend such simplicities in opposing either tradition or modernity, religion or secularism. Instead, this allows for a nuanced look at Egypt’s political landscape from which a form of modernity emerges based on both Islamic traditions and secular governance. It will also be very helpful in considering the challenges posed by Islamist movements in complicating the more usual Western model of secular-liberal governance normally associated with modernization.

Islamist movements in Egypt aren’t just resisting modernization—they represent complex responses to modernity itself. These movements challenge the secular-liberal model of governance by trying to address social, economic, and political issues through an Islamic lens. While they may not present a fully alternative version of modernity, they certainly disrupt and complicate the process of secular modernization, pushing the state into an ongoing negotiation between religious and secular forces.

This ongoing negotiation is visible in various areas where Islamist movements have influenced Egypt’s socio-political environment. The following sections will explore the specific challenges these movements pose within the framework of negotiated secularism and multiple modernities.

Grassroots Mobilization: The Challenge to Secular Authority

Especially in Egypt, Islamist movements have been able to fill in, above all, in grassroots mobilization where official institutions have failed. By their policies of health care, education, and welfare closely related, such movements ensure that they will have strong popular backing and gain popular legitimacy enough to function almost as a counterbalance to the secular state. This grassroots presence exerts considerable pressure on the government, compelling it to engage in a precarious negotiation: it must either address these social demands more effectively or jeopardize its influence on these religious organizations.

The equilibrium of negotiated secularism is not static; it is subject to evolution. The

state's response to Islamist groups, whether through tolerance, co-optation, or suppression, exemplifies this ongoing negotiation. The 2012 presidential election, which resulted in Mohamed Morsi's ascension to office, exemplifies this process distinctly. The efficacy of Islamist grassroots initiatives resulted in political clout, indicating that secularism in Egypt must perpetually adjust to the prevailing religious impact on public and political affairs.

Religious Identity versus National Identity: A Threat to Secular Governance

Islamist movements present the most serious challenge to secular governance; it is a cultivation of religious identity over and above national identity. Although negotiated secularism occurs, the state faces an uphill task of cultivating a united national identity along with respect for religious pluralism. Sometimes, Islamist groups disrupt this balance by making their loyalty to the ummah—a worldwide community of Muslims—primary to their civil allegiance.

Figures like Sayyid Qutb famously propagated this view; he belittled national identity as insignificant, even calling it “nothing but a rotting handful of sand.” Needless to say, these beliefs contradict the very fundamentals of secular nationalism; the latter aims to unify all people of a country into one single national identity regardless of their religious background. Shaaban Abdel Rahim, a prominent figure in the Islamist Al-Nour Party, asserted that a Muslim from Malaysia is more like him than an Egyptian Copt, underscoring the idea that religious allegiance supersedes civic or national identification.

When religious identity supersedes civic identity, it jeopardizes the secular ideal of a cohesive national identity that transcends religious distinctions. This compels the state to engage in challenging negotiations, as it must seek to preserve national unity while permitting religious expression.

Social Division: Bane to Secular Unity

This is the dominance of religious identity over national identity, eroding social cohesion and creating several layers of conflict in society. For this negotiated secularism paradigm to work, or for the secular administration to function effectively, the state has to

strike a judicious balance between religious conservatism and secular pluralism. But Islamist organizations' strong emphasis on religious identity often increases existing social polarities.

This further exacerbates tension between Muslims and religious minorities, thus making the task of the state of convincing the diversified segments rather complex.

Differences remain, however, between religious fundamentalists within the Muslim community and the more indulgent or even secular parts of the population. That internal divergence erodes the social cohesion on which the state depends to maintain civic order and leads all too often to calls for the reevaluation of what role religion plays in civil society.

Locus of Control

This often contributes to the development of a highly supernatural way of thinking that diminishes the importance of reasoning and empirical procedures in the solving of private and public problems. In some interpretations of Islam this contributes to a strong development of awareness of the spiritual realm, through defense against or struggle with Satan, Shaytan. These can be further elaborated by the religious influences on such mundane practices as stepping into the bathroom with the left foot while uttering a protective prayer or uttering a prayer before food to keep Satan away. While these rituals seem harmless, such a worldview reflects one in which supernatural forces are believed by many to play a significant role in both personal and societal events.

This influences how religiously defined groups understand and contextualize disasters and crises on a larger scale. For example, the collapse of a crane into the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca in 2015 killed 111 people and injured close to 400. While the investigating authorities framed it in terms of negligence over upkeep of the crane, the families of many of the victims and others within the faith community framed the incident as being the will of God. Victims themselves were considered martyrs, blessed by the proximity to such a sacred site. The tragedy was regarded as mainly ordained, fated beyond human agency.

This is such a fatalistic attitude that has been deeply engrained within religious thought; it reduces the depth of emphasis upon human faults and subsequent action. Where

disasters are framed as tests from God, or an act of God's will, often little drive exists for safety measures and accountability by people to improve. And it is not only confined to big things, but it also trickles down into the minute, details like health issues, poverty, and accidents, into which a fate-like destiny unfolds. A consequence of this would be less motivation to seek out practical means that are evidenced.

More broadly still, religious belief affects responses both at the levels of the individual and society to issues of reform and progress. The supernatural explanations of one's or society's difficulties will clearly delay progress on matters well serviced by empirically grounded problem-solving: public safety, health, and infrastructure. A good example is the sudden death cases in Egypt, whereby people believe this is preordained by God; such thinking highly likely to lead to lax investigation of the true cause of such sudden deaths.

Despite the execution of research—frequently in partnership with global entities such as the World Health Organization—there exists a paucity of publicly accessible information, especially concerning specific data across diverse domains. Lacking such transparency in reporting almost seems a mistake, but more than likely it came by the religious belief that such incidences occur by the will of God. Such a school of thought makes deep scientific understanding irrelevant because many would find it unnecessary or even irrelevant when religious descriptions can comfort them.

Although faith provides individuals with solace and a feeling of purpose, this religiously inspired mindset can occasionally hinder the resolution of tangible issues through pragmatic, secular approaches. In this regard, religious fatalism challenges the equilibrium between maintaining religious beliefs and promoting public welfare through a rational, evidence-based government.

The Manipulation of Religious Concepts: From the Colonial Era to Modern Times

The deliberate use of religious beliefs, especially attributing events to divine will or supernatural forces, has long served as a powerful tool for controlling Islamic communities. This practice began during the European colonial period and still impacts society today, especially in places where secularism is weak or heavily debated.

Historical Origins

During the colonial period, especially under British governance, colonial officials promptly acknowledged the profound impact of Islamic culture and religion on societal thought and conduct. They exploited specific Islamic philosophical concepts to sustain authority with minimal opposition. A notable instance is the endorsement of al-Ghazali's 11th-century assertion, which elevated divine writings above human reason in instances of discord. Colonial authorities used this approach to:

- (i) Bar them from thinking critically about social and political conditions.
- (ii) Indoctrinate people into the belief that everything that exists is God's will.
- (iii) Clothe the colonial rule with a god's will to minimize resistance.

They spread these ideas through the following channels: selective printing of texts; funding the interpretation of religious texts from religious scholars who support ideas parallel to those of the colonial administration; suppression of any sort of oppositionist thought. In this way, this approach undermined the native intellectual traditions and tied colonial administration to religious mythology, which severely limited critical thinking and organized opposition.

MODERN CONTINUATION

While colonial rule is over, this use of religious concepts to validate the rule of the government has not ceased and transformed into modern models. Indeed, most so-called Muslim countries still have rulers who draw on religion for their authority. This is often by means of abusing religious institutions and media that represent certain interpretations of Islam to legitimize their actions and decisions.

A far stronger example could be the Egyptian constitutional referendum of 2012 in which, through religious appeals, the Muslim Brotherhood muscled voters into saying yes to its proposed constitution. The Brotherhood and sympathetic religious officials framed the vote as rather more than an exercise in political will, treating defeat of the constitution as an interpretation that God's will was being denied. Some clerics made it

known that to vote ‘no’ invited eternal damnation. For such clerics, the vote had been elevated past politics to one of religious duty.

This type of manipulation reflects strategies utilized throughout the colonial period but adapted for the contemporary context, adding global communication and media. Most contemporary governments are trying to balance their authority with religious legitimacy to use such a connection to sustain control within the mantle of “negotiated secularism.”

To summarize, the challenges Islamist movements bring to governance in Muslim-majority countries are closely tied to the intricate dynamics of negotiated secularism. Rather than having a straightforward divide between religion and the state, these societies continuously grapple with finding a balance between religious influence and political control.

Factors like grassroots mobilization, placing religious identity above national identity, social divides, and the manipulation of religious beliefs are all intertwined, shaped by the constant push and pull between religious and secular forces.

Negotiated secularism shows that secularism in these societies isn’t set in stone. In such societies, religious beliefs are normally curtailed or controlled when need arises in political life. Such various regimes may cling to power in the name of religion, trying to provide a semblance of neutrality between religion and politics. All this juggling gets very tricky when old colonial gimmicks such as manipulation of the media and religious propaganda are borrowed to suit the times for influencing public opinion.

To address these challenges, it’s important to understand that they are not static—they evolve as social, political, and technological landscapes shift. Moreover, the negotiation between secularism and religious authority is not unique to Muslim-majority societies. Similar tensions exist worldwide, especially in places where secularism is incomplete or contested.

4.4 Impact of Religious Thinking on the socio-economic perception in Egypt’s Economy

This section discusses the elaborative relations that exist between religious belief and

economic reality in Egypt and challenges and opportunities provided by such interaction. The economy of Egypt is formally not based on the Islamic model, as it is basically secular in nature, oriented by market policies with growing privatization. Despite these shifts, Islamic principles continue to play a significant role in shaping socioeconomic attitudes and behaviors, creating a complex interaction between official economic policies and cultural-religious values.

Even though Egypt's legal framework adheres to secular models, marked by market liberalization and government interventions like subsidies, religious beliefs strongly influence public opinions and economic behavior. This creates a distinct contrast between the state's secular economic policies and the population's economic mindset, which is still strongly influenced by Islamic values. Egypt's enduring Islamic traditions, combined with its evolving economic strategies, offer an interesting perspective on how religious economic principles coexist with and shape the largely secular practices of a modern state. This section explores key Islamic economic concepts and their impact on various aspects of Egyptian society.

(i) Riba Interest and Gharar Uncertainty

Among the most important tenets of Islamic economics are the prohibitions of *riba* and *gharar*, which guide ethical perceptions concerning financial practices in Egypt. However, this interaction is immensely more complicated vis-à-vis the modern economic system.

In fact, the establishment of civil banks in Egypt deals in interest-based dealings, and people also borrow to return loans, which itself is a manifestation that these actions have become widespread despite their prohibition in Islam. It is a compromising spirit toward the existing financial system.

At the same time, some of them refuse to collaborate with traditional banks and to invest money in them. Instead, they seek the services of Islamic banks that conform to their religious understanding and thus offer alternatives devoid of *riba* and *gharar*. In this way, people can follow their religion and at the same time survive in the secular economic world.

This duality represents one variety of “negotiated secularism” in which religious values

coexist with and sometimes challenge the ways in which secular mechanisms regulate financial systems. Even though Egypt's legal and financial infrastructures are largely secular, pockets of its population continue a religious-based practice and thus participate in an economic system that is, for them, incomplete in its representation of Islamic economic values.

(ii) The Practice of Zakat-Obligatory Charity

In Islamic tradition, one of the forms of obligatory charity exists to reinforce the principles of social justice and solidarity, imposing a moral obligation on the well-to-do toward the poor. This thus structures perceptions concerning economic inequality. There is, however, sometimes tension if it does not meet the immediate needs of the poor.

For instance, some of the rich in the community may opt to spend their zakat feeding the animals. To the poor, this may seem like a waste of time as many of them consider themselves the targets of receiving zakat.

These disparities between intentions and perceptions could be exclusionary to people from such marginalized groups. Conflicts of priorities may be invited when people have basic, unmet needs for survival and see resources elsewhere. That may invite some criticism of whether in fact charitable acts truly meet human needs that are most dire.

It is also likely that perceived neglect on account of animals sometimes creates negative responses. Certain individuals may well vent their frustrations at the animals as a form of protest against the system they perceive as being more concerned about animal welfare than human needs. Here, it reflects the depth of emotional and social impact of resource distribution practices. These acts, once perceived to be unfair, will lead to behavior that negates the principles of zakah.

(iii) Qadar (Predestination), Nasib (Allotted Share), and Rizq (Divinely Allocated Provision)

Beliefs in Qadar (fate), Nasib (allotted share), and Rizq (sustenance) significantly influence individuals' perceptions of financial success, failures, and strategic planning. These concepts frequently promote the acceptance of one's financial situation, which can

facilitate a sense of tranquility and diminish anxiety around money accumulation.

However, they may also be used to justify economic inequalities or discourage proactive economic planning, creating a tension between personal religious beliefs and the state's secular economic policies that emphasize individual initiative and growth.

These religious concepts collectively influence economic behaviors, attitudes toward risk, entrepreneurship, and even policymaking. They can foster contentment and social solidarity through charitable obligations like zakat but may also justify economic inequality or discourage forward-looking financial planning. As a result, Egypt's economy operates at the intersection of religious values and secular policies, where religious attitudes influence both public perception and individual economic decisions, despite the formal adoption of secular, market-based approaches.

It is important to notice the inherent tensions between Egypt's religiously influenced socioeconomic attitudes and its secular economic models. While the formal economy embraces liberalization, privatization, and foreign investment, religious values continue to shape economic behavior at the grassroots level, as well as how people engage to work. These tensions influence economic growth strategies, foreign investment, and development policies, as they create differing expectations between the public's religiously informed economic views and the state's secular economic goals.

The coexistence of religious and secular economic approaches in Egypt presents both challenges and opportunities for socioeconomic development and political stability. The impact of deeply ingrained religious economic principles extends beyond financial systems, influencing social structures, gender roles, and individual economic behaviors. This dynamic interplay between religious and nonreligious ideologies shapes not only Egypt's economic policies but also its broader sociopolitical trajectory.

5. Social Implications of Negotiated Secularism in Egypt

Since the 2011 revolution, secularization in Egypt has impacted more than just politics—it has influenced the country's social landscape as well. However, this process is better understood as negotiated secularism, where secular ideals and religious traditions

constantly interact. Secularism in Egypt isn't a simple, straightforward process. Instead, it's constantly influenced by the ongoing negotiation with deeply rooted religious traditions.

This section looks at how this dynamic affects three key areas: women's rights and gender equality, the status of religious minorities and secular individuals, and the impact of secularization on Egypt's arts, media, and popular culture. The research of these subjects should help to bring out how religious traditions and secular reforms are constantly moving in their balance as part of changing dimensions in the social fabric of Egypt.

5.1. Consequences for Women's Rights and Gender Equality

With deep Islamic roots and a great deal of historical significance, Egypt is an ancient country that balances its modernity with cultural heritage, extended even into the issues of women's rights and gender parity. In brief, women's status and roles reflect the dynamic interaction of secular reforms and religious traditions at present, with changes in their roles and rights pulled by both forces.

Historical Context and Recent Development

In Egypt, during the last decades, significant changes in women's rights and roles came into being impelled by the following key factors:

- (i) Higher-quality education enables them to involve themselves better in the labor market as well as in public life.
- (ii) Economic pressures: Financial needs have shoved many women into the job market, thus breaking down traditional roles of gender.
- (iii) Global influences: International exposure to the women's rights movement created more demands towards global norms for equality.
- (iv) Movements of enlightenment: So-called liberal and secular groups mobilized women against religious or conservative cultural constrictions.

Yet such developments are often at variance with traditional cultural and religious belief systems on gender roles. The result has been such a diversity in the experiences of

women, based on social class, rural/urban settings, as well as family backgrounds. This is a function of negotiated secularism pulling in two different directions: progressive elements wish to transform while cultural and religious tradition oppose such a metamorphosis.

Regulatory Framework

Differences in women's rights are thus the product of several combined sources: secular law, constitutional mandate, and international agreement, each arrayed against personal status laws, drawn from religious tradition, and thus opportunities and challenges for advancing gender equality.

(a) Constitutional Clauses:

(a-1) Equality Commitment: The 2014 Constitution of Egypt was promising gender equality—a big catch for proponents of secular reforms.

(a-2) Protection and Empowerment: it protects and empowers women based on international standards for human rights.

(a-3) Leadership Opportunities: The Constitution guarantees that women have equal rights to hold public office and other leadership opportunities as a step toward gender equality.

(b) International Commitments

(b-1) International Treaties: Egypt has signed key international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a manifestation of belief in secular legal principles.

(b-2) Reservations: Notwithstanding, Egypt showed concern for some of the provisions of CEDAW that conflicted with the Islamic Sharia on questions of personal status law. This is indicative of tension between global standards and local religious tradition.

(c) International Liabilities

(c-1) International Treaties: the Egyptian government has signed a number of significant international conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women - CEDAW, revealing partial adherence to secular legal principles.

(c-2) Observations: Though Egypt signed onto the CEDAW, it did raise concerns regarding those provisions which are opposed by the Islamic Sharia, specifically with respect to personal status law. Again, here is the eternal fight existing between the global norm and the religion practiced in the locality.

(d) Legislation of Personal Status

(d-1) Religious Foundations: Personal status laws, relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance amongst others, find significant underpinning in Islamic jurisprudence. More often, these latter do tend to favor men over women in respect to specific advantages in the case of divorce and polygamy.

(d-2) Opposition to Reform: Efforts to reform these laws frequently face opposition, not only from conservative religious groups but also from some women who view these regulations as divinely ordained.

This situation reflects Egypt's ongoing balancing act between secular reforms and religious traditions, both of which continue to have a strong influence on its legal system.

Implementation Challenges

Even though Egypt's constitution and international commitments offer legal protections for women's rights, the actual enforcement of these laws is often inconsistent. Cultural attitudes and traditional practices, especially in rural areas, frequently overshadow legal provisions, limiting women's access to justice and equality.

This contradiction highlights one of the defining characteristics of negotiated secularism, in which the gap between legal reform and actual practice discloses a deep-seated tension between the pull toward gender equality and the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes often legitimized by religious tradition.

Recent Legislative Reforms:

The Egyptian government in recent years has worked to increase protections for

women, a movement toward a more inclusive conception of women's rights within negotiated secularism. Some key reforms include the following:

(i) Criminalization of Sexual Harassment 2014: With new laws, there is an attempt to tackle gender-based violence, which is a common fate that women suffer in both the private and public sphere.

(ii) Criminalization of female genital mutilation (FGM): Until recently, the ban on FGM in Egypt had been an incremental one. Initiated first by the 2008 Ministerial Decree that barred medical professionals from performing the practice in hospitals and clinics, Law No. 126 of 2008 was another amendment to the Child Law in criminalizing the practice.

In 2016, the penalty under Law No. 78 was toughened to raise prison sentences to 5–7 years—or up to 15 years if the procedure caused death or permanent disability. The latest reform came with Law No. 10 of 2021, which closed all loopholes in the law and made criminals not only those who perform FGM but also those who request it. These gains at the legislative level notwithstanding, FGM remains common in those rural areas where deep-rooted cultural beliefs still hold sway—a fact that underlines ongoing challenges in enforcement.

(iii) Inheritance Laws Amendments and Ongoing Activism 2017–Present: Law No. 219 of the year 2017 imposed more severe punishment for anyone withholding a woman's rightful inheritance—a step closer to imposing harsher enforcement measures on women's legal entitlements. Yet, many women give up their “inherited” rights—that is, “tanazul”—and this is due to severe social and cultural influences, particularly in rural areas. The current inheritance laws, informed by Islamic Sharia interpretations, allocate female heirs half the share of their male counterparts. Activists, along with progressive religious scholars, are demanding further reforms in the form of equal inheritance, reinterpretation supportive of gender equality, and more mechanisms for enforcement. These, though, have strong opposition from conservative religious figures and parts of society who consider the current laws divinely ordained.

These reforms signify the negotiation between the secular and the religious, which is not yet complete, with the former gradually but relentlessly expanding women's rights despite resistance from more conservative circles. However, the diversity within Egypt—

from urban progressives to rural traditionalists and from religious conservatives to secular liberals—makes it very difficult to apply such reforms to satisfy everybody. It also reflects the hurdle of enacting nationwide legal reforms, whereby attempts at modernization are often pitted against deeply entrenched cultural and religious traditions. Thus, this is very far from equating to a path of gender equality in Egypt.

It is a convoluted process formed through the diverse social typography of the country. Negotiated secularism, as described by the complex nature of the legal framework concerning women's rights, has constitutional and legal provisions that are supposed to grant protection but are often burdened in its actual practice by religious interpretations, especially in personal status laws. After all, success will depend on how any gap between formal legal equality and deep-seated cultural and religious norms shaping women's everyday experiences will be bridged.

5.2. Religious Minorities, Secularism and Secular People in Egypt

Overall, the struggles of religious minorities and secular persons are particular and specific to the greater dynamics at play in negotiated secularism in Egypt. Firmly enshrined in the constitution, the robust presence of Islam in legal, social, and political life institutes a complex framework within which these groups will have to weigh the scales against discriminatory attitudes among society for constitutional protection.

Legal Framework and Constitutional Ambiguity

Article 64 of the 2014 Egyptian constitution provides for an absolute right to freedom of belief, continuing past constitutional protection for religious freedom. Yet the same legal framework now enshrines an officially more restrictive environment than the 1923 constitution, recognizing only three religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

In practice, that freedom is circumscribed, which places religious minorities such as the Baha'i community and atheists in a state of legal liminality. The requirement placed by the state to indicate religious identity on national ID cards further marginalizes these groups. It is this legal framework that has become one of the important sites of negotiated

secularism: while secular principles reach for expanded freedom of religion, social norms and religious hegemony constrain it.

Social Discrimination and Sectarian Tensions

Religious minorities, above all Coptic Christians, have long faced social discrimination and episodic sectarian violence. A wave of high-profile attacks portrayed Christian communities as defenseless, highlighting the discrimination they face in employment, education, or political life.

Questionably accurate statistics on the Coptic Christian population are indicative of some of the complexities in negotiated secularism in Egypt. While state figures put Copts at roughly 5–6% of the population, sources from within the Christian community cited a figure as high as 15–20%. Statistical ambiguity merges with both the legal and social challenges faced by religious minorities to offer weighty stumbling blocks towards ensuring fair representation and protection.

On the other hand, atheists and secular people face added challenges, since they are often viewed as social deviants. Another important characteristic of negotiated secularism in Egypt is using the blasphemy laws to silence voices from the secular and atheist communities.

The case of Egypt's Baha'i community epitomizes these struggles. Back in 2009, the Supreme Administrative Court granted Baha'is the right to take identification documents without declaring one of the recognized religions. Its implementation has been spotty.

Malaysia and Indonesia: A Comparative Perspective

As in any other country with a majority Muslim population, Egypt's treatment of religious minorities warrants explanation. Malaysia, to cite an example, only officially recognizes certain religions but assumes a more institutionalized approach: it holds separate Shari'a courts for Muslims and secular courts for non-Muslims. The result is that such a dual system provides space for clear demarcation between religious and civil law—a more rigid boundary, for sure, between secular governance and religious jurisprudence. But it also symbolizes the segregation of citizens according to their religious identity,

thereby widening the divide in society.

Indonesia, by contrast, legally recognizes six religions and bases its philosophy on Pancasila, a doctrine that espouses pluralist values as one of the tenets of the country's identity. Yet, Indonesia is still viewed as struggling with serious challenges in realizing the rights of religious minorities and non-believers as constitutional guarantees clash with social practices relegating some groups to second-class status.

While Malaysia's institutionalized legal separation and Indonesia's formal pluralism present different models, Egypt's version of negotiated secularism is unique in that religious influence permeates a broader array of public and legal domains, particularly through personal status laws, which apply differently to citizens depending on their religion. These comparisons highlight that while Egypt's challenges are not unique, its specific form of negotiated secularism—where the boundaries between secular and religious law are less formalized—produces distinct outcomes in the treatment of religious minorities and secular individuals.

Some key considerations for reforms that might better protect religious minorities in Egypt and engender a more inclusive society would be:

- (A) Removing religious identification from national ID cards to avoid discrimination and assure a totally neutral public administration.
 - (B) Establishment of one civil legal code that guarantees equal rights and equal justice for all citizens, regardless of one's religious background or preference.
 - (C) Secularizing the public sphere through neutrality in public institutions and the inclusion of secular values in education and policy.
 - (D) Strengthening antidiscrimination legislation with mechanisms for enforcement and provide an independent supervisory mechanism against abuses of religious freedom.
- Interfaith dialogues, learning with respect, understanding across the board by different religiously affiliated persons.
- (F) Quota systems or advisory bodies would allow the minorities to have actual, rather than symbolic, political representation.
 - (G) Enrichment of media and cultural representations of religious minorities to improve public perception and eliminate stereotypes.

Implementation Strategies

While these reforms may not sit well with conservative groups, they are fundamental in laying a platform for an inclusive Egypt. The implementation could be gradual: less controversial steps can first be taken to garner more public support before the more significant changes.

These changes would address the legal and social inequality issues hounding religious minorities and thus would help shape national citizenship rather than allegiances based on religion. It is only at a time when ecumenical and religiously diverse religious pluralism, together with social harmony within an increasingly ecumenical public sphere that is secular and inclusive, would see overall social stability, that economic development, and international standing as progressive leadership within the region find significant enhancement.

5.3 Arts, Media, and Popular Culture:

Mirrors of Egypt's Negotiated Secularism

The major domains in Egypt where the negotiation between religious and secular values are continually acted out must be arts, media, and popular culture. These cultural products, especially film and television, refract but at the same time actively construct societal understandings of secularism and religious tradition. Key developments in Egyptian cinema and media through the decades bring out the fact that such forms of expression have mediated complex balances between secular modernization and deeply engrained religious values.

Historical Background and Recent Developments

The early to mid-20th century is an important period in Egyptian media; a medium - cinema - of progressive portrayals of gender roles was expressive of Egypt's modernization effort. During this period, the roles of women in public life changed significantly, epitomizing a secularist aspiration for equality between the sexes. Take for example film artists Aziza Amir and Bahiga Hafez, who challenged traditional female status and propagated the character of women as an active contributor in society. Films such as

Fatma, the Lawyer, 1954, fully advocated secular ideals in depicting women in professional life and underlined their agency and competence in public-private life. Stories abound depicting a broader social movement for a secular modernization within Egypt's post-colonial period.

The 1952 revolution magnified these trends, as cinema became a tool of the state's modernizing project. Films like *Wife Number 13* (1962) attacked social practices such as polygamy and reflected a worldly questioning of religious mores. Such films enacted religiously sanctified habits through humor and narrative subversion by foregrounding their social effects without questioning the authority of Islam. Cinema was, thus, the site where secular and religious values were being negotiated at this time: filmmakers had to walk a tightrope between critique and tradition as they pleaded for gradual reform in society.

Case Study: Islamic Revival and Renegotiation of Secular Space

But well into the late 1970s and even 1980s, the rise of the Islamic revival saw a sea change in Egyptian society. It is at this point that religious conservatism is picked up afresh with increasing interest and influence within public discourse and in portrayals through the media. Progressive messages of women's liberation framing preceded the more conservative portrayals of the ongoing renegotiation of secular and religious spaces in Egypt.

One popular example of such a shift is the film *Timour and Shafika* (2007) that reflects shifting cultural attitudes in response to the resurgence of traditional religious awareness. In sharp contrast to their predecessors in portraying career women, *Timour and Shafika* tells a different story. While Shafika's political career as a minister smashes traditional gender stereotypes, her personal relationship with Timour—her bodyguard—reinstates patriarchy as Timour's conservative attitudes clash with Shafika's ambitions. The denouement, which consists of Shafika renouncing a career for domestic peace, underlines how conservative religiosity has undermined secular modernity.

This is to say, even the so-called narratives of women's empowerment may be bound by traditional expectations of gender—a certain model of negotiated secularity in post-revival

Egypt. On the other hand, with such a progressive-minded woman but nonetheless seeing the eventual compromise in *Timour and Shafika*, one sees resilience toward the patricentric imagination and subtle servings toward examples of tension between the modern secular imagination and traditionalist religiosity in this work. Negotiated secularism falters, in fact, on this very duality of progress and tradition self-consciously reconstituting one another within the relevant cultural space.

Media as the Reflection of National Identity

This transformation of Egyptian cinema represents a trend in which the woman's question was a test to the nation's secular-religious equation. Films such as *Fatma, the Lawyer*, and *Wife Number 13*, through woman's rights and her liberated status, acted as barometers of Egypt's secular modernity in the mid-20th century. However, by the beginning of the 2000s, that had been translated into more media showing how one negotiates progress with tradition, as in *Timour and Shafika*. From career-building professionals to women who are negotiated through imposed compromised ambitions, how women are represented represents a shift in which secularism and religious tradition are going to be weighed in their manifold ways in society.

Moreover, cinema not only reflects such social changes but negotiates them. Films like *Wife Number 13* (1962) accomplished the task of critiquing religious practices through humor without disrespecting cultural mores, showing how media can at the same time function as a site of critique and an agent of social change. At the heart of negotiated secularism in Egypt is the balancing between critique and tradition within a context involving careful media practices within the limits set by religious and secular discourses for everyday experiences.

The Contemporary Landscape: The Media's Role in Legal and Social Reform

In recent years, Egyptian media has increasingly addressed social issues related to religious practices, with a particular focus on women's rights.

A very nice example is the series in 2021 entitled *Le'bet Newton*, where the implementation of oral divorce in Egyptian society is critically analyzed. The series

outlines in detail the legal and social convolutions this practice brings about in women, showing how easy it has been to pronounce divorces to create a long legal and family complication. By framing oral divorce as a social problem, rather than as a form of religious critique, the serial advocates practical legal reform without religious confrontation. This is a new stage in negotiated secularism in Egypt whereby media can call for reformist pressures by highlighting social implications of religious practice to render them publicly discussable, hence raising public awareness about the need for reform.

Consider how media functions to fire up public debates over legal reform through reception according to *Le'bet Newton*. The debate about oral divorce stirred up by the series has become a heated debate throughout Egypt, underlining mounting pressures for legal reform. It gives evidence, certainly, that the media continues to have great power in contested arenas between religious traditions and their secular legal systems to influence popular opinion toward desires for reform. In this respect, media is the site of negotiation of the secularism of Egypt, rather than a reflection of it, as it stretches the limits of tolerance in accepting discourse about sensitive topics.

Media as Cultural Negotiator in Negotiated Secularism

Egyptian media are peculiarly cultural mediators between tradition and modernity. By portraying social ills through film, serials, and other modes of cultural creation, media do not only manifest the tension present in society; they also create a grassroots public discourse from the top down, influencing the most recent legislative reforms. Media can very well be thought of as a “broker” within the larger context of negotiated secularism: framing social problems may make public opinion change toward reforming areas where secular and religious values have been in conflict.

One noted example is the 1975 film *Uridu Hallan* (I Want a Solution), which exposed the sufferings of women in Egypt’s divorce system. “The wide appeal the film enjoyed and the public discussion it created led to reforms in the divorce laws to make the process more sensitive to women’s rights.” Another film, *678*, released in 2010, which dealt with the endemic problem of sexual harassment, made the issue the most discussed topic in

public debate. This created awareness, public pressure was built, and soon it became a generally invoked use of law to criminalize sexual harassment — a real means by which the media can effect social change.

Socially sensitive issues also became involved with TV series. Drama series *W Leh La* (Part 2) (2021) translated as *Why Not?* The debate over women's rights to sponsor guardianship was brought up and when single women were able to sponsor guardianship through the change in the law, it had been a change in public opinion both when the series had aired and evidenced the proactive role of media regarding negotiations of societal norms and at pushing for legal reform. These examples underscore the proactive role media plays in shaping public discourse and influencing the legal framework within Egypt's negotiated secularism. Film and television can evoke powerful narrations of issues that touch at or near the core of great social concern, thereby joining traditional values with the liberal instincts of secular modernity in giving popular voice to reforms which might otherwise meet strong resistance. The media here, therefore, create more of a dynamic force in negotiating the change within the socio-legal landscape of evolving Egypt, rather than any manifestation of societal tensions themselves.

Ultimately, media's influence tips them into a very critical position within Egypt's negotiated secularism: as a mirror reflecting societal struggles, a catalyst for legal reform, and cultural reform. Media will continue to remain, until further notice, one of the solid tools in molding not only public perception of this changing status but also the direction of social change amidst an increasingly complex interaction between secularization and religious tradition facing Egypt.

6. Conclusion

True secularity in Egypt represents an extremely complicated and sometimes paradoxical interrelation with religious tradition and efforts of modernization. From the very outset of its attempts at secularization within the rule of Muhammad Ali to the current struggle under the government of President El-Sisi, Egypt has been wrangling with how to balance its Islamic heritage with the needs and requirements of a modern

state. Several important observations come from our analysis:

1. **Incomplete Secularization:** Egypt is far from being completely secularized, and that for several reasons. Most importantly, grassroots resistance to the very idea has been aroused by decades of defamation of secularism by religious authorities who succeeded in portraying secularism as hostile to religious values, arousing mistrust in the hearts of a large stratum of Egyptians.
2. **Entrenched Interests of Religious Authorities:** Religious institutions and religious leaders do not want to compromise their authority and the mobilization capabilities. They received much respect and influence in society, at times even more than state authorities. It is this gained and matured strength that acts as an obstacle to any secularizing policy or behavior.
3. **Shifting Social Tides:** Religious laws and prescriptions, often anchored in traditional concepts, are increasingly coming into conflict with contemporary socio-economic realities. For example, more than 30 percent of breadwinners in Egypt are women, while the contrary premise of a male as a sole breadwinner gives the basis to many religious laws.
4. **Continuing Gender Inequalities:** Even though the economic roles of women are growing day by day, the rigid inheritance laws of most societies persist with the traditional trend of inequality between men and women.
5. **Plight of Minorities:** Religious minorities in Egypt, along with unbelievers, face discrimination and persecution at every turn, testifying to what is lacking in Egypt's intentions of secularity.

Proceeding further, there are a few prospects which a secular state will bring about for Egypt:

1. **Protection of Civil Rights and Minorities:** With regard to the protection of civil rights and minorities, secularism would protect religious minorities and atheists a lot better, opening the path to really building an equal and just society.

The Sociopolitical Implications of Secularism in Egypt

2. Status of Women: Greater secularization may perhaps be necessary to overcome the persistent inequalities between the sexes, most especially on matters which the interpretation of Islamic law regulates, such as inheritance.
3. Solution to Social Problems: Secularism cures certain present societal evils founded on misinterpretations of traditional religion regarding such issues as oral divorce, polygamy, and unequal inheritance laws, which invariably have been against women.
4. Economic Independence: Thereby availing better facilities for inheritance laws will improve their economic condition, which in turn would reduce, to a large extent, their dependence on society for support.
5. Cultural Development: Secularism would mean freer expressions in arts and media, making them even more diversified and vibrant.
6. International Relations: With a more worldly view, Egypt may gradually become better prepared internationally, thus being able to join the ranks today's contemporary peers from around the world.

Realizing these gains and furthering secularism in Egypt will be aided by certain key steps taken:

1. Reshaping Secularism: There is a dire need to present the right concept of secularism and its benefits to all citizens. This also includes correcting the misunderstanding of secularism as atheism or suppression of religious practice. Education should emphasize that it is for the protection of religious freedom, including those of Muslim minorities in a secular country.
2. As will easily be shown by historical precedence, though the Islamic Golden Age-from roughly the 8th to the 13th century-was not, strictly speaking, secular, it did generate intellectual freedom and tolerance which greatly benefited learning, the arts, and the sciences:
 - (i) Religious Tolerance and Intellectual Pluralism: The Abbassid Caliphat, and especially the City of Bagdad, fostered an intellectual climate where scholars coming from different

religious backgrounds collaborated. A famous example is that of the House of Wisdom Bayt al-Hikma, promoting translations and interpretations of other traditions. The openness to other traditions cultivated a pluralistic intellectual atmosphere established in (Gutas, 1998).

(ii) Freedom of Thought and Science: Intellectual works of philosophers and scientists like Ibn Sina, Al-Farabi, and Al-Razi questioned or elaborated on religious dogma. Indeed their contributions to mathematics, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and physics do reflect a kind of freedom from tight control by the religiously orthodox. Similarly, contributions to mathematics like Al-Khwarizmi in algebra and Al-Biruni in several sciences epitomize the limits of freedom from religious doctrine (Nasr, 1968; Freely, 2009).

(iii) Intellectual Sponsors: Rulers, such as Al-Ma'mun, who sponsored the spread of rationalist schools of thought and patronized sciences other than religion. A patronage which sponsored debates and scientific achievements and recognized the pragmatic value of the developments in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine (Watt 1973; Saliba 2007).

(iv) Metropolises such as Baghdad, Cordoba, and Cairo became vectors of a specific cultural and intellectual exchange. In the case of Al-Andalus for example, "scholars from several religions working together produced knowledge that streamed on into both the Islamic world and Europe proper" (Menocal, 2002).

While they did not equate to modern secularism, these elements of intellectual openness and religious tolerance are important in the development of Islamic civilization. What this historical example would suggest is that the principles of secularism may be in tune with Islamic heritage and perhaps usefully inform contemporary discourses on secular governance for Muslim societies.

3. Legal Reforms and the Civil Approach: Legal frameworks should be so reformed as to guarantee complete equality of rights and responsibilities between men and women, as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. Such reforms are essentially of a civil character.

For instance, inheritance laws should be updated to reflect women's growing societal

roles and economic contributions, ensuring justice and fairness for all citizens. By grounding laws in civil principles, the legal system can remain flexible and responsive to evolving societal needs, promoting equal treatment and inclusion for all, regardless of gender or religion.

4. Educational Reform: All this requires comprehensive educational reform in a direction that encourages critical thinking, religious tolerance, and a balance in the belief system. A more workable solution could be to introduce comparative religion courses in schools teaching Islam, Christianity, and other great world religions with the purpose of bringing respect for religious diversity. This would ensure that the contributions of all cultures and religions towards civilization are considered while rewriting the curricula in history and social studies and thus lead to mutual respect and reduction of sectarian prejudices. Problem-solving and debates that will develop in students the processes of questioning and analyzing and not passively absorbing information will also have to include critical thinking.

5. Cultural Shift: Free discussions and debates on religious issues, especially via mass media and performing arts, make diversities normal and change conservative attitudes. This may be accomplished in television and film through debates or discussions on religions and their various opinions, or even through characters of different religious backgrounds, to stir a debate in the public and increase tolerance. Moreover, public discussions and displays of art on religious pluralism might constructively make people aware of sensitive issues such as the concept of gender roles and religious freedom. Such cultural platforms can be highly instrumental in bringing a change of mindset in society to be more accepting of diversity.

6. Grassroots Alignment with State Authority: Promotion and organization should be put in place so that the general will is aligned with the secularizing projects of the state through continuous civic education and free public debates. For example, awareness in schools and at universities could acquaint the masses with the importance of secular

governance, equality before the law, and protection of individual freedoms. Moreover, the community outreach programs involving religious leaders, civil society, and the media would bring a better sense of how to marry secular precepts with religious values. It is such efforts that form a core in building a broad base of public understanding and acceptance of reforms that are inclusive and pluralistic.

Secularism brings a set of profound and extremely far-reaching implications to Egypt. When it comes to national identity, governance structures, and societal cohesion, Egypt is still struggling to work its way through the divide between religious tradition and secular modernity. Resistance from both an entrenched religious authority and grass-roots resistance has been very strong; there is considerable potential gain in moving toward a secular society.

Sustained progress can thus be achieved only by devising a distinctively Egyptian form of secularism, one which respects the country's religious heritage while embracing the principles of equal citizenship, human rights, and modern governance. In any case, it is more likely to be gradual and nonlinear, presupposing continuous effort, dialogue, and readiness to challenge cherished beliefs about the role of religion in public life.

By recognizing the misconceptions of secularism, representing its historical forerunners in Islamic civilization, and showing how it might serve the interests of all citizens, Egypt is able to assure for itself an inclusive, fair, and prosperous future. As it seeks to find the right path, it needs to balance respect for its religious heritage with acceptance of needed adjustments in a modern pluralistic society. If these multi-dimensional issues are addressed with care, Egypt can emerge as an enviable example of secularism for the rest of the nation's grappling with the same menace in the region and at large.

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