



Secular or Islamic State: Where Does Egypt's Military Government Stand?

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The battle is already raging in Egypt between those who advocate a secular State governed by secular laws and those who are in favor of a government that would apply laws in full compliance with Islamic *shari'a*. In that respect, the appointment of *Tariq Al-Bishri* to head the commission charged with amending the Egyptian constitution is deeply disturbing to the secular group on two fronts. His views advocating a religious state governed by Islamic jurisprudence are well documented. Similarly, and even more disturbing, the appointment itself sends an alarming message about the tendency of the Egyptian Military Council to shape the debate in favor of those advocating an Islamic State. *PI Online* examines the views of Judge *Al-Bishri* through his own writings and interviews during the past three years.



Tariq Al-Bishri, the grandson of Sheikh *Selim Al-Bishri* who once was the head of *Al Azhar*,¹ totally rejects secularism, as he emphatically stated: “*I consider secularism to be void and anti-Islamic.*”² More recently in another TV interview published on Facebook, he stated: “*We have to reestablish the Sharia laws again as an important part for governing*”³.

For *Al-Bishri*, Islam is an encompassing source connecting the lines between its prevailing values and the country's organizational structures and systems, including individual rights and obligations. *Al-Bishri* also sees a multi-party system, which he considers it to be a Western development, as only operating within that Islamic structure. He even questions the present geographical borders of countries in the Middle East as imposed by the West without the religious or ethnic cohesiveness of the citizens in these countries. For him,

¹ Sheikh *Selim Al-Bishri*, head of *Al-Azhar* from 1900 to 1904 and 1909 to 1916 was considered to belong to the Malaki version of Islam. He is also respected and liked by those belonging to the *shi'a* sect and some believe that he had become a *shi'a* towards the end of his life.

² <http://www.islammemo.cc/Tahkikat/hewarat/2007/04/02/39062.html>

³ <http://www.facebook.com/islamic.egypt#!/video/video.php?v=10150387779805237&oid=189707794384557&comments>

therefore, national identity in the Middle East is a false basis for belonging. *Al-Bishri's* entire philosophical argument tends to go back to one central issue: the importance of an Islamic *Ummah* in shaping all aspects of society and as the foundation for the existence of the State⁴.

Al-Bishri has also been critical of the Christian Church in Egypt. In his latest book published this month, "The State and the Church", he asks if the Church does not operate outside the law when it refuses to comply with court orders. While there is room to criticize the Coptic Church if all laws were secular,⁵ the situation is quite different if Islam is the law of the land as he proposes, that would be tantamount to saying there can be no Christian church within the law.⁶

Al-Bishri is also vehemently anti-American and has often blamed the United States for practically all of Egypt's problems. He states: "*American hegemony is responsible for destroying Egypt, the state, its administration and its people... the Americans were successful in displacing Egypt and establishing Israel as the main and only player which counts in the Middle East... any internal reform must be accompanied by freeing ourselves from American hegemony.*"⁷

Al-Bishri is also known for this statement, which adorns the preface of one of his books: "*Any Islamo-Secular dialogue is fruitless*". According to him, the fundamentals of Islamic and secular ideologies are irreconcilable.⁸

It is perplexing that such a personality, who does not represent the secularists who started the movement in *Tahrir* Square, should be assigned a lead role in revising the constitution to bring greater democracy to Egypt. One cannot help but wonder – what signal his selection was intended to send to the world, or to radical elements within Egypt?

One possible signal to Islamists can be heard on their sites. For example, one commentator on an Islamic site said: "Let's keep this appointment under raps until *Al-Bishri* does his job."

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⁴ On Islam July 30th, 2010 <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/madarik/politics/90013-2010-07-30-144653.html>

⁵ The Coptic Church in Egypt has been adamant that civil laws concerning marriage and divorce of the Copts fall within its realm and is not governed by the State, and the government had given the Coptic Pope, *Shenoudah*, unparalleled control over his flock with the understanding he would keep them in line and pro-government. Thousands of Christians however participated in the uprising despite the fact that *Shenoudah* incited the Copts to refrain from demonstrating.

⁶ Al Shourouk January 21st, 2011 - <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?ID=380234>

⁷ Al-Shorouk – February 26th, 2010 - <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=186372>

⁸ <http://rewayat2.com/vb/showthread.php?t=23363>