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Regulating religious authority for political gains: al-Sisi's manipulation of al-Azhar in Egypt

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Abstract

The shedding of blood is a serious matter in Islamic law; disregard for human life negates the very essence of just rule. By standing by General al-Sisi as he suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, the popular legitimacy of al-Azhar—the oldest seat of Islamic learning—was called into question. This article shows how the al-Sisi government skilfully deployed the two other state-controlled religious establishments, the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and Dar-ul-Ifta, to boost al-Azhar's popular legitimacy in this context. Existing scholarship highlights the importance of competition within the Egyptian religious sphere to explain how the Egyptian state co-opts the al-Azhari official establishment. This article instead shows how the state, equally skilfully, uses state institutions to boost al-Azhar's popular legitimacy—albeit to ensure that it remains useful for the purposes of political legitimisation. Political authority and religious authority in Egypt thus remain closely entangled.