

## **Chapter 4**

# **Questioning Secular Modernity: The Political Visions of Islamic Intellectuals in Egypt and their Quest for the Civil Society**

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### **1. Introduction**

After its defeat in the June/Six-day war in 1967, Egypt witnessed a drastic change in its intellectual landscape. In the process of examining the roots of the Arab's defeat by Israel, some intellectuals abandoned the socialism they had espoused. The theme of the relationship between the religion, society, and politics has been a heated point of contention since then.

Coupled with this point, today, the need for a reformist interpretation of Islam has been advocated by different actors: by religious bodies, by independent scholars, or by some governments. In the Egyptian context, such a trend became visible after the Nasserist era. Not limited to the religious or intellectual circle, the discourse of moderate Islam gained its influence in the political discourses in the Egyptian public sphere. Through the articulation of the idea concerning contemporary religious issues, the intellectuals espousing this idea tackled problems such as social inclusion, national unity, and democracy.

### **2. The Emergence of the Moderate Islamic Trend as a Visible Tide: The Compilation of *the Contemporary Islamic Vision***

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In the early 1980s, Kamal Abu al-Majd, a constitutional lawyer, compiled a booklet entitled *Toward a New Islamic Trend*. The booklet was secretly circulated among about 150 Islamic intellectuals and edited in collaboration with some of them at that time, and then published formally in 1991, nearly 10 years after its compilation, under the new title, *the Contemporary Islamic Vision: Declaration of Principles*. This booklet gave political, social, and economic visions from the Islamic perspective which these intellectuals concurred with.

In the preface of the booklet, Abu al-Majd pointed out the failure of two major currents that had failed in the Arab world: First, liberal capitalism, which had caused economic injustice, disparities, social unrest, and second socialism, which suppressed many people and movements in order to achieve the revolution (Abu al-Majd, 1992, 37–40). Instead, he shed light on the growth of “the Islamic tide” those days and located it as an alternative to the two ideologies.

As the motive for compiling the booklet, he finds three elements: First, the need to criticize the ambiguous slogan of an “Islamic solution,” which many Islamists chanted at that time (Abu al-Majd, 1992, 24–25). Clearly, it refers to the famous slogan used by the Muslim Brotherhood when it entered parliamentary elections in the 1980s. Second, the sense of crisis toward the rise of radical thought, which attempted to separate itself from “the general current in human history.” Third, the spread of misunderstandings against Arabs and Muslims due to some Islamist movements raising the banner of Islam from the inappropriate political and social standpoints (Abu al-Majd, 1992, 25–30). Abu al-Majd pointed out that a “tide of anger” that ignored the social reality and paralyzed young people was growing in the society. Nevertheless, at the same time, he argued that the intellectual current that correctly understood the purpose of Islam was steadily gaining followers in the streets of the Arab and Islamic world day by day, and named it as the “moderate Islamic

trend (*tayyār al-waṣāṭiyya al-Islāmiyya*)” (Abu al-Majd, 1992, 27).

For examples of the visions shown in the booklet, it stipulated the political principles from the Islamic perspective as follows: (1) the principle of Shura (consultation) concerning social issues; (2) accountability of the rulers; (3) the rule of law binding all powers, which is derived from the Islamic sources; and (4) respect for the rights and freedoms of the people. Abu al-Majd’s writing not only contained Islamic tones but an aspiration for political freedom. The description of “the rule of law derived from Islamic sources” appears to be an appeal for the restraint of power rather than the enforcement of Islamic law.

The scholars and intellectuals of the moderate Islamic trend clearly recognize themselves as the inheritors of the reformist movement in the early twentieth century, represented by prominent scholars like Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida. Although nationalism and socialism became prevalent in the mid-twentieth century, some scholars and activists continued to seek the reform of Islamic thought. For example: Muhammad al-Ghazali, who later strengthened his reformist attitude in his later years, Hasan al-Hudaybi, the second supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, who had more progressive view in comparison with al-Banna in some issues and was against the idea of *takfīr* (accusing other Muslims of being infidels). Fathi Osman, who left the Brotherhood in the mid-1950s, showed a progressive view on women’s political and economic freedom in the early 1960s. Jamal al-Din ‘Atiyya launched an academic magazine entitled with *the Contemporary Muslim Magazine* (*Majallat al-Muslim al-Mu‘asir*), as soon as the restriction on the Muslim Brotherhood got loosened and called for the *Ijtihād* in contemporary issues. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who moved to Qatar in the 1960s, became a vocal voice of the moderate Islam and made the slogan of the moderatism (*al-waṣāṭiyya*) renowned, relying on the method summarized as *tawāzun* (balance), *i’tidāl* (moderation),

*jam'* (unison), *wāqī'iyya* (realism), and *maydāniyya* (pragmatism) (Krämer, 2006, 198). And then, the intellectuals gradually came to the fore as a visible intellectual trend from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, under the expansion of the religious violence.

### **3. The Moderate Islamic Trend and the Egyptian Political Development in the Last Decades**

The moderate Islamic trend itself is composed of intellectuals, academics, and political activists from different backgrounds; some of them enjoyed a traditional religious education, some were from a nationalist background, some belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, and so on. They just form a loose platform and do not necessarily agree with the others on social matters or religious interpretations.

What is important is, although this trend connotes Islamists, it also contains a critical perspective to the conservative and ambiguous aspect of the Islamist ideologies, going beyond merely chanting “moderate Islamic understanding.” The scholars and intellectuals of this intellectual trend contributed to the maturing of some significant political concepts such as “citizenship” or “civil state.”



Figure 1. Salim al-'Awwa  
Source: Author



Figure 2. Tariq al-Bishri

Source: Author

Over the last decade, I have been focusing on two intellectuals from the camp of the moderate Islamic trend. Salim al-‘Awwa (1942–), an international attorney, and Tariq al-Bishri (1933–2021), a retired judge, the latter of whom I will focus on later. They are independent intellectuals who have never belonged to a religious body or political organizations. It is worth paying attention to the fact that they both enjoyed a modern secular education and are legal professionals. They do not speak with the language of traditional religious education but with modern vocabularies. Moreover, they maintain the familiarity with both western law and Islamic law through their profession.

Many younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1990s and 2000s were heavily influenced by their ideas. In particular, some members who left the Muslim Brotherhood to launch a political party against the policies of the organization, heavily relied on their ideas when they drafted the party platform. Their party was entitled “the Center Party (Hizb al-Wasat)” from 1996, but its establishment was met with obstacles from the Mubarak regime as well as the Brotherhood. It was finally established after the January 25 revolution.

Then, how did the idea of these intellectuals contribute to the

refinement of the Islamist discourse?

One of their contributions is the idea of equal citizenship (*muwāṭana*). They believe that the state that their society seeks is not a Caliphate but a modern democratic state, based on the equality of all citizens regardless of their religion or biological sex. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was often divided over the availability of a higher position in a state for women and Christians, they have consistently claimed that equal citizenship should be the basis of the democratic state, based on their relatively modernist approach without abandoning their commitment to Islam. Al-‘Awwa has been an advocate of the idea of an Islamic civil state based on democracy and constitutionalism, which does not enact laws contrary to the general principles of Shari‘a. Al-Bishri does not espouse the idea of the Islamization of the state or the overall enactment of Shari‘a. Rather, he pays special attention to the heritage of Islamic sentiment in the Egyptian nation and the influence of the culture of Islamic jurisprudence on the Egyptian legal mind, even though Western law was imported in the modern period. In his words, “Shari‘a exists in our lives.”

At the same time, they and their followers in the Islamist movements cooperated with the intellectuals from the secular liberalist camp and have protested against the authoritarian rule in Egypt. They were involved in the Kefaya movement, a protest movement against the fifth term of Hosni Mubarak. They engaged in dialogue with secular liberalist camp as public intellectuals, monitored elections, worked in collaboration with NGOs, and so on.

The moderate Islamic trend in Egypt has developed into three dimensions: the criticism of the conservative or radical aspect of Islamist ideology, the pursuit of democracy and aspiration for bridging the secularism and Islamism in the nation. In the following part, I will focus on the idea of Tariq al-Bishri and explore such dimensions stated

above in his idea.



Figure 3. Egypt Divided After First Round Referendum Vote  
Source: Getty Images

#### **4. The Case of Tariq al-Bishri: The Search for Cultural Authenticity and Advocacy of the Basic Current**

##### **(1) An Intellectual Career**

Tariq al-Bishri is a retired judge, and one of the most renowned Islamic thinkers in contemporary Egypt. Although he hardly uses the term “*al-wasāṭiyya*” or moderate Islam in his work, he is widely recognized as a representative figure of this trend in Egypt.

Born in 1933, when the influence of the British occupation remained in the society, he developed an interest in the independence of the nation. While he deepened his interest in Western philosophy and the episodes of western history such as the French revolution during his student days, he started to espouse socialism and secularism in the 1950s. He at that time believed that the independence of the nation was to be achieved through economic independence. He recalls himself at this period as “a pure secularist,” although he maintained his familiarity

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with Islamic jurisprudence as a judge in the Egyptian court and felt the blessing (*rizq*) of the God in his reason and heart in his daily life (Kuroda, 2017, 33). In his intellectual career, he was influenced by modernist scholars like ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri and ‘Abd al-Wahhab Khallaf as well as renowned scholars closer to the Islamist trend like Muhammad al-Ghazali.



Figure 4. World War Two North Africa 1940  
Source: Getty Images

However, after the defeat of 1967 war, he started to consider that a nation’s independence should be not only achieved through economic factors, but also through building a national identity concerning its own civilization. Thus, he realized the role of Islam as a fundamental identity in his society. Though he abandoned socialism and secularism, his main interest in national independence has never changed. Such intellectual transformation was a very common phenomenon among the Arab intellectuals at that time. In Egypt, Hasan Hanafi, a philosopher who advocated the “Islamic Left (*al-yaṣār al-Islāmī*),” ‘Adil Husayn, a representative voice of the socialist labor party, and Muhammad ‘Imara are the typical cases of such intellectual transformation.



## **(2) Support for Democracy**

Not only his unique idea of the state-religion relationship which I will explain later but his ardent support for democracy has located him in a distinguished position in the Egyptian society.

His professional background is very unique. While he served as a judge in the Egyptian administrative court until his retirement age, he sometimes issued a judgement against the government's will. In the latter half of 2000s, while the Egyptian government strengthened its authoritarian tendency, the country experienced the emergence of social movements across different actors such as opposition parties and human rights activists. He strengthened his commitment to the protest movements together with the other intellectuals.



Figure 5. Egyptian Voters Go To The Polls

Source: Getty Images

In October 2004, al-Bishri published an article entitled with “I call upon you for civil disobedience (Ad‘ukum ila al-‘isyan)” and criticized the fragmentation of the state function under the Mubarak regime. Some analysts found the partial influence of this article on the formalization

of the Kefaya movement (El-Ghobashy, 2005; Hirschkind, 2012). Although participants of the Kefaya movement unanimously saw him as a potential presidential candidate according to some Egyptian sources, he seems to have refused this proposal (Howeidy, 2005; Shehab, 2005).

Furthermore, he became internationally known in the process of transition after the Arab Uprising. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which was in charge of the transition process after the resignation of Mubarak, appointed him as the head of the committee for the constitutional amendment. His appointment was seen as the result of the Egyptians army's consideration for both the Islamist and secular-liberal camp. While in charge of amending the constitution, he supported the idea of drafting a new constitution after the completion of the democratic transition, which hampered the Egyptian army's intention to maintain its power under the former constitution amended at a minimal level (Suzuki, 2013, 87–88). His remarks and activity during this period can be seen as an attempt to make the democratic transition substantial.

### **(3) Perspective for the Egyptian Modernization and its Political Future**

Al-Bishri describes himself as “a person who advocates the importance of citizenship, who emphasizes the role of political groups with a religious base, and who stands at the intersection of all national currents, especially the Islamic current and the ethno-national current” (al-Bishri, 2012, 41). In such a manner, his idea inherits and integrates the three mainstream ideologies witnessed in the Egyptian nation: Egyptian nationalism, Arab nationalism, and Islamism (Kuroda, 2017, 34).

As an Islamic thinker, he has been seeking the establishment of a political community with cultural authenticity. Unlike typical Islamists, he does not necessarily seem to espouse the idea that “Islam is a religion

and a state” ardently and he has hardly used the term “Islamic state/government” in his writings. Instead, he finds a firm connection between culture, morals, and law in a society. He believes that every society has its own value system and a person should judge what is right and wrong according to it. Such ethical standards formulate the country’s legal culture and give legitimacy to a set of laws to be enforced. Thus, he attaches importance to Islam as a culture inherited in the Egyptian society for centuries (Kuroda, 2019, 8–10).

It is worth noting that his recent political ideas aim at the settlement of the ideological and political conflicts in Egypt. In my personal communication with the Egyptian academics since the revolution, some of them pointed out the polarization of the Egyptian society. Before the revolution, activists and intellectuals with different ideological orientations could collaborate with each other in their resistance to the authoritarian rule. However, after the revolution, since the common goal had been achieved, they became polarized.

In his book in 2008, *Toward a Basic Current for the Community (Nahwa Tayyar Asasi li-l-Umma)*, al-Bishri called for the formation of “a basic current” that devotes itself to the common goals among different social and political forces, based on his reflections on modern Egyptian history (al-Bishri, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

He seeks to solve two issues found at the root of every problem in the Egyptian society for the last 150 years up to the present: fear of the foreign enemy and of colonialism, and how to run the state and society in an effective way (al-Bishri, 2011, 18).

In connection with the latter issue, the centrally administered government takes on too many functions and does not realize the political will held by the public. He attaches importance to secondary

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1 The introduction of al-Bishri’s idea on “a basic current” in this section below is extensively based on the author’s past article (Kuroda, 2017).

groups and forces in a society, consisting of journalists, parties, or private organizations, in order to put pressure on the state to get rid of this imbalance (al-Bishri, 2011, 26–27).

In this context, his evaluation of the modernization process in Egypt is notable. According to him, there were many social units people belonged to in the pre-modern Egyptian society. Some of them were based on blood relations such as tribes and clans, others on a shared vocational or territorial bond, and still others on religious affiliations, sects, Sufi orders or school of thoughts. He maintains that religion plays a significant role in the formation of many social units in the society (al-Bishri, 2011, 25–26, 45). However, Muhammad Ali's modernization reform toward the centrally governed state destroyed such traditional ways of organizing the society and the people's sense of belonging. For example, he criticizes the abolishment of Waqf and the control over Sufi Tariqas in the modern Egypt. The Egyptians still live under the legacy of unbalanced modernization and colonialism, and they are split over the inherited, indigenous values and imported alien values.

Based on such critical reflection, he supports the resurgence and unity of various socio-political movements and social groups, including ones with religious characteristics, in order to revive the Egyptian nation.

However, these political and social forces have to overcome the conflicts and differences among their opinions, which they inevitably face when they try to come together. According to him, such conflicts have to be reconciled through dialogue. The concept of dialogue in al-Bishri's ideas is much broader than an exchange of opinions in newspapers, symposiums and even in an assembly. He sees dialogue not only as the means to mutual understanding but as a negotiating process to integrate the claims brought up by different groups. Therefore, he finds a path to dialogue in the activities of social movements, looking for a point of consensus in the nation (al-Bishri, 2011, 32–33).

In the summer of 2014, he told me, “the stream of the middle ground (*tayyār al-wasaṭ*) is a comprehensive current, under which all the currents could come together. The Egyptian revolution brought polarization [to our society]. If there is no conversation among the people, intellectual wars (*ḥarb fikriyya*) occur. However, dialogue must be conducted before all the intellectual wars. We are always seeking the intersection between all the positions. This is the stream of the middle ground, which unites all the streams. As intellectual wars prohibit the uniting of different streams, they lead to the polarization ... the tide which would be attacked first in this war is the middle road (*al-wasaṭ*). However, it is the idea which the Egyptians would finally join. I think this tide has a promising future.”<sup>2</sup>

Al-Bishri passed away in February 2021, about seven years after this interview. Not only al-Bishri, but many intellectuals who were the advocates of this trend have passed away in recent years or have reached an advanced age. Therefore, some might wonder what role this trend plays in the Egyptian society today and how it will continue to evolve.

In my last fieldwork in January 2020, however, I found that a compilation of al-Bishri’s interview had been published. This work of 500 pages had been compiled by the Egyptian academics in order to preserve and deliver his wisdom and admonition to the next generation (Ghanim and Mustafa, 2019).<sup>3</sup> In this way, the intellectual attempts to inherit his idea survive in the current Egyptian society. As is shown in his idea, the idea of the moderate Islamic trend became intertwined with

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2 Interview conducted by the author, July 24, 2014, Cairo.

3 According to the information I obtained during my fieldwork, the editors asked al-Bishri to write an autobiography at first. As he declined their requests, however, they decided to conduct a series of interviews. The interviewer visited his house for around two years to listen to his life story and collect his opinions on the contemporary social, political, and cultural issues. For the detail of this voluminous work, see my book review (Kuroda, 2020).

the themes such as national unity combining the different intellectual camps and the need for democracy in accordance with the political and social development in the last decades. These intellectual projects remain as a challenge for the future generation in the coming decades.



Figure 6. The compilation of al-Bishri's interview, *Dialogues with Tariq al-Bishri* (Hiwarat ma'a Tariq al-Bishri), sold at Cairo International Bookfair in 2020. Some compilations of al-Bishri's past articles, which were newly published in the last few years, were also displayed on the lowest shelf along with the other new releases from the publisher.

Source: Author

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