

In Egypt's Democracy, Room for Islam

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LAST month, Egyptians approved a referendum on constitutional amendments that will pave the way for free elections. The vote was a milestone in Egypt's emerging democracy after a revolution that swept away decades of authoritarian rule. But it also highlighted an issue that Egyptians will grapple with as they consolidate their democracy: the role of religion in political life.

The vote was preceded by the widespread use of religious slogans by supporters and opponents of the amendments, a debate over the place of religion in Egypt's future Constitution and a resurgence in political activity by Islamist groups. Egypt is a deeply religious society, and it is inevitable that Islam will have a place in our democratic political order. This, however, should not be a cause for alarm for Egyptians, or for the West.

Egypt's religious tradition is anchored in a moderate, tolerant view of Islam. We believe that Islamic law guarantees freedom of conscience and expression (within the bounds of common decency) and equal rights for women. And as head of Egypt's agency of Islamic jurisprudence, I can assure you that the religious establishment is committed to the belief that government must be based on popular sovereignty.

While religion cannot be completely separated from politics, we can ensure that it is not abused for political gain.

Much of the debate around the referendum focused on Article 2 of the Constitution — which, in 1971, established Islam as the religion of the state and, a few years later, the principles of Islamic law as the basis of legislation — even though the article was not up for a vote. But many religious groups feared that if the referendum failed, Egypt would eventually end up with an entirely new Constitution with no such article.

On the other side, secularists feared that Article 2, if left unchanged, could become the foundation for an Islamist state that discriminates against Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

But acknowledgment of a nation's religious heritage is an issue of national identity, and need not interfere with the civil nature of its political processes. There is no contradiction between Article 2 and Article 7 of Egypt's interim Constitution, which guarantees equal citizenship before the law regardless of religion, race or creed. **After all, Denmark, England and Norway have state churches, and Islam is the national religion of politically secular countries like Tunisia and Jordan.** The rights of Egypt's Christians to absolute equality, including their right to seek election to the presidency, is sacrosanct.

Similarly, long-suppressed Islamist groups can no longer be excluded from political life. All Egyptians have the right to participate in the creation of a new Egypt, provided that they respect the basic tenets of religious freedom and the equality of all citizens. To protect our democracy, we must be vigilant against any party whose platform or political rhetoric threatens to incite sectarianism, a prohibition that is enshrined in law and in the Constitution.

Islamists must understand that, in a country with such diverse movements as the Muslim Brotherhood; the Wasat party, which offers a progressive interpretation of Islam; and the conservative Salafi movements, no one group speaks for Islam.

At the same time, we should not be afraid that such groups in politics will do away with our newfound freedoms. Indeed, democracy will put Islamist movements to the test; they must now put forward programs and a political message that appeal to the Egyptian mainstream. Any drift toward radicalism will not only run contrary to the law, but will also guarantee their political marginalization.

Having overthrown the heavy hand of authoritarianism, Egyptians will not accept its return under the guise of religion. Islam will have a place in Egypt's democracy. But it will be as a pillar of freedom and tolerance, never as a means of oppression.