Constructing the National Body through Public Homophobia: A Discourse Analysis of Egyptian Media Coverage of the 'Rainbow Flag Case' in 2017

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Abstract

Since the revolution in 2011 and the reconstitution of authoritarian military rule under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, various *moral panics* shook Egypt and were accompanied by the policing of bodies, sexuality and sexual identities. The so-called 'Rainbow Flag case' was a notable illustration of such policing. After youths waved a rainbow flag at a concert in Cairo in 2017, state-controlled media led a vicious campaign against homosexuality that was part of a massive state crackdown on LGBTIQ+ people. Building on previous feminist research on gendered nationalism, this paper uses a discourse analysis methodology to examine state-controlled media coverage after the event to explore the discursive repertoires that constitute LGBTIQ+ people, especially homosexuals, as *others* within the Egyptian nation. It becomes evident that the regime - needing to reconsolidate and strengthen its authoritarian rule - promotes and supports a self-legitimising gendered nationalism, generating power by re-establishing heteronormative identities. Furthermore, the crackdown, repression, and discourse aim to restore the patriarchal order after the revolution in 2011.

Introduction

We were proud to hold the flag. We wouldn't have imagined the reaction of society and the Egyptian state. For them, I was a criminal — someone who was seeking to destroy the moral structure of society.[1]

These were Sarah Hegazy's words in an interview one year after the so-called 'Rainbow Flag case'. Hegazy, an Egyptian LGBTIQ+ activist[2] and one of the founding members of the socialist Bread and Freedom Party, died by suicide on 13 June 2020 while in exile in Canada. She attained

notoriety after being detained by Egyptian authorities for waving a rainbow flag at a concert of the popular Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila in Cairo on 22 September 2017. The concert was attended mainly by young people of middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Since the lead singer of Mashrou' Leila is openly homosexual and an advocate for LGBTIQ+ rights, this display – by Hegazy and others – of a symbol of sexual and gender diversity fitted the context of the band's concert.

The government's reaction was a crackdown on LGBTIQ+ people: prosecutions of homosexuals – or people perceived as such – surged and within a month after the concert, 75 mostly male persons had been arrested. Only a few of them had attended the concert; others were entrapped via (gay) dating apps or arrested at cruising spots of middle- and working class - gay men in central Cairo and Giza. They were publicly denounced and stigmatised in a media-incited 'moral panic'[3].

Homosexuality itself is not criminalised in the Egyptian Penal Code; nevertheless, LGBTIQ+ people are usually confronted with charges in regard to sex work and debauchery. Hegazy, the only female arrested, was charged with 'promoting sexual deviancy and debauchery' and for 'joining outlawed groups that aim to disrupt the provisions of the Constitution,' among other malfeasances.[4] Although charges like these were introduced to prosecute terrorists, militants, and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliates, in recent years they have also been deployed against civilians, activists, and satirists; i.e. against anyone appearing to be 'different' or opposing the authoritarian regime of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Sisi). And while LGBTIQ+ rights were discussed during and after the Egyptian revolution of 2011,[5] arrests - mainly of men - nearly quintupled between the military coup in 2013 and March of 2017,[6] with prison sentences ranging up to six years and detainees being subjected to anal examinations, a form of sexual assault considered torture by the United Nations Committee Against Torture (UN CAT) and human right organisations such as Amnesty International[7]. Hegazy was released on bail after three months, during which she was tortured and sexually and psychologically abused. Her death shed light on the Egyptian regime's brutal repression of LGBTIQ+ citizens, while its announcement simultaneously sparked a new wave of hate speech against her and other queer people, replicating homophobic rhetoric applied by the state-led media in 2017.

This article shows how the media-generated 'moral panic' in 2017 was used as a tool by the Egyptian government to further its legitimacy[8] and bolster its authoritarian power[9] after the revolution of 2011, while constructing and promoting a narrative of national morals under assault by internal and external 'others'. Applying a structuralist, reconstructive, qualitative discourse analysis following Diaz-Bone's approach,[10] I highlight the underlying structure of the discourse[11] based on an analysis of three different state-owned or -controlled outlets: *Al Ahram Online*, *Youm7*, and *El Watan News*. By examining fifty-eight online articles that represent the initial coverage following the events at the Mashrou' Leila concert, I unpack the media language's othering[12] of homosexuals and the recurring discursive themes of homosexuality defined as foreign and as a threat to Egyptian national security, morals, values, identity, religion, society, and culture.

Analysing the proclaimed discourse on homosexuality provides important insight into how the Sisi regime uses the discursive and effective re-establishing of heteronormative hierarchies of sexual relations in the intensified prosecution of LGBTIQ+ to support its nationalist project. At the same time, the discourse also reveals an anxiety about the patriarchal gender system after the revolution whereas efforts and initiatives amongst activists had emerged in 2011 that question(ed) heteronormativity: the crackdown in 2017 was part of 'masculinist restoration', a process in which higher levels of coercion and the 'deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses' are used to ensure the reproduction of a shaken or instable patriarchal order.[13]

Background: Political and Social Turmoil in Egypt after the 'January 25 Revolution'

Crackdowns on homosexuals have a history in Egypt. One infamous example is the raiding of the 'Queen Boat' on 11 May 2001; it had been a popular party venue known as a space where LGBTIQ+ people socialized. In the context of this 'Queen Boat case', fifty-two men were arrested and charged, and a mediatized moral panic was created.[14] According to Pratt and Awwad, this was meant to divert attention from the government's socio-economic failings, socio-economic changes and shifting gender-roles.[15] It seems evident that there is a continuity and similarity between the cases. Nevertheless, the government crackdown on LGBTIQ+ people in 2017 and the massive surge in prosecutions under the Sisi regime cannot be explained simply as a continuation of earlier politics but also need to be contextualised in regard to the current post-revolutionary moment in Egypt.

Egypt has undergone major political transformations since President Hosni Mubarak was toppled in the wake of the 'January 25 Revolution' in 2011. Its first president was elected in 2012 – the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) - affiliated Mohamed Morsi – but a campaign to oust him resulted in millions taking to the streets in June and July 2013.[16] These demonstrations accompanied the end of Morsi's presidency on 3 July 2013, in what Sisi and his supporters called a 'second popular revolution',[17] while others - such as MB supporters, regime opponents and scholars - call it a 'coup d'état'[18].

MB supporters faced enormous violence by the security forces,[19] and soon all political activities by the MB were prohibited; the group was officially labelled a terrorist organisation in December 2013. On 8 June 2014, the leading figure of the coup and the head of the armed forces, Sisi, was elected president. At first glance, Sisi's power seems secure. Yet the country remains deeply divided[20] and faces an ongoing economic crisis,[21] and the regime struggles for legitimacy. Repression and arrests extend beyond MB supporters: the government systematically targets journalists, activists, and its critics - whether real or alleged - and arrested at least 60,000 political prisoners.[22]

These changes were accompanied by a 'surge in nationalist discourse', defining 'who is good for Egypt, who is a real patriot, and who is an enemy'.[23] The intensified repression was based on several (new) laws, among them a counterterrorism-law and the Emergency State.[24] Severe restrictions were put on the Egyptian media and since 2017, approximately 500 websites have been

blocked.[25] With fewer private outlets opposing the government, the state media promote a pro-government and anti-MB program, and journalists face disciplinary action for deviating from government narratives. Moreover, the three media regulatory bodies - created even before the 'Rainbow Flag case' - may have a constitutional mandate to provide journalistic freedom, but drastically limit it in reality. Today, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) licenses audio, visual, digital, and print outlets and supervises all media in collaboration with the National Media Authority and the National Press Authority; most of its members are appointed by the president.[26]

On 30 September 2017, shortly after the Mashrou' Leila concert, the SCMR required from the media that firstly any mention of homosexuality or its 'signs' (e.g. rainbow flags) must be accompanied by statements that homosexuality is improper conduct, a disease and disgrace that should be hidden, and secondly homosexuals should be shown as remorseful.[27] The council wanted to avoid empathetic coverage and showed increasing 'tendencies of more censorship by using vague ethical rules as legal boundaries.'[28] On 25 October 2017, an Egyptian member of parliament (MP) presented a draft law with the support of sixty-seven other MPs. The draft defined homosexuality, set penalties of up to fifteen years in prison for conviction under its several provisions and proposed disclosing the identity of so-charged individuals: this would have exposed them to the risk of violence by state and non-state actors.[29] Even though the law did not pass, it constitutes proof for the growing criminalisation of homosexuality.

Alongside repression, the building of public (or, following Gramsci, 'cultural'[30]) legitimacy is crucial for the consolidation of power in authoritarian regimes. Under Sisi, the 'January 25 Revolution' became subject to several stages of appropriation and delegitimisation;[31] i.e. regime and media assert that the revolution had catastrophic effects on the economy and state security – a posture aimed at persuading people that any other uprising would be dangerous[32] while simultaneously absolving Sisi from the blame for Egypt's current situation.

Sisi aims at demonstrating the power of the military in the war against terrorism on the Sinai Peninsula, while portraying himself as the safeguard of women and Copts, as an international partner, and a pious Muslim. Hence, he countered the MB's portrayal of him as anti-Islamic and instead presented himself as 'reformer of Islam',[33] while trying to control the religious sphere.[34] Harders called an authoritarian logic of action of this kind 'Islamisation': the regime attempts to counter religious actors' cultural hegemony by 'appearing more religious than the Islamists themselves', a process already seen under Mubarak.[35] Sisi uses especially the 'nationalist narrative,' which is based on 'a highly gendered conception of patriotism and the nation'. The military is seen as 'masculinist', whereas the populace is feminized. The personality cult around Sisi is fed by the 'negative, misogynist, feminization of the people'.[36]

Literature Review

To understand the politics and discourse on homosexuality in Egypt, I firstly build on critical feminist and postcolonial literature on gendered nationalism.[37] Gender-sensitive work on Egyptian

nationalism focused primarily on the phase of nation building that occurred between Muhammad Ali's rule and the 1919 revolution against the British and emphasised how the modern nuclear family was used to shape the national character while citizens acquired new domestic behaviours.[38] Baron explored moralising discourses about the female and the feminized citizens to show how Egyptian nationalists developed the concept of family honour, centred on female purity, in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism.[39] Jacob showed how the Egyptian bourgeoisie produced a new *effendi* masculinity that drew on historical discourses as well as on contemporary values in their struggle against both orientalist discourses and colonial rule.[40] Comparing the hegemonic nationalist discourse in Egypt under Nasser with that under Sisi, Naguib exposes the binary gender codes projected within these narratives and argues that in both cases 'highly gendered imageries and symbols have legitimized and reinforced autocratic military rule'.[41] This traces to theoretical arguments describing the intertwining of nationalism and masculinity,[42] homo-nationalism,[43] and the nexus of homophobia and processes like othering[44] through which the hegemonic hierarchies of masculinity and nationalism are maintained.

Othering is inscribed into the notion of any nationalism; to build a nation, markers of national identity are necessary, such as ethnic origin, religion, language, and culture.[45] Authors writing on orientalist binary gender stereotypes that legitimised colonial domination described how European colonists perceived the feminine (Muslim) East in contrast to the masculine (Christian) West[46] and how feminine and masculine figures representing the nation[47] were constructed. Devaluing the other serves as a self-affirmation and claim of superiority and the othering of colonized peoples was integral to European colonialization.[48] To liberate themselves from colonialism, anti-colonial movements constructed their own identities, often based on ethnic and/or religious notions.[49] This new, essentialized, positively connotated self is perceived as different from the colonizer.[50] The construction of an identity that can be considered authentic or traditional - especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts[51] as in Egypt[52] - by using sex and gender to codify collective behaviours created social environments and identity claims seen as desirable while simultaneously affirming political authority.[53]

The 'Rainbow Flag case' is part of the state-induced homophobia in Egypt - and one may ask whether this homophobia is a reaction to and consequence of Western colonialism. Various scholars from Muslim countries tried to demonstrate the diverse Islamic representations of sexuality in contrast to Western attitudes.[54] Bauer argued for an understanding of 'Islam as a culture of ambiguity' in which sex – from a Western perspective classified as non-normative – was practiced without being connected to a specific sexual identity or category.[55] This discussion, however, is still ongoing and while some authors[56] speak of homosexuality in the Middle East, others like Massad argue that the Western binary of homosexual and heterosexual was imposed on the intellectually and sexually colonized subalterns to classify them as 'homosexual' or 'gay'.[57]

Simultaneously, colonial powers enforced their conceptions of sexuality and morality in their legislation. Laws imposed during British rule are still used in Egypt to charge 'lawbreakers' with 'habitual debauchery' (for instance, Law 58/1937 of the Penal Code). Additionally, a law aimed at regulating sex work among other sexually related activities (Law 10/1961) is used to convict

alleged LGBTIQ+ people; this law can be traced back to 'the heydays of nationalist struggle'[58] and was aimed at combatting brothels that were owned and visited by the British.[59] Building on Massad, Rahman suggested to 'understand the dialectic of Islam and queer rights as a more complex process of triangulation and [to] describe how the positioning of queer rights and Muslim homophobia within a triangulated model serves to invoke a sense of Western exceptionalism.'[60] While he criticises the way concepts of sexual orientation are deployed in a classic colonizing mode, he points out that 'homocolonialism' is also - particularly by repressive state actors - embraced to 'derive legitimacy from encouraging their populations to resist the imposition of queer rights as part of a resistance to neocolonialism.'[61]

Thus, when government officials, media, and other actors join in a homophobic discourse of national security, the 'authentic self' is crucial for the (re)production of national sovereignty, the maintenance of political order, and the protection of cultural identity.[62] Analysing the 'Queen Boat case', Awwad describes a 'new crisis of postcolonial modernity over which sovereignty is claimed and external (economic) domination is at least diffused (...) by displacing economic anxieties onto the moral conduct of the nation.'[63] Furthermore, actions against homosexual men can be interpreted as an attempt to ''rescue' Egyptian masculinity from the insecurities experienced as a result of socioeconomic changes and shifting gender roles.'[64] Women's participation and outspoken demand for their rights at the protests, increasing discussions of sexual violence in the public sphere, 'an actual LGBT+ corner'[65] in Tahrir Square and discussions about the future of LGBTIQ+ people in Egypt: the uprisings in 2011 were definitely a special momentum in respect to efforts to alter dominant gender roles.[66]

Nevertheless, the empowered questioning of the patriarchal and masculinist state and social order certainly also unleashed 'a state of social anxiety and panic towards bodies of female protestors.'[67] Consequently, bodies perceived as a danger to the patriarchal order and nation are policed, female bodies as well as LGBTIQ+ or other unruly bodies, and this policing is continuously accompanied by a state-narrative 'anchored in morality'.[68] This process can be regarded as 'masculinist restoration' (Kandiyoti), or as the reinforcement of 'hegemonic masculinity to maintain control over the gendered public sphere and eliminate prospects of socio-political change, thereby consolidating the gendered architecture of citizenship.'[69]

In the following, I will shed light on how state-censored media constructs and produces 'hypervisible subjects'[70] during a moral panic and how this is connected to and supports the nationalist project and reconsolidation of authoritarian rule under Sisi.

Discourse Analytical Methodology and Data Set

The analysis of media's reaction to the 'Rainbow Flag case' is based on Diaz-Bone's approach to structural discourse analysis.[71] The data set analysed contains fifty-eight online articles dealing with the topic which I saved in a data repository:[72] *Al Ahram,* state-owned and widely regarded as Egypt's most authoritative and influential newspaper; [73] *Youm7*, belonging to the Egyptian Intelligence Service;[74] and *El Watan News*, a privately held outlet founded in the wake of the

revolution in 2011 focusing on younger readers. All report daily and are available for every Egyptian with internet access - and they are subject to state censorship: therefore, their analysis provides insight into the state-regulated and state-guided public discourse.[75]

The articles were published after the concert, and although the rainbow flag appearing at the concert on 22 September had already gone viral, it took two days before the first articles on the topic were published. This delay may be connected to the sensitivity of the issue of homosexuality in Egypt, thus underscoring the highly securitised category assigned to the coverage of the concert. Reporting intensified after 24 September; then after 30 September 2017 and the SCMR decree on the mention of homosexuality in the media, interest seemed to decline. In the beginning of November, however, the issue was taken up again in *Youm7* and *Al Ahram*, which coincides chronologically with the parliament's discussion of a draft law on homosexuality.

Representation of Homosexuals and Recurring Themes in the Discourse

In a first step, I compiled the semantics and thereby the themes addressed in the articles about the incident. Most newspapers used the term *al-mithlyya al-jinsya*, considered to be the direct translation of 'homosexuality', *or al-mithlyyin* [gays]. Journalists also used less literal, more pejorative terms, such as the noun *al-shudhūdh* [anomaly] and the adjective *shādh* [abnormal, anomalous, bizarre, deviant, eccentric, also translatable as 'beast' or 'monster']. Another term is *shūādh* [gays, queers, deviants or animal/cattle], used as adjective for 'atypical', 'abnormal', 'eccentric'. Another adjective found often - especially in *Al Ahram* - is *fāsiqūn*, which is used in the Quran to describe 'the defiantly disobedient'. *Al Ahram* was particularly harsh in the use of defaming and dehumanizing words for homosexuals, such as *al-fāsiqūn* [disobedients], *al-munḥaṭūn* [degenerates], *al-marḍā al-nafsyyin* [psychopaths], *al inḥirāf* and *sulukyyāt shādh* [showing perversion and abnormal behaviour], *tuqusuhum al-mudanasa* [having sacrilegious practices], and *tasarub (…) mithl al-saraṭān* [infiltrating the youth like cancer]. The semantic choices are emblematic of the othering, producing a categorised other who is perceived as different, abnormal, dehumanized, while at the same time reifying a pure and authentic Egyptian-self.

Those negatively connoted words were highlighted in most headlines; some were particularly emphasised by citing political authorities and officials from Al Azhar and Dār al-Iftā' al-Miṣriyyah,[76] describing homosexuals as sinners, sick, or a threat, and the raising of the rainbow flag (the 'gay flag,' ʿalam al-mithlyyin) as an act of perversion or even *al-ghaḥr bil-maʿṣiyya tarwiyyi lilfitna* [promotion of sedition].

All newspapers used a similar semantic field and similar arguments, even before the SCMR-guidelines on reporting on homosexuals were released. After the surface analysis and more precise coding of the material, nuanced differences in the coverage of the three news outlets were noticeable. In addition to its derogatory language describing homosexuals, *Al Ahram* emphasised the West's infiltration of Egyptian society and encouraged the media to diminish the 'spread of homosexuality' in Egypt, while appealing to the 'duty dictated by a sense of responsibility for the

human destiny, which is united in the preservation of the divine religions' – language that implies the inclusion of Egyptian Copts in the national body, today's 'official' approach for national unity.

The discourse in *Youm7*, centring on the deterioration of the youth, presumed connections with the movements of January 2011, foreign conspiracy, Egyptian values and identity. *Youm7* made almost no references to the current political or economic situation. Instead, it took a more informational or advice-focused approach, publishing explanations of laws and interviews with religious authorities on 'what to do if your son is gay' and 'how to treat gays in society'. After the SCRM's regulatory statement, *Youm7* published a list of 'negative aspects of homosexuality' and wrote on 'the ways to combat homosexuality and reduce its danger to the individual and society'.

El Watan treated homosexuality even more as a threat to society and masculinity than the other newspapers. However, unlike the other two outlets, *El Watan* also provided supporters of LGBTIQ+ rights a platform by publishing a comment by a concert attendee; an interview with Ahmed Alaa, who had been detained for raising the rainbow flag; and a statement by the Revolutionary Socialists Movement declaring its solidarity with homosexuals and their rights on 26 September.

Other than that, none of the three papers published opinions from or interviews with the incriminated parties. In denying those groups the possibility of expression, the papers took a stance anticipating the SCMR's order. Instead, they portrayed them as criminalised others and as objects to be judged by religious, juridical, and scientific authorities. This included interviews with physicians who argued that homosexuality is contrary to nature and that AIDS is a form of religiously ordained capital punishment. The consulted authorities or the authors of the articles acted simultaneously as moral judges and authorities on the 'dangers' of homosexuality, while trying to protect and warn Egyptian society about this threat – a supposedly direct implementation of Sisi's will ('following the instructions of President (…) Sisi').

Religion, Morality, Values, and 'Authentic' Egyptian Culture

In most of the articles, representatives of state or religious institutions regarded homosexuality as contrary to morality (*akhlāq*, a term neither defined in the articles nor by legal texts and therefore open to interpretation and change) and religion; not only specifically stating Islamic morals, tradition and law as reference points, but also mentioning a general 'religious belief' and the position of 'all monotheistic religions' sharing a disdain for homosexuality. Thus, they proclaim the regime's morality as founded in Islam, while they indicate that this is not only an Islamic stance but is also a position shared by other religious groups. Alleged religious unity in disapproval of homosexuality is emphasised by frequent mention of Lot's story (to be found in the Bible and the Quran) and by references to non-Islamic attitudes against homosexuality, including those of the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and ultra-Orthodox Jewish law.

Islam has an important role in the building of an Egyptian national identity[77] and the existence of discriminatory family laws rooted in Islamic codes is hailed by conservatives as a means of affirming their country's 'authentic' Islamic roots.[78] Moreover, journalists argue that Egyptian law

is based on Sharia law—even if this is incorrect since Sharia law is mostly used as the foundation of personal status law, and the laws on debauchery are part of the current Egyptian criminal law, which is itself heavily based on the French Civil Code and influenced by the British. However, Islam is used as a marker of national difference from the West. Consequently, behaviour that is seen to depart from or to pervert religious norms is represented as un-Islamic and - hence - un-Egyptian.

Punishment and defamation of homosexuality are used to produce Egyptian national identity and culture. Similar to Pratt's observation on 2001, the continual use of the term *perverts* to describe homosexuals and concert attendees constructs not only the idea of 'perverting from' the cultural norms of society but also of actively perverting them.[79] The equation of moral and religious values with 'traditional Egyptian values' is remarkable, especially in light of the conflicting narratives of Egyptian nationalism and its secular ideological influences. Furthermore, the choice of calling Egypt 'the land of Al Azhar' is interesting, since it veils the difficult position of Al Azhar under Sisi,[80] making Al Azhar a national unifier and implying that the law confirms its religious authority.[81] Egyptian culture as rooted in Islam is consistently represented as being in opposition to and separate from 'the West' (and homosexuality). Therefore, state officials - such as the deputy of the Human Rights Committee of the House of Representatives Mohamed al-Ghoul on 26 September 2017 in Youm 7 - are quoted defending the prosecution of homosexuals on the basis of protecting Egyptian cultural values from Western immorality.

'The Dominance of the West'

Al Ahram's narrative is dominated by the perceived threat of foreign influence, as for instance on 26 September 2017: 'As if there is an invisible hand that seeks with full force to demolish the youth in Egypt, by encouraging parts of them to deviate and engage in abnormal behaviours, or to seduce other parts and push them to embrace extremist ideas and engage in terrorist groups (...).' Some of the found motives, such as the 'invisible hands' influencing the Egyptian youth, were already present during the revolution of 2011 and invoked the idea of foreign powers (usually Western states, but also countries supporting the MB) manipulating or controlling the youth, who then act against Egypt's standards with deviant and abnormal behaviour. The notion that homosexuals are persuading others to join in their 'extremist' ideas and the comparison of the activism for LGBTIQ+ rights with the dangers of terrorism clearly transforms homosexuals into a political danger for the Egyptian nation.

The West is said to be responsible for promoting and spreading homosexuality and morals that are 'not Egyptian', and the 'spread of homosexuality' is seen as a negative side effect of globalization and of the ongoing dominance of the West,[82] as the following sentence from an article on 30 September 2017 in *El Watan* demonstrates: 'Western hegemony is no longer limited (...) to the external relations of countries, in their politics, economy, culture, education, media, etc. Rather, it infiltrated to dominate all aspects of life within these countries, by controlling the system of laws in them according to the system of international agreements dominated by Western culture.'

This dominance is also expressed in the imposition of 'Western values', in turn identified with the legalisation of gay marriage and generally the 'promotion of gay rights' by international human rights organisations or by the West's financial support of Egyptian NGOs.[83] These arguments concur with Rahman's work on 'homocolonialism' who notes that 'repressive state actors in particular often derive legitimacy from encouraging their populations to resist the imposition of queer rights as part of a resistance to neocolonialism.'[84] Therefore, the West and human rights organisations are portrayed as working against Egypt in general and as containing and asserting non-Egyptian values. The debate centres on the need to protect Egyptian national sovereignty from Western influence ('Western values and morals'), which is considered to undermine the nation.

Homosexuality as a Security Threat

Different metaphors describe homosexuality as a threat to existing society, either as perversion or as disease, comparing it to cancer or HIV. Additionally, it is portrayed as a threat to children, family, marriage and to the Egyptian nation as a whole, which is referred to as *al-waṭan* [homeland or fatherland]. More often, however, *al-daūlaa* [state] was used, possibly implying that the state's sovereignty is endangered. The threat to the Egyptian state is also highlighted by assertions that accepting homosexuality would provide a breeding ground for extremism and that homosexuality can be compared with *al-irhāb* [terrorism], for instance in *Al Ahram* on 29 September 2017, one reads that 'if such a door is opened, there will be a security collapse - terrorism - (…) God save us from the immoral people.' This comparison profits from another discursive othering of an internal enemy of the Egyptian nation; homosexuals and terrorists are both perceived as threats to national security, as spreading and growing, as dangerous (physically, by damaging public health, morally, by destroying the unity of the nation and religion), as *fasydūn* [evil], *inḥirāf* [corrupted], *tufsid* [destroying], and *jārymaa* [committing crimes].

The portrayal of homosexuals as a threat to the nation is made obvious by references to political opponents (also considered enemies of the state) or by the defamation of people who criticise the state's treatment of homosexuals, who are labelled homosexuals themselves. Some comments make connections with the revolution of 2011 and refer to the Revolutionary Socialists[85] or the April 6 movement, both of which became known for their crucial roles in organising the Tahrir Square demonstrations. By criminalising the April 6 movement and criticising the Revolutionary Socialists as being 'too gay friendly' or for 'destroying the nation and its security' a connection between the alleged threat of revolutionaries and homosexuality is implicated.

Gendered Nationalism

While only a few articles mentioned masculinity explicitly, it is an omnipresent basso continuo. The state press emphasised - with the help of religious and medical authorities - that marriage must be between a man and a woman and that gay marriage, or a gay couple having children, is

unacceptable. The pathologizing of (male) homosexuality as a disorder that arises from exogenous factors – e.g. in *El Watan* on 25 September 2017 connected to 'the wrong upbringing' in childhood, a 'lukewarm' relationship to the father, an overly strong bond to the mother ('seeing the problems of life through her eyes'), and sexual assault during childhood - reflects the binary view of bad effeminacy vs. good masculinity. Masculinity, moreover, is itself seen as endangered by homosexuality, as identifiable in *El Watan* on 27 September 2017: 'The head of the Cairo Center for Political and Legal Studies expressed his thanks, appreciation and respect to the prosecutors and the men of the Ministry of the Interior for quickly dealing with this communication in order to preserve Arab moral values and the constants of Egyptian identity, in defence of chivalry and masculinity, and the fight against moral corruption.'

Egypt itself is portrayed as being vulnerable – a consequence of two revolutions in the last decade (the coup in 2013 is defined as revolution). The attributed fragility resembles the gendered nationalism prevalent since the late nineteenth century, in which Egypt is feminized and has to be protected – Sisi has even been portrayed as 'the man' saving Egypt 'the woman'[86] and often was referred to as 'the saviour', liberating the country from the MB.[87] Homosexuality does not fit the discourse of a militarized, religionized nationalism, and threatens the reproduction of the heterosexual patriarchal narrative of the nation.[88]

This scrutiny of individuals' sexuality in discourses on nationalism follows a moralistic logic, which is one of four intersecting logics of securitisation in a human-security state.[89] While women's behaviour in both the private and public spheres is often represented as symbolic of a nation's character, the 'Rainbow Flag case' illustrates the ways in which the alleged defence of *al-nakhwaa wa al-rujūlaa* [masculinity and sense of honour] by the 'human-security state'[90] confirms hegemonic notions of masculinity that are inextricably linked to national identity.

Conclusion

Since 2013, the reaction of Egyptian officials to the LGBTIQ+ community has become increasingly harsh. A poignant example can be seen in the case of media reactions related to the Rainbow Flag incident, which resulted in a crackdown on homosexuals and in debates on juridical punishment for homosexuality. Crucial were the state-censored and partly state-owned Egyptian media; the 'Rainbow Flag case' evoked not only excessive coverage, but also a moral panic. Nevertheless, the media's reaction to the 'Rainbow Flag case' was not random homophobia but a conscious tactic that served the Sisi government's nationalistic narrative. In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, and especially after the coup d'état of 2013, gendered nationalism was used as a much-needed unifier and counter-ideology to the Islamist movement, embodied by the MB. As the 'Queen Boat case' was used to prop up the fading popularity of Mubarak at a critical time, the 'Rainbow Flag case' was used by the Sisi regime, which struggles to build legitimacy and heavily relies on nationalist rhetoric.

Analysing the state-censored media coverage as part of the moral panic revealed a 'religionized moralizing discourse'[91] in which national identity is (re)produced by constructing heterosexuality

as an essential marker of difference from the West and by othering homosexuals as interior and exterior threat to the Egyptian nation. The construction of a homogenous national identity and body is used to bolster the security regime's battered legitimacy, its authoritarian power, and contentious nationalist political agenda. Gendered nationalism provides Sisi with a strategy according to which a 'new dualism is (…) constructed between the abstract nation as a mother, as a pure female figure that naturally obeys and loves the patriarch, and the protesting people as an untamed, infertile, dishonourable, and oversexed woman, as an enemy of itself.'[92]

The regime's treatment of homosexuals reveals a deep anxiety about the stability of the Egyptian nation, which mirrors the ongoing struggle for legitimacy of the postrevolutionary authoritarian regime. The repeated - discursive and actual - violence against *the other* evokes emotional and affective reactions. A controlled media discourse is therefore crucial to the state apparatus; by reinforcing fear, anxiety, and feelings of threat among the Egyptian public, the regime manufactures a role of vanquishing a common 'enemy' - proving itself capable of defending the nation. While the extent of the crackdown is part of the increasingly repressive authoritarianism of the regime, it further indicates its need for moral panics and 'masculinist restoration'. The 'Rainbow Flag case' was part of an attempt to restore the patriarchal gender system, whereas efforts and initiatives amongst activists had emerged in 2011 that question(ed) heteronormativity. By restoring the patriarchal system, diffusing pluralism and diminishing political mobilisation efforts from 2011, by prohibiting the visibility (and existence) of others in the nation, by creating and/or supporting a moral panic and scapegoating a known 'enemy' within the nation, the regime coerces state violence allegedly approved by a (homogenous) majority of 'the people'. It is acting as 'protector' of the nation, fulfilling its duty by ruling with a firm hand, and demonstrating power while actually being threatened by the visibility of pluralism that could alter society; and in the long-run, bring the population to demand change again.

About the Author

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[1] Arraf, Jane (2018) 'After Crackdown, Egypt's LGBT Community Contemplates 'Dark Future'', *NPR*, 18 June, accessed 4 October 2021, https://n.pr/3ALfhKl.

[2] I consider homosexuality as a sexual orientation and not exported from the 'West' even though 'what it means to identify today as homosexual' or LGBTIQ+ person needs to be contextualised in its historicity, in regard to colonialism and neoliberal globalization, and looked at through the intersectional prism of class, culture, gender and

political structures. (Cf. Mikdashi, Maya (2011) 'Gay Rights as Human Rights: Pinkwashing Homonationalism', *Jadaliyya*, 16 December, accessed 15 September 2019, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24855)

[3] I built on Weeks and Rubin when speaking of 'moral panic', defining it as a political moment in which anxieties are directed into distress about an unpopular minority violating social values, often centred around sexuality, bodily integrity, and morals. As a result of the public outcry, which often is initiated by state and media, the targeted groups are frequently framed as a threat to public morality and consequently punishing laws can be enacted. (Cf. Rubin, Gayle (1984) 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Carol Vance (ed.): *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston and London: Routledge & K. Paul) and Weeks, Jeffrey (2003) *Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge). See also Amar, Paul (2011) 'Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of 'Men in Crisis,' Industries of Gender in Revolution', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7 (3), pp. 36–70; (2013A) *The Security Archipelago. Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press); (2013B) 'The Revolution Continues', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15 (1), pp. 94-99.

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[7] Amnesty International (2017) 'Egypt: Draft bill to criminalize same-sex relations amid unprecedented homophobic crackdown', 9 November, accessed 12 December 2017, https://bit.ly/3BQdDZp.

[8] On different legitimation strategies of the Sisi regime please see: Yefet, Bosmat and Limor Lavie (2021) 'Legitimation in post-revolutionary Egypt: Al-Sisi and the renewal of authoritarianism', *Digest of Middle East Studies* 30, pp. 170-185.

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[71] Diaz-Bone built his approach on Foucault (1981) but understands discourse not only as a structure consisting of statements, but also as a structuring practice. The discourse itself cannot simply be "read", it is a structure to the extent that a system of rules can be found in a set of related statements and can be reconstructed in regard to four different aspects which Diaz-Bone adopted from Foucault's discourse theory: objects, concepts, position of the speaker, and strategic/thematic choices; see Diaz-Bone, Rainer (2006) 'Die interpretative Analytik als methodologische Position'[Interpretative Analytics as Methodological Position], in Brigitte Kerchner and Silke Schneider (eds.) *Foucault: Diskursanalyse der Politik [Foucault: Discourse Analysis of Politics]*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), p. 74-76.

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[76] Dār al-Iftā' al-Miṣriyyah is the state-run Egyptian Islamic institution issuing fatwas/interpretations of Islamic law.

[77] Al-Ali (2000), p. 42

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