An Affair With Books

A special literary supplement marking the 26th annual Cairo International Book Fair.

Eve of the Book Fair — Religious and Literary Establishments Remain at Loggerheads

By Richard Woffenden

Four years after a court sentenced him to eight years in prison for blasphemy, ex-tax collector turned novelist Alaa Hamid is still waiting at home for the government to decide what to do with him. And, like Hamid, many of those in Egypt's artistic and cultural community consider themselves in legal limbo: shuttlecocks kept in the air in the games played by the government to keep a balance between the demands of liberals and the religious establishment of Al Azhar.

While not wanting to be seen as the oppressor of free speech, many government officials feel duty bound to act in tandem with Al Azhar to defend the religious sanctity of the nation. But others feel that Egypt's signature on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights — whose Article 19 guarantees free expression — cannot be reconciled with laws that might send Hamid to jail for writing a fictional text or forcibly divorce alleged apostate Nasser Hamid Abu Zeid from his Muslim wife, as two recent constitutional test cases are attempting to do.

The 1990 Hamid trial heralded a new era in Al Azhari intervention in the publication of arts and literature. Following the publication of Hamid's book *Distances In A Man's Mind*, *Al Ahram* columnist Ahmed Bahgat — among others — mounted a campaign to ban the book. Hamid was called to face criminal charges, dismissed from his civil service job and sentenced to eight years.

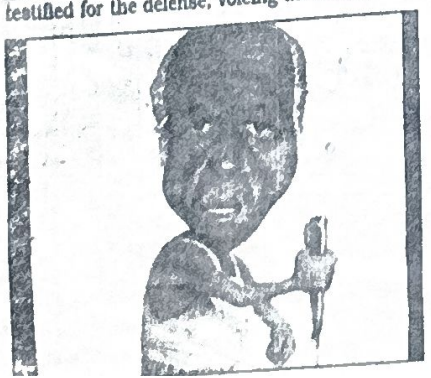
"[Hamid] has abandoned belief in Islam and no faith remains in his heart," explained Rizq Al Tawil, the dean of Islamic studies at Al Azhar. "Thus he has no loyalty and has become a source of danger. Muslim society has the right to deal with him as it wants... he has become untrustworthy in his work. Public interest cannot be overturned in favor of the individual... There is no objection to him being dismissed from his job."

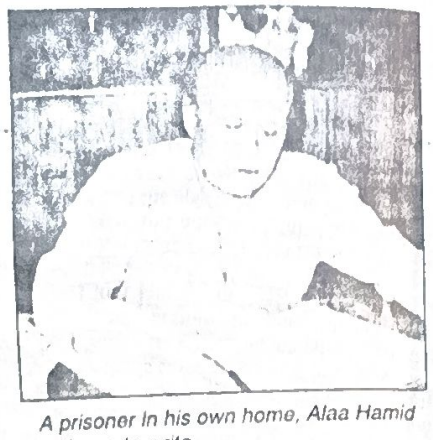
Hamid's next book, *The Bed*, earned him another year in prison.

The sentence was referred to the executive office, which has decided to refrain from enforcing the two sentences in an attempt to pacify advocates of free expression as well as cultural conservatives, but both sides made clear their feelings at the time the case was in court.

Ahmed Hassan Muslim of the *Fatwa* committee at Al Azhar testified: "This writer must be punished, because he has caused an ideological disturbance, his writing has caused confusion, and he is of no use to the people."

"This matter is related to democracy and freedom of thought. It is the author's right to create what he wants and to disseminate his ideas, irrespective of the literary value of the work," renowned feminist Nawal Al Saadawi testified for the defense, voicing the concerns of





A prisoner in his own home, Alaa Hamid continues to write.

other writers who on other occasions would be wholly opposed to her ideology. "Al Azhar has nothing to do with artistic and literary work and has no right to judge them. Islam opposes the use of force in religion, meaning that it is not permitted to coerce belief; therefore a state which puts a writer like Alaa Hamid on trial is neither religious nor Muslim."

Meanwhile, Alaa Hamid discovered that whilst no bookshop will stock his novels, many sell *The Trials of the Egyptian Salman Rushdie: Alaa Hamid* in which journalist Ahmed Abu Zeid quotes militant preacher Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman: "[Alaa Hamid] must be killed and all his books burnt."

Abu Zeid clarifies that Alaa Hamid is *morted* (apostate) and adds that "all Muslims have agreed that the apostates should be killed."

These cases arose after the government found itself relying heavily on "official Islam," in the form of Al Azhar, in its campaign against terrorism, says left wing philosopher Hussein Amin. He believes that the current actions are "a campaign of suppression" that is a result of Al Azhar taking "advantage of the power it was given by the government."

The banning of books is nothing new to Egypt — the two doyens of Egyptian literature Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz have both been victim to the censor's grasp. However, these actions took place under regimes which made no pretence towards democracy; today artists have greater expectations of President Mubarak, elected to a third term under the slogan "Enemy of Terrorism, Friend of Democracy."

The Tagammu and other leftist opposition parties have been instrumental in organizing the campaigns to defend the writer's civil rights. Six months ago, 62 members of the People's Assembly signed a petition to request that the chief executive grant immediate amnesty to Hamid — so far there has been no answer.

More worrisome than this silence has been the confiscation by the security forces of Alaa Hamid's latest book *The Sons Want The Price* without any explanation.

Artists and intellectuals have been meeting regularly at the Atelier writer's club to protest official inaction, particularly on the part of Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni. Writers fear a climate in which the publication of a painting by Gustav Klimt in *Ibdaya*, a cultural magazine published by the state-owned General Egyptian Book Organization, caused outrage both inside and outside parliament.

"The situation is disastrous," Amin says. "Look at Hosni's statement that the Sheikh of Al Azhar is the highest authority [in issues such as Hamid's] and that the government must abide by his decision."

And as this year's book fair opens on 27 January, both liberal and conservative *literati* wait to see if religious authorities will once again exercise their powers to remove further texts from the public domain and open a new front in the cultural battleground.

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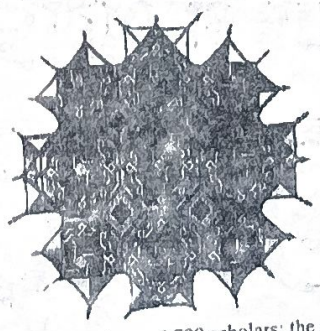



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