

## Egypt: Christians defend Al Azhar University



*Al-Azhar University*

***Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan has attacked the great Imam of Al Azhar University, Al Tayyeb, for supporting the Egyptian military, which overthrew President Mohammed Morsi. The Churches, however, have applauded him***

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In the chaotic cauldron that is the Middle East, it is possible for Egypt's Christians to find themselves vehemently defending the leader of the Muslim world's most prestigious centre of Sunni Islamic learning, despite the fact that the university has been at loggerheads with the Vatican for years.

Yesterday, Vatican news agency *Fides*, of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, published some statements by the Council of Christian Churches in Egypt, in support of the great Imam of Al Azhar University, Ahmed Al Tayyeb. "The virtues of the Imam and his human stature are witnessed by his story," said Fr. Bishoy Helmy, the Council's Secretary General.

It all began last Sunday, when Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip *Erdoğan*, leader of the moderate Islamist Justice and Development party (AKP), launched a full frontal attack on Al Tayyeb for supporting the Egyptian military, Mohammed Morsi's ouster. Erdoğan and Turkey supported the "Arab Spring" revolts right from the start and saw the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power – elected after Hosni Mubarak's ousting – as a positive thing.

Many Western countries did not hide their relief at the coup's overthrow of Morsi. In their eyes, it prevented this key country in the Arab world from becoming marred by instability and a safe port for radical Islam. But Erdoğan and Turkey, generally a solid ally of the West, did not share this sense of relief.

Hence Sunni Erdoğan's attack on the Sunni president of Al-Azhar University, Al Tayyeb, which Turkish newspaper *Zaman* reported on last Sunday. According to the Turkish Prime Minister, by expressing his support for the military figures who ousted Morsi, Al Tayyeb lost all authority and respect within the Muslim world: "That scholar is finished. History will curse men like him, as history cursed similar scholars in Turkey before," *Zaman* quoted Erdoğan saying. According to the Turkish Prime Minister, a scholar should not sacrifice his honour for the sake of political interest.

The Egyptian government – which has a great deal of influence over the well-respected Al-Azhar university - came to the Imam's defence immediately. In the face of the current crisis, "a strong collaborative agreement between Al Azhar and the Council of Christian Churches is being registered, the organization that aims to represent the unitary position of Christians in relation to social and political events," Mgr. Adel Zaki the Apostolic Vicar of Alexandria in Egypt told *Fides*.

The most surprising thing of all is that relations between Al-Azhar and the Vatican are still officially frozen, after the Sunni university decided to suspend bilateral talks as a result of what was said in Benedict XVI's speech to the diplomatic corps in January 2011. He was seen to be meddling in the country's domestic affairs. The speech opened an old wound that never truly healed: In a famous speech he made in Regensburg, Ratzinger quoted a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Emperor who said the Muslim Prophet Mohammed brought into the world "things only evil and inhuman." His remarks spurred protests – some violent – all across the Muslim world.

Although the situation in Egypt is extremely tense, the Vatican hopes to re-engage in dialogue with Al-Azhar. The President of the Pontifical Council for interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, said he hoped that contact could resume despite the complex political situation in Egypt. He said the door is always open for Al-Azhar and that the Vatican would be willing to talk when the university is ready to. Paradoxically, thanks to Erdoğan, the Vatican and Al-Azhar could be one step closer to resuming dialogue.