

Egypt president Sisi bans offensive images, urges religious moderation

by [Louisa Loveluck](#) in the [February 18, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi issued a decree January 13 allowing his government to ban any foreign publications it deems offensive to religion. The move came days after his foreign minister joined the Paris solidarity march in support of *Charlie Hebdo's* right to offend.

This and other contradictions lie at the heart of his approach to religion, 18 months after he overthrew an Islamist president in the most populous Arab country.

Sisi's so-called religious revolution is "part and parcel of a broader and more traditional statist project," said Michael Hanna, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation think tank. "This is why both religious expression and religious immoderation are to be tightly controlled, as they are understood as potential sources of instability that could disrupt public order."

Sisi, a former army general, began the year with a call for a "religious revolution" in Egypt, an attempt to position himself at the vanguard of moderate Islam.

His professed goal is to purge the religion of extremist strands of intolerance and violence that fuel groups like al-Qaeda and the self-described Islamic State.

"It's inconceivable that the thinking that we hold most sacred should cause the entire Islamic world to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing, and destruction for the rest of the world," he said in a speech to clerics at Al-Azhar University, the highest seat of Sunni learning in Egypt. He called on Egypt's imams to conduct a "truly enlightened" review of how religious texts were read and propagated

Sisi has also called for religious toleration, and he became the first Egyptian president to attend a Coptic Christmas Eve mass. It was a popular move among Christians, to whom Sisi's authoritarianism represents a bulwark against the return of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Sisi is seeking to impose change through the state, using official religious institutions like the 1,000-year-old Al-Azhar University, with backing from the police and the

judiciary, which is secular but strongly influenced by Islam.

Since Mohamed Morsi was ousted as president in July 2013, his followers have been depicted as terrorists and subjected to mass arrests, and Brotherhood preachers have largely been purged from the country's mosques.

"[Sisi's] is a conservative vision, just not a radical one," said Nathan Brown, a longtime Egypt scholar based at George Washington University. "It assigns a strong role for the state in protecting what are seen as the rights of the community and public morality in general."

The prosecution of those deemed to have insulted religion—a practice that picked up after the 2011 revolution and attracted stinging criticism during Morsi's rule—has also continued apace since the popularly backed 2013 coup.

Egypt's penal code allows the law to get tough on dissenters from the majority Sunni population, including Shi'ite Muslims and Bahá'ís, who face harassment by security forces.

Atheists also tread a dangerous path in Egypt: on January 12, a court sentenced 21-year-old student Karim al-Banna to three years in jail for professing his atheism via social media and for allegedly insulting Islam. He was one of at least six people tried for religious defamation in the space of as many months.

*This article was edited on February 3, 2014.*