QUEER BUT NOT EGYPTIAN

LGBTQ REPRESSION AND NATIONALISM UNDER AL-SISI

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0. Abstract

The goal of this study was to gain insight into the link between anti-LGBTQ policies and discourse under current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on the one hand, and his nationalist project on the other. During al-Sisi's Presidency, Egypt has witnessed a sharp increase in queerphobic state-led discrimination and criminalization. At the same time, the regime has also made great efforts to diffuse nationalist rhetoric among the Egyptian population. This dissertation revealed a connection between the two phenomena. Through a critical discourse analysis on articles from state-run or state-controlled newspapers and a literature review, it was concluded that LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi should not be understood as merely an expression of homophobia, but rather as an intentional project that serves a well-defined purpose. We argued that the discursive and effective repression of LGBTQ individuals fits within the expansion and embedding of al-Sisi's nationalist project in Egyptian society. Through the exclusion and demonization of LGBTQ individuals, al-Sisi can define and delineate the boundaries of Egyptian national identity in a way that he sees fit. We distinguished two central pillars of this identity: Islam and anti-Western sentiments. LGBTQ people are portrayed by his regime as traitors to both elements and are thus considered non-Egyptian. We examine how is part of al-Sisi's quest to gain legitimacy and consolidate his power. Therefore, in addition to the concepts of nationhood and sexuality, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is central to this thesis.

Het doel van deze studie was om meer inzicht te verwerven in het verband tussen het anti-LGBTQ-beleid en -discours onder huidig Egyptisch president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi enerzijds en diens nationalistische project anderzijds. Onder het bewind van president al-Sisi kent Egypte een sterke toename in de queerfobe staatsgeleide discriminatie en criminalisering. Tegelijkertijd investeert het huidige regime ook bijzonder sterk in nationalistische retoriek. Uit deze thesis bleek dat er een verband bestaat tussen beide fenomenen. Aan de hand van een kritische discoursanalyse op artikels uit staatsgeleide of door de staat gecontroleerde kranten en een literatuurstudie werd er tot de conclusie gekomen dat de LGBTQ-repressie onder al-Sisi niet louter als een veruitwendiging van homofobie moet verstaan worden, maar een welbepaald doel dient. De discursieve en effectieve repressie van LGBTQ-personen kadert namelijk binnen de uitbouw en verankering van al-Sisi's nationalistisch project. Aan de hand van de exclusie en demonisering van LGBTQ-personen, kan al-Sisi de grenzen definiëren en afbakenen van de Egyptische nationale identiteit zoals die volgens hem moet vormgegeven worden. Twee centrale pijlers van deze identiteit zijn de islam en anti-Westerse sentimenten. LGBTQ-personen worden door zijn regime voorgesteld als verraders van beide elementen en worden bijgevolg als niet-Egyptisch beschouwd. We onderzoeken hoe al-Sisi op deze manier tracht legitimiteit te verwerven en zijn macht te consolideren. Om die reden staat in deze thesis naast de concepten *natie* en *seksualiteit* ook Gramsci's concept *hegemonie* centraal.

1. Introduction

''[The police] took me to the "morality ward" and kept me until 4 a.m. in a tiny room with no food or water. They took my phone and belongings. When they came back with a police report, I was surprised to see the guy I met on Grindr is one of the officers. They beat me and cursed me until I signed papers that said I was "practicing debauchery" and publicly announcing it to fulfill my "unnatural sexual desires."

-Yazid, 27-year-old gay man from Egypt, July 17, 2021'' (Younes 2023)

The above excerpt was taken from Human Rights Watch's most recent report on the persecution and repression of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals (LGBT) by private individuals and state actors in the Middle East and North Africa (Younes 2023). One of the countries that was surveyed, is Egypt. The report shows that Yazid's testimony is everything but an isolated incident. The country has a record of targeting and repressing LGBTQ individuals or people who are perceived as such, subjecting (alleged) LGBTQ individuals to discrimination, verbal and physical assault, online extortion or arrests. This discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity by the Egyptian authorities has been widely documented by journalists, academics and human rights organizations from the turn of the century onwards, following an increase in state-led arrest campaigns by former President Hosni Mubarak's regime, which especially targeted gay men (Magued 2023). Current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is continuing this trend of state-sponsored queerphobic violence and discrimination. Under his rule, anti-LGBTQ repression by the state apparatus has reached new heights, both through discursive repression and through state policies and large-scale arrest campaigns against LGBTQ individuals, as was proven by the aforementioned Human Rights Watch report and many others (Younes 2023). At the same time, Egypt has been witnessing a surge in nationalist rhetoric since President al-Sisi's assumption of power, which remains omnipresent in Egyptian society today (Sobhy 2015).

Is it a coincidence that al-Sisi from the beginning of his rise to power invested both in intense state-led repression of LGBTQ people and in a torrent of nationalist rhetoric, which is widely

disseminated among the Egyptian population? This dissertation assumes that the answer to that question is no and assumes that there is a clear link between this widespread LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi's rule and the nationalist project that his regime is so strongly committed to, rather than assuming that the queerphobic discourse, anti-LGBTQ policies and repressive arrest campaigns against LGBTQ people are simply an externalization of Egyptian homophobia. In this dissertation, we will examine the place of al-Sisi's attempts to police LGBTQ individuals in his nationalist project. While much has been written about President al-Sisi's repressive queerphobic violence and discrimination on the one hand and on his nationalist project on the other, research linking the two phenomena is scarce. This dissertation will attempt to gain insight into the role of al-Sisi's heteronormative sexuality policies within his nation-building project, and thereby attempt to contribute to filling in this research gap.

This will be done through a combination of a literature review and a critical discourse analysis. For the critical discourse analysis, we will draw on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The research object of our critical discourse analysis will not be speeches or other forms of language utterances by President al-Sisi, but newspaper articles and opinion pieces that focus on homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals. These articles were pulled from two state-controlled newspapers, *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7*. The choice of this research material is partly explained, by a lack of speeches by al-Sisi mentioning homosexuality or the LGBTQ community. More importantly, we also believe that these state-controlled media outlets play an important role within al-Sisi's nationalist project and are therefore a meaningful source of information to answer our research question. This will be argued more thoroughly later in this dissertation.

In the theoretical framework that will be applied to our analysis, a number of concepts are of central importance: the nation, sexuality and the Gramscian concept of *hegemony*. This dissertation starts off with a theoretical section, in which these concepts will be further explained and related to each other. In order to do so, we will first briefly examine the link between the nation, nationalism, gender and sexuality. We will then explore the concept of hegemony and argue why this concept is a useful framework to analyze al-Sisi's nation-

building project. Chapter three includes an outline of the position of homosexuality in Egyptian society, as well as a comprehensive overview of the social position of LGBTQ people and queerphobic repression under former Egyptian presidents Hosni Mubarak and Mohamad Morsi and under the rule of current President al-Sisi. The next chapter attempts to outline the nationalist project of the al-Sisi regime. Chapter five consists of an overview of the methodological choices with regard to the critical discourse analysis, as well a brief discussion on my positionality in conducting this research. Then, finally, the results of the empirical analysis will be presented thematically in chapter six, based on the critical discourse analysis and secondary literature. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the findings in relation to al-Sisi's nation-building project and hegemony to answer the central research question. Lastly, we will come to a conclusion in chapter seven.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Nation and sexuality

In the following chapter, we will outline the theoretical framework of this dissertation. The central concepts in this section are *the nation*, *nation-building*, *gender,* and *sexuality*. Based on a literature review, these concepts will be briefly explained and related to each other. This will also include a reflection on the link between the nation, gender, and sexuality within the Egyptian context.

2.1.1. The nation, nation-building, and boundary maintenance

Before delving deeper into the concept of *nation*, it is important to note that, although the terms *nation* and *state* are often used synonymously, they are by no means interchangeable. A state should be understood as a sovereign political entity, which is bounded by concrete, tangible boundaries, adheres to international law and is recognized by the international community. A nation, on the other hand, has no tangible boundaries (Mayer 2012). But what exactly is a nation then? Numerous works exist on the concept of *nation*, resulting in a wide range of definitions. With his *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson wrote one of the leading works on the subject, offering the following definition: *"an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"* (Anderson 2006: 6). This definition is widely adopted as a basic definition for the concept and will also be the starting point of this dissertation. Anderson explains the attribute *'imagined'* in his definition by stating that *"the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"* (Anderson 2006: 6). Nira Yuval-Davis summarizes this as an *"abstract sense of imagined simultaneity"* (Yuval-Davis 2006: 204). Yuval-Davis adds to this that the national imagination includes previous and future generations, claiming that meeting all members of the nation is not just prevented by the size of the nation, but is inherently impossible (Yuval-Davis 2006). The *community* that Anderson refers to in his definition, should, according to him, be conceived as a *"deep, horizontal comradeship"* or *"fraternity"* (2006: 7).

The latter forces us to ask what this fraternity is based on. Members of a nation feel connected through a shared national identity, which, according to Zillah Eisenstein, provides an identity *"beyond the self, a sense of belongingness, and connectedness"* (2003: 37). Mayer conceives of this shared national identity as nationalism, which she defines as "*[t]he ideology which members of the community, those who are of the same kind, share - through which they identify with the nation and express their national loyalty"* (2012: 1). This supposed collective identity is constructed in national narratives, which are grounded in myths about the nation, its origins and its members (Mayer 2012). It is for this reason that Eisenstein conceives of nations as a "*complete invention, as completely mythic and unnatural*" and *"a phantasmatic imagining"* (2000: 35).

In academic literature, nations and national identities are generally considered socially constructed (Mayer 2012). The national identity on which a nation is founded can be constructed in different ways, based on a variety of markers, which formulate a set of conditions or requirements that individuals must meet in order to claim a nation's identity and to be entitled to belong to the collectivity of the nation (Mansbach & Rhodes 2007; Yuval-Davis 2011). Mansbach and Rhodes (2007) distinguish five – non-exhaustive – categories of markers that can construct a sense of "we-ness" or "likeness" and on the basis of which a nation and a national identity can be imagined: blood kinship or common descent – or rather, as Yuval-Davis argues, "*the myth of common descent"* (2011: 20) –, a shared language, a common culture, a shared religion, and citizenship. Mayer adds to this a shared history and communal sufferings in the past as an important national marker (2012). Yuval-Davis (2011) additionally distinguishes the identification with a common set of ethical and political values as a signifier of belonging, such as democracy or human rights. It goes without saying that it is impossible to generalize the importance of these markers for every nation and that any list of possible markers to define a nation will always be incomplete – after all, very many attributes can be recited as a marker of national identity. These markers are merely basic markers that are provided in academic literature to analyze nation and national identities (Mansbach & Rhodes 2007).

It is important to note that these markers construct national identity not as an isolated identity, but *in opposition* to others. Consequently, these markers provide members of a nation with an identity that is *exclusionary* of other identities (Eisenstein 2000). These markers are not simply the markers of a nation, but are markers of *difference*, delineating the symbolic boundaries of the nation, dividing the world's population into 'us' and 'them', insiders and outsiders (Yuval-Davis 2006). National identities can therefore be understood as social and cultural constructs, constructed in opposition to the Other, to those who do *not belong* and who are excluded from the nation (Mayer 2012). Consequently, othering is inherent in formulating national identities and constructing the nation (Ameling 2022). This brings us to the concept of *boundary maintenance*, or the *politics of belonging*, as Yuval-Davis calls it in her leading work *The Politics of Belonging*. This process involves political projects concerned with the construction, reproduction and maintenance of the boundaries of the community that is the nation, based on a set of markers of belonging, along with the inclusion and exclusion of people and social groups (Yuval-Davis 2011). The set of markers of belonging, based on which groups engage in boundary maintenance, are not fixed, but can vary depending on the nationalist rhetoric conducted by different political and nationalist groups or actors, who can redefine or manipulate these markers (Mansbach & Rhodes 2007). This leads Lane Bruner to argue that nations do not have stable identities and are perpetually subject to change (2002). Significant changes in these markers of national belonging may therefore "*cause new groups to become alienated from dominant characterizations of collective belonging, preventing the process of national identity construction from ever being completed*" (Lane Bruner 2002: 1). We will return to this later.

These political projects of *boundary maintenance* prove crucial for a clear understanding of the concept *nation* and of the ways in which the nation is constructed. Boundary maintenance is inherently part of what the literature calls *nation-building*, "*[t]he process of diffusion and reproduction of nationalist beliefs by state apparatuses*" (Miley 2018: 184). The diffusion of nationalism and nationalist sentiments allows the articulation of "*a 'communal loyalty' which is positioned against loyalties that are seen as subversive to the recognized shared identity*" (Eisenstein 2000: 38).

2.1.2. Nation, gender, and sexuality

As was mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation assumes a link between the nation, gender, and sexuality. Before the 1980s, however, academic theorizations about nations and nationalism paid little to no attention to gender dimensions or sexuality. It was widely assumed that nationalism was a male issue (Özkirimli 2000). This changed in the mid-1980s, when scholars increasingly began to study gender relations in the context of nationalism and came to understand that nations and nationalism are deeply gendered, that nationalism is a gendered discourse, and that a theory of gender power is crucial to a correct understanding of nations and nationalism (Özkirilmi 2000; Kim-Puri 2005).

One of the leading authors within this field is Nira Yuval-Davis, who formulated groundbreaking insights into the role of women in the nation in her works *Woman-Nation-State* (1989), which she co-edited with Floya Anthias, and *Gender and Nation* (1997) (Özkirimli 2000). Women occupy a crucial place within the nation by assuming a variety of roles: they are the biological reproducers of the nation, by reproducing the members of the community; they reproduce the nation ideologically, as the transmitters of its culture and cultural codes, customs, religion, and language; and they reproduce the nation's ethnic or national boundaries (Yuval-Davis 1997). Moreover, women also *symbolize* the nation: in national narratives, the nation is often represented as feminized, as a woman in danger who must be protected by the men of the nation. As a result, according to Yuval-Davis, women, besides being the nation's reproducers, are also the bearers of its honour. Hence, purity and modesty are required from them (Yuval-Davis 1997).

In addition to gender, the nation and nationalism are deeply intertwined with sexuality. Mayer understands sexuality as a cultural construction, which is not fixed in time and space and "*which refers both to an individual's sexed desire and to an individual's sexed being,*" which includes ideas about pleasure and fantasy, as well as physiology and anatomy (2012: 4). Moreover, for a proper understanding of the link between nations, nationalism, and sexuality, it is important to consider that sexuality is situated in the sphere of political and cultural contestation and is subject to political and cultural restriction and repression (Mayer 2012). Thus, sexuality should not be seen as something that is merely an intimate practice,

confined to interpersonal desire and the private sphere, but as intrinsic to the public sphere and the nation (Ludwig 2016, Pryke 1998).

Nations control, in various ways, the sexuality of their members and regulate sexual boundaries (Pryke 1998; Kim-Puri 2005). According to Pryke, this is part of nation-building projects. He distinguishes two principal ways in which sexuality can feauture within such nation-building projects. The first way in which nation-building projects are preoccupied with sexuality, concerns fertility, as nationalist movements or projects attempt to regulate or even dictate the reproduction of the members of the nation (Pryke 1998). The second way Pryke identifies, is *"through the attempt to delimit what is acceptable sexual behavior on the part of the national citizen"* (1998: 541). This refers to sexual behaviors such as masturbation, pre-marital sexual relations, and homosexuality, that have been or are being framed by nationalist movements as harmful as harmful, both to the individual and the nation, often from a hygiene, health or morality perspective, in a *"quest for purity"* (1998: 541).

2.1.3. The nation, gender, and sexuality in Egypt

The above shows that nations and nationalism are strongly intertwined with gender and sexuality. In what follows, I will contextualize this within the Egyptian context, drawing on some key academic works that have delved deeper into gender and sexuality within Egyptian nation-building projects or nationalist movements. The focus in the existing gender-sensitive literature on Egyptian nationalism lies mainly on the period between Muhammad Ali's rule from the beginning of the nineteenth century and the 1919 revolution against British occupation (Ameling 2022).

In *Nurturing the Nation*, Lisa Pollard (2005) explored the origins of Egyptian nationalism and the 1919 revolution through a gender and family lens, uncovering the importance of gender and familial politics in the creation of the modern Egyptian state. Central to her argument lies the claim that Egypt's modernization projects by Egyptian elites and nationalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved installing "modern" domestic virtues, morals, and behaviors among the Egyptian elite classes, such as monogamy, the modern nuclear family and bourgeois domesticity, in a quest to create a modern, Egyptian nation as an act of opposition to the British colonial rule. In *Egypt as a Woman*, Beth Baron (2005)

delved deeper into the influence of gender and the female and feminized Egyptian citizens in the shaping of the Egyptian nation from the nineteenth century until the 1940s. Exploring the gendered language and images in nationalist rhetoric, Baron argued that the Egyptian nation was imagined and constructed as a woman and that female honor and purity were central to nationalist discourse in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. Drawing on this, Rim Naguib compares in her article *The Leader as Groom, the Nation as Bride* (2011) the hegemonic nationalist discourses in Egypt under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser and current President al-Sisi and exposes how both leaders have employed highly gendered images and symbols in their nationalistic narratives in a quest to legitimize and reinforce their autocratic military rule. In his *Working out Egypt* (2011), Wilson Chacko Jacob studied the Egyptian *effendiyya*, a term that refers to the educated, cultural bourgeoisie that was preoccupied with politics and political ideologies, and their struggle against colonial rule and against the colonial and orientalist imagination of Egypt and its citizens as degenerate, feminine, and backwards, in opposition to a virile, masculine Europe. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this social group sought to create men who were 'properly men' and 'masculine enough' to be entrusted with the responsibility of good self-government, which led to the formation of a new, performative *effendi masculinity*.

The leading academic works all reveal an intertwining of the Egyptian nation and Egyptian nationalist narrative on the one hand, and hegemonic notions of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality on the other. It is clear that nationalist identity and nationalist rhetoric in Egypt contain an undeniably strong gender component. However, research on the gender dimension in the nation-building project of current President al-Sisi and on the place of the extensive repression of LGBTQ people under his rule in his nationalist project, is scarce. In the following chapters, we will attempt to narrow this gap.

2.2. Hegemony and the nation

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation will draw on the Gramscian concept of *hegemony*. In what follows, we will first briefly frame and explain this concept historically. In the final section if this chapter, we will explore the relevance of this concept to our research and relate it to the concept of nation-building.

2.2.1. Hegemony: an exploration of the Gramscian concept

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian philosopher and revolutionary, who is very influential as a Marxist thinker to this day. As a founding member of the Italian Communist Party and critical voice against the fascist regime under Benito Mussolini, he was considered a threat to the regime, resulting in his imprisonment from 1926, until his death in 1937. However, Gramsci could not be silenced: during his prison years, he wrote his highly influential *Quaderni del Carcere* or *Prison Notebooks*, an extensive series of notes in which he reflected on numerous topics, including philosophy, politics, and culture (Gramsci & Weststeijn 2019).

From these *Prison Notebooks,* the concept of *hegemony* emerged as an important theoretical concept and as a substantial part of Gramsci's response to the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of orthodox Marxism (Bates 1975). Orthodox Marxism employed deterministic economic views, leading it to assume the proletarian revolution as a necessary and inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations of production it engendered. When historical developments in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century made it clear that these Marxist views had failed to adequately interpret and explain the political realities of the time, Gramsci set out to find answers to explain the defeat of the working-class movements in Europe and the rise and triumph of fascism in Italy (Woolcock 1985). He concluded that besides economics, ideology and ideas play a fundamental role as well, which led him to the concept of *hegemony* (De Orellana 2015).

Even though hegemony is a central theme in his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci does not elaborate his theory of hegemony in a systematic way. Thus, a precise definition of Gramsci's interpretation of the concept does not exist (Bates 1975; Lears 1985). Bates summarizes the essence of Gramsci's *hegemony* as follows: "*[t]he basic premise of the theory of hegemony is (...) that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas*" (1975: 351). Gramsci noted that in Europe, the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, did not merely rule by coercion or by merely "*giving their domination an aura of moral authority through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols*" (Lears 1985: 569). On the contrary, the bourgeoisie in Europe ruled with the consent of the subordinated classes, which Gramsci argued was linked to ideology and

consciousness (De Orellana 2015). This led him to argue that dictatorship and coercion by the ruling class are not the sole form of political rule: Gramsci also distinguished *hegemony* as a form of political leadership (Bates 1975). According to Gramsci, hegemony can be understood as "*political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the worldview by the leading class*" (Bates 1975: 352). Thus, the subordinate masses give their consent to the ruling class and their political, cultural, moral and ideological leadership based on the "*ideological predominance of the cultural norms, values and ideas of the dominant class over the dominated*" (Woolcock 1985: 204; De Orellana: 2015). These ideas always serve the interests of the dominant class. However, they are presented as serving the common interests (Singer 2017; Gramsci & Weststeijn 2019). The worldviews of the hegemonic class, those in power, become "*the border of normality, defining what the world is and how it works*" and "*turn into what Gramsci called senso comune*" - common sense (Lasio et al. 2019: 1062). The subordinated groups "*confirm the social order assuming the dominant views about what is normal, acceptable, true, and universal, thus agreeing to their conditions of subordination*" (Lasio et al. 2019: 1063), which translates into cultural hegemony for the ruling class. This cultural hegemony precedes political, economic, and social hegemony, upheld by legitimacy and consent of the masses (Gramsci & Weststeijn 2019).

For a good understanding of hegemony and how dominant groups can achieve it, the concept of *civil society* is of central importance. Gramsci analyzes the state as "*composed of two separate yet complementary spheres: the civil society and the political society*" (Singer 2017). In Gramsci's understanding, *civil society* refers to private organisms or cultural practice institutions "*which contribute in molecular fashion to the formation of social and political consciousness*" (Bates 1975: 353; Singer 2017). Civil society consists of the educational system, religious institutions, literature, and the media. These "*hegemonic apparatuses*" (Woolcock 1985: 206) serve as instruments for the creation of consent among the masses and the exercise of hegemony, by promoting the cultural and ideological values and ideas of the dominant class, camouflaged under the guise of common sense (Singer 2017; Woolcock 1985). The second sphere is *political society*. With this concept, Gramsci refers to public, coercive institutions, such as the police, the military, and courts, or "*repressive apparatuses*,"

as Singer (2017) calls them, which are seized upon by the ruling class to exercise direct domination and to which the dominant groups resort to discipline *"those who do not 'consent'"* (Bates 1975: 353; Singer 2017). Civil society is thus the domain of consent, whereas political society is the arena of coercion. Gramsci speaks of a dialectical relationship between these two spheres. According to him, consent and coercion always co-exist and are mutually dependent (Lears 1985; Bates 1975).[1] Hegemony can thus be summarized as *"the interplay between consent and coercion with the aim of producing leadership"* (Singer 2017).

It is important to note that according to Gramsci, hegemony is never fixed: *"hegemony is not a constant thing, it's always changing by challenging, resisting, and endorsing the 'dominant hegemony'. There is always room for a counter-hegemony"* (Singer 2017). Counter-hegemony refers to challenging the hegemonic ideology and dominant cultural ideas - which conflicts with the interest of the ruling class (Singer 2017).

When discussing Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, however, it is important to note that this concept must be understood within a specific context. Gramsci grasped and used *hegemony* in terms of class relations, to analyze class power and the distribution of goods in a capitalist society, relating to the bourgeoisie as the ruling group, and peasants and the proletariat as the subaltern groups (Lasio et al. 2019; Lears 1985; Ludwig 2016). Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to broaden the use of this concept beyond its use as a tool to understand class relations and the *"economic and political stability of capitalism"* (Lasio et al. 2019: 1063). Ludwig claims that there is no logical reason to restrict hegemony to class relations and advocates utilizing the concept as a tool to understand the formation of state power, while taking into account power relations other than class relations, such as gendered, heteronormative and racist power relations, through which modern societies are shaped as well (Ludwig 2016). This view will be the starting point of this dissertation as well.

2.2.2. Nation-building as a hegemonic project

Thomas Miley claims that *"the nation is best conceived as a hegemonic project"* (2018: 197). This claim relies on the work of Bob Jessops, who, in line with the Gramscian tradition, defines a *hegemonic project* as a *"project to secure the political, intellectual, and moral leadership of the dominant class(es)"* (Jessop 2008: 12). As we have already discussed, the nation is never

completed and nation-building should be understood as a never-ending project, as *"national identity is incessantly negotiated through discourse"* (Lane Bruner 2002: 1). Lane Bruner states the following:

> "*There is, therefore, a never-ending and politically consequential rhetorical struggle over national identity, and, because national identities are incessantly negotiated, nation building requires the services of advocates offering accounts of national character. State representatives and those who publicly content with them compete for the national imagination of citizens, particularly in times of social unrest, by appropriating available cultural materials to create visions of public belonging.*" (Lane Bruner 2002: 1)

That struggle of political and nationalist actors to spread and entrench their nationalist narrative as the dominant narrative, accepted by other groups in society as being in line with the common interest, is the basis of nation-building projects. This coincides with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which, like national identities, is also never fixed, but is perpetually subject to contestation and resistance and must therefore be reaffirmed time and again by the ruling groups. In the following section of this dissertation, we will discover that Egyptian President al-Sisi is highly committed to his nation-building project and to anchoring his discourse on the national Egyptian identity in Egyptian society, with the aim of legitimizing his political rule. Therefore, we will analyze his nation-building project as a hegemonic project.

3. Homosexuality and LGBTQ people in Egypt

In the following chapter, we will explore the situation of the LGBTQ community in Egypt, focusing on the current state of affairs in Egyptian society. While it is not the goal of this dissertation to provide an exhaustive historical overview of the political, legal, and socio-cultural position of LGBTQ people in Egypt, this chapter does aim to provide a brief overview of their situation from President Hosni Mubarak until today. In this chapter, we will mainly focus on the state-led repression of LGBTQ individuals. However, in order to paint a more complete picture of the reality of homosexual individuals in the Egyptian context, we will start with a section in which we will outline the sociocultural position of homosexuality in Egyptian society.

3.1. Homosexuality in Egyptian society

Homosexuality is highly taboo in Egyptian society. However, historical sources shows that this has not always been the case and that same-sex relations and homoerotic love were to some extent recognized as cultural practices in Middle Eastern Muslim societies for centuries, albeit on condition of discretion and respect for certain conventions (Dalacoura 2014). However, this tolerant attitude shifted in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The academic literature on this topic offers multiple explanations for this shift (Dalacoura 2014; Needham 2012; Schaer 2022). However, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve deeper into these different explanations. In what follows, we will briefly discuss the sociocultural position of gay individuals in Egypt.

Homosexuality is generally considered shameful in contemporary Egyptian society, as it goes against "*some of the most important principles of Arab society: family, procreation, and Islam*" (Needham 2012: 297). We will not elaborate on the theological debates surrounding homosexuality in Islam and Coptic Christianity, the two largest religions in Egypt. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is sufficient to point out that prominent religious scholars and institutions of both religions do not condone same-sex relations (Azer 2016). Al-Azhar, the most important Sunni institution in Egypt, rejects homosexuality, condemning it as "obscene" and "reprehensible", as this "*goes against the teaching of religions*" (Amin 2021) – a viewpoint that is shared by the Coptic Church. This is illustrated by the 2017 conference organized by

St. Mark's Orthodox Coptic Cathedral, the representation of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. 'The Volcano of Homosexuality Conference' consisted of a series of lectures by Coptic priests around the 'recovery' of homosexuality, which it considers a sin and disease (Egypt Independent 2017).

These anti-homosexual sentiments are widely shared within Egyptian society. Social disapproval is evident in the common Egyptian-Arabic terms for 'homosexuality' or 'homosexual men'. The most commonly used term to designate 'homosexuality' is the pejorative term *al-shudhūdh*, which literally means *abnormality* or *anomaly*, although it is worth noting that the newer, neutral term *al-mithlyya al-jinsya*, which can be directly translated as *homosexuality*, is beginning to gain traction in Egyptian society (Azer 2016; Ameling 2022). This strong disapproval of homosexuality is also reflected in numbers: a 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that 95% of Egyptians believe that homosexuality should be rejected by society (Pew Research Center 2013). The results of a new survey in 2019 remained along the same lines (Poushter and Kent 2020; Holleis 2023). In 2022, these homophobic sentiments took the form of a new online anti-LGBTQ movement in Egypt that called itself 'Fetrah'. *Fetrah* is Arabic for human instinct, but it can also be translated as '*the state of purity and innocence*'. Through various social media channels, the movement spread its message that homosexuality should be rejected as "deviant" and that there are only two genders. Although the original Facebook page was taken down after only a few days, the movement quickly went viral: by that time, the page had reached 500,000 likes, and the hashtag is still used daily among its mostly young followers (Shihab-Eldin 2023; Schaer 2022).

As a result of this widespread homophobia, social exclusion, discrimination, and mistreatment of members of the LGBTQ community are very common in Egypt. Consequently, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender Egyptians often feel strongly compelled to suppress their identities to keep themselves safe (Kanso 2018). Within the family, honor plays an important role in Egyptian society. The fear that a gay family member will damage the family's honor, or that traditional marriage between a man and a woman and procreation will not take place, often leads families to disown or mistreat the person in question, or even to resort to honor killings. Sometimes families seek refuge in 'sexual reorientation' therapy with a psychiatrist (Whitaker 2006).

However, the exclusion of people who engage in same-sex sexual activity is not limited to the domestic sphere. Research by UN Rapporteur Leilani Farha in 2018 revealed discrimination against the LGBTQ community in Egypt's housing market: LGBTQ people are widely denied housing, either by being evicted from their homes or by landlords refusing to rent to them because of their sexual orientation or engagement in same-sex relations (Kanso 2018). The physical safety and integrity of LGBTQ people in Egypt is also under serious threat. This is largely due to a state-led crackdown, which will be discussed later in this chapter, but also partly due to non-state actors, as LGBTQ people are regularly victims of organized crime by gangs. Through online (dating) applications, they are lured to a house under the guise of a date, where they are then assaulted and humiliated by gang members who extort them by taking videos and threatening to distribute these videos online: "*The footage shows them being forced to strip and dance while being beaten and abused. They are forced at knife point to give their full names and admit that they are gay*" (Shihab-Eldin 2023). Perpetrators of such attacks are rarely arrested – in part because victims are often afraid to report the attack for fear that their sexuality will be considered a greater crime than gang violence (Shihab-Eldin 2023).

3.2. The legal framework surrounding homosexuality in Egypt

Although Egypt does not explicitly criminalize homosexuality or same-sex relations, the country has strict public decency laws in its Penal Code that are used to persecute or discriminate against members of the LGBTQ community. These laws punish "*acts of 'public indecency,' 'incitement to debauchery,' and the possession or distribution of materials deemed to violate 'public decency'*" (Younes 2023). Strikingly, the Penal Code does not provide a definition for public indecency and debauchery, or an exact overview of which acts are punishable (Younes 2023). In her online report for Human Rights Watch, Younes (2023) lists some of the laws that are used to arrest people who engage in, or are suspected of engaging in, same-sex relations:

> *"Article 178," which punishes anyone who trades or distributes materials, including photos, that violate "public morals" with up to two years in prison and a fine up to 10,000 Egyptian pounds (US$566).*

Article 269a, which punishes anyone found to incite a passerby with "signals or words to commit indecency" with imprisonment for up to one month and heightened penalties for repeat offenders.

Article 278, which punishes anyone who publicly commits 'a scandalous act against virtue' with detention for up to one year or a fine of up to 300 pounds (US$17)."
(Younes 2023)

However, the most important and frequently used law in the context of LGBTQ repression is Article 9 of Law 10/1961 on the Combating of Prostitution. This law punishes "the habitual practice of debauchery" and was originally related to combating and criminalizing sex work (Younes 2023; Abdel Hamid 2017). Because 'debauchery' is not clearly delineated, Egypt's law enforcement authorities and high courts can interpret the term very broadly, often interpreting it as "*consensual same-sex conduct between men*" (Younes 2023), regardless of whether money was exchanged or not, despite the fact that the law was originally intended to combat sex work (Shihab-Eldin 2023). A second important law often used to prosecute LGBTQ individuals is Article 8 of Law 10/1961. This law relates to *"publicizing materials on the internet that incite debauchery, and invite its practice*" (Abdel Hamid 2017: 27).

3.3. The history of state-led LGBTQ repression in Egypt

Due to the lack of an explicit legal framework criminalizing homosexuality, the Egyptian Penal Code offers freedom of interpretation for law enforcement authorities and courts to punish homosexuality and same-sex relations. Consequently, Egypt's recent history is characterized by violent repression of LGBTQ people, the first intensification of which is witnessed in the late 1990s (El-Menyawi 2006). In the following section, we will provide an overview of these state-led LGBTQ repressions. We will structure this overview chronologically by president, starting with Hosni Mubarak, followed by Mohamed Morsi and finally current President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

3.3.1. LGBTQ repression under Hosni Mubarak

Under President Hosni Mubarak, who was in power from 1981 to 2011, from the late 1990s the country witnessed increased attention by the state to men who (allegedly) engaged in

same-sex relations (Magued 2023). This resulted into state campaigns against homosexual individuals or individuals perceived as such, conducted by the Cairo Vice Squad, which "*apparently felt growing pressure to 'clean up' the places where 'perversion' transpired*" (Human Rights Watch 2004: 18). Despite these increased levels of attention from Egyptian police forces for men who engaged in homosexual activities, this period in time was not dominated by an omnipresent repression of LGBTQ individuals. According to Pratt, *"Egyptian authorities (...) generally turned a blind eye to the activities of the gay community and some observers even considered Egypt's gay community to be thriving"* (Pratt 2007: 131). Provided discretion, members of the LGBTQ community could meet in public: a number of pubs and parties emerged in Cairo, where men from all different societal backgrounds and classes who wanted to engage in sexual relations with other men could meet one another (Human Rights Watch 2004; Pratt 2007; Bahgat 2001). The Cairene nightlife provided a space where these men could meet in relative safety, not only to engage in sexual relations with other men, but also to organize themselves and establish a shared identity through conversation and friendship: some of the men who frequented these pubs and parties started to appropriate the term "gay" (Human Rights Watch 2004). Despite state campaigns against men (allegedly) having sexual relations with other men, these individuals enjoyed a certain degree of freedom of movement and relative tolerance, allowing activist voices to rise in Egypt, advocating for sexual freedom: "*The intervention of international agencies advocating for human rights enables national activists to adopt a legitimate and resonating human rights' frame in the defense of the LGBTQ rights*" (Magued 2023: 138).

However, this policy of relative tolerance under Mubarak came to an end in 2001: after the turn of the century, repressive state campaigns against (alleged) homosexual individuals gained momentum. The key event that marked this shift in the treatment of (perceived) homosexual Egyptians was the 'Queen Boat case', the arrest of 52 homosexual men, or men perceived as such, at the LGBTQ-friendly nightclub Queen Boat after a police raid on May 11, 2001. These arrests led to a sensational trial against the accused on the grounds of debauchery and religious desecration, and the eventual conviction of 23 men (Azer 2016). This case ushered in a national crackdown on LGBTQ individuals in Egypt.

This crackdown, however, did not occur out of nowhere. In the months prior to the Queen Boat case there had already been indications of a changing climate: the country witnessed an increased state surveillance of Egyptian men engaging in same-sex relations or in activism to advocate for LGBTQ rights, resulting in the harassment and arrest of a significant number of Egyptian homosexual men by Egyptian police in public or in house raids. These men were either identified by informants or entrapped by police through websites and chat-rooms, set up for arrest through fake dates (Pratt 2007; El-Menyawi 2006; Bahgat 2001). The identification of these men often led to charges based on "habitual debauchery" or "contempt of religion," resulting in their arrest, detention and torture. However, this was not always the case: in some cases, the men were harassed by the police or "*quietly abducted from their households, not to be heard from for long periods of time*" (El-Menyawi 2006: 19) without formal charges being filed against them.

Thus, the Queen Boat case took place in a context of increased state surveillance of men who allegedly engaged in sexual relations with other men. On May 11, 2001, 55 (allegedly) homosexual men were arrested in a large-scale police raid. Most of them were arrested at a floating night club in Cairo, Queen Boat, which regularly hosted LGBTQ friendly parties. According to their lawyers, even men who were not present in the nightclub at the time of the arrests, were arrested in their private homes, in order to inflate the number of those arrested in front of the press (Bahgat 2001; Long 2004). Only three of these men were released after several days. The remaining 52 men were arrested and held in degrading conditions, including torture, beatings, whippings, electric shocks, and anal examinations by the Forensic Medical Authority to determine "*whether they had engaged in sodomy*" (Azer 2016). These anal examinations are not only based on an outdated nineteenth century mythology about the effect of homosexual sexual activity on the body, but they are also considered a form of torture according to international standards and by UNCAT, the United Nations Committee Against Torture (Long 2004; Ameling 2022). Other forms of torture suffered by these men during their detention were specific to the detention of men accused of same-sex relations: they were forced to undress and pressured to confess whether they were 'active' or 'passive'; other inmates were encouraged to beat them; and they were

subjected to verbal abuse by police and prison staff, including being called *khawal*, a derogatory term for men who have sex with other men (Pratt 2007).

Just over a month after the arrests, the first trial in the country's history to try Egyptians for allegedly engaging in same-sex relations began (Pratt 2007). On July 18, 2001, the highly mediated trial began under the scrutiny of the international community. By November 14, 21 of the initial 52 defendants had been convicted of 'habitual debauchery' and ordered to serve prison sentences ranging from one to two years. The main defendant was sentenced to five years in prison for 'contempt of religion' and debauchery, while his alleged aide was sentenced to three years in prison. The remaining accused were acquitted (Pratt 2007).

The trial was heavily mediated: for months, national newspapers reported on the arrests, the charges, and the trial, with stigmatizing headlines that openly named the accused and called them 'Satan-worshippers' or 'sexual perverts'. The demonization was not just limited to the accused: the media's massive coverage and widespread queerphobic rhetoric created a "*new image of homosexual conduct*" (Human Rights Watch 2004) that began to circulate in Egyptian society. For the first time in Egypt, homosexual conduct received unprecedented public attention. It became no longer a private matter, but a matter of public concern and large-scale sexual 'deviance' (Human Rights Watch 2004).

In the years following the Queen Boat case, Egypt witnessed a crackdown on (perceived) LGBTQ individuals: people were arrested on the streets, police officers infiltrated gay associations, tapped phones to round up and arrest men who were suspected of homosexual behavior or lured them through online dating sites or chat rooms, and the Cairo Vice Squad raided LGBTQ-friendly venues and private homes on a weekly basis (Bahgat 2001; Trew 2015; Human Rights Watch 2004). These arrests were usually followed by detention and torture and resulted in lawsuits on the grounds of debauchery (Long 2005). These arrests were a hot topic in the Egyptian state media, which framed the homosexual relationships and sexual activities of the arrested Egyptian citizens as a national scandal (Long 2004).

Exact figures of the number of arrests during this crackdown do not exist, as many of the prosecutions, detentions, arrests, and abuses, and have remained unreported (Human Rights Watch 2004). A February 2004 Human Right Watch report speaks of 179 men arrested and

charged since early 2001 on suspicion of 'debauchery', but adds that this is in all likelihood only a fraction of the actual number of men who were prosecuted by the state on the basis of their alleged engagement in same-sex relations: in reality, up to hundreds of men were probably harassed, arrested and often tortured without being charged (Human Rights Watch 2004). Trew even speaks of nearly 1,000 men arrested in a two-year period following the Queen Boat case (2015).

In 2004, after three years of intense crackdown, large-scale police operations and arrests came to an end, and Egypt entered a period of relative calm for Egyptians engaged in same-sex sexual activity and relationships. Sporadic arrests continued, but there was no longer a coordinated, large-scale state-led operation targeting men engaging in same-sex relations and sexual behavior. Gay men were even able to reassemble in public places in downtown Cairo to a certain extent (Londoño 2014; Acconcia et al. 2022).

In the academic literature on the topic, the arrest campaigns under Mubarak are explained as a "lightning rod," "*to divert public attention from economic recession and the government's liquidity crisis*" (El-Menyawi 2006: 19; Awwad 2010). The arrests and the accompanying media frenzy distracted Egyptian citizens from Mubarak's failure to tackle the deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances (Human Rights Watch 2004). The Queen Boat case, for instance, diverted public attention when Mubarak's regime introduced additional sale taxes as a new austerity measure (El-Menyawi). In addition, El-Menyawi (2006) also argues that the targeting of LGBTQ individuals on moral and religious grounds was an attempt to reassure the Egyptian public that, despite numerous arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members, the regime was not pursuing an anti-Islamic course.

3.3.2. The 2011 uprisings and Mohamed Morsi's rule

On January 25, 2011, uprisings broke out in Egypt. Large cross-class networks connected and workers, middle-class professionals, government employees, unemployed individuals, young people, students and housewives mobilized in mass riots against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak under the slogan "bread, freedom and human dignity" to demand socioeconomic changes, to stand up for their human and social rights, and to end rampant police brutalities against Egyptian citizens. These uprisings eventually led to the ousting of

Hosni Mubarak after a 30-year term of office (Abdalla 2012; Acconcia et al. 2022). LGBTQ advocates were among the demonstrators and protested alongside them in these uprisings, where they not only supported the demands of the other protesters, but also saw an opportunity to advocate for the advancement of LGBTQ rights in the public sphere (Acconcia et al. 2022). During the uprisings, members of the LGBTQ community were among the groups most targeted by state actors precisely because of their sexual and gender identity: they were targeted for attacks, arrests, harassment, and anal examinations. Nevertheless, the uprisings also represented a first step towards emancipation: for the first time, LGBTQ rights were being discussed in public, and LGBTQ individuals and activists were able to organize themselves. These meetings between activists continued to be organized after the uprisings, although they remained more informal in nature. LGBTQ activists primarily organized through social media, as it was *"easier to bypass state control"* (Acconcia et al. 2022: 8). Hence, proper LGBTQ organizations were not yet formed for security reasons, as it was safer for activists not to disclose their sexual orientation in public (Acconcia et al. 2022).

In June 2012, Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected as Mubarak's successor. However, his presidency was short-lived: about a year later, in late June 2013, Egypt witnessed new massive demonstrations across the country in response to the high rates of unemployment and inflation. Millions of Egyptians took to the streets to express their discontent with President Morsi, which eventually culminated in his ouster on July 3 by the Egyptian army, led by army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in what many consider to be a coup d'état. One year later, al-Sisi was officially elected as the new president in June 2014 (Van de Bildt 2015; Al-Tahhan 2018; Ameling 2022).

During Morsi's brief rule, Egypt's LGBTQ community was able to breathe a sigh of relief, despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood, which vehemently opposes homosexuality, was in power (Trew 2015; Holleis 2023). The main reason for this, is that during his presidency, Morsi failed to get a full grip on the Egyptian security forces. In addition, the police force had also been weakened by the 2011 uprisings and was still rebuilding during Morsi's rule (Trew 2015). Ibrahim Abdella (2015) also cites that the security forces had to deal with other major security issues during this period, namely protests and civil disobedience. Thus, this period was marked by few arrests, which made room for encounters between LGBTQ people in

public and a tentative presence of LGBTQ activism on social media: "*the fledging gay community was able to flourish*" (Trew 2015). However, al-Sisi's rise to power would drastically change this, introducing a policy of "*violent assaults, torture (including forced anal exams), arbitrary detention, a denial of the rights to assembly and expression, and discrimination in accessing healthcare, education, employment and housing*" against Egyptian LGBTQ people (Younes 2020a).

3.3.3. Al-Sisi's crackdown on the LGBTQ community

The targeting and persecution of LGBTQ people, particularly gay men, has been part of al-Sisi's policies since the beginning of his rise to power. In the following section, we will provide an overview of the tactics used by police forces under al-Sisi to persecute LGBTQ individuals and the human rights violations associated with these persecution campaigns. We will then briefly examine the role of the media in this crackdown. Al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ policies are not only manifested in the harassment, arrest and sentencing of LGBTQ people, but also have an important policy-oriented dimension, which we will also briefly consider to conclude this chapter.

3.3.3.1. Harassment, arrests, and convictions

As early as October 2013, the first large-scale arrest of 14 (alleged) homosexual men took place, at a gym in a Cairene suburb. One month later, police officers raided a party at a villa in another Cairo suburb, where they arrested and detained ten men on suspicion of homosexual conduct (Londoño 2014). The arrests and harassment of LGBTQ individuals under al-Sisi has not ceased since and, like the crackdown under Mubarak from 2001 to 2004, took the form of coordinated, state-led repression. Exact figures on the number of people thath have been arrested since al-Sisi's rise to power do not exist, but it is clear that the crackdown under al-Sisi is even more intense than the LGBTQ repression that took place during Mubarak's rule, leading Abdella to speak of a "*manhunt for gay people*" because of the new intensity of this repression (2015: 4). Ameling mentions a five-fold increase in arrests between the military coup in 2013 and March 2017 (2022).

These arrests occur in a variety of ways. On the one hand, there are police raids on LGBTQ-friendly venues such as clubs and bars, but this is no longer the primary way in which LGBTQ

people and those perceived to be LGBTQ are arrested. Increasingly, police officers are raiding homes and arresting and harassing people on the streets (Abdella 2015; Abdel Hamid 2017; Younes 2020a; Younes 2023). However, the tactics used by police officers and the Vice Squad to persecute LGBTQ people have become more sophisticated in recent years, integrating technology and online surveillance into their policing, traces of which we saw under Mubarak's regime (Shihab-Eldin 2023; Holleis 2023). In a 2023 human rights report, Younes notes that "*while digital platforms have enabled LGBT people to express themselves and amplify their voices, they have also become tools for state-sponsored repression*" (Younes 2023). The following has now become the main method of entrapment used by the police: police officers set up fake accounts on social media or dating or networking sites such as Grindr or WhosHere and contact LGBTQ people, flirt with them - sometimes for weeks on end and regularly ask them to send explicit pictures - and eventually persuade them to meet up, in order to arrest them on suspicion of debauchery. Sometimes the police officers pose as wealthy visitors from the Gulf, luring the targeted individual with their money (Holleis 2023; Abdel Hamid 2017). During the online conversations that precede the 'date', police officers often pressure their victim to agree to sex in exchange for money, since proving that money was exchanged or that such an offer was made can provide authorities with the evidence they need to pursue a case in court (Shihab-Eldin 2023). Their interlocutors are also sometimes asked to bring condoms to the arranged meeting, which are then used as evidence of sex work during the arrest and increase the burden of proof (Holleis 2023).

Even on the street or during police raids, the digital activities of people suspected of being part of the LGBTQ community are an important piece of evidence to legitimize their arrest and detention: police officers unlawfully force them to unlock their phones by threatening or actually using force against them, in order to collect private information such as photos, (LGBTQ-) dating and networking applications, and WhatsApp chats to enable the prosecution of these individuals. In fact, having such chats, pictures, websites or applications on one's phone is sufficient evidence to arrest someone (Younes 2023). Human Rights Watch reports that when no incriminating information is found on an arrested person's phone, security forces sometimes download same-sex dating applications onto the detainee's phone and upload pornographic material to justify and prolong their detention (Younes 2023).

Sometimes police officers go as far as editing photos of the detainee into explicit images and uploading or mimicking conversations as additional 'evidence' (Shihab-Eldin 2023; Younes 2023).

During their detention, arrested (alleged) LGBTQ people often have to face several serious violations of their rights, such as being denied access to a lawyer and being forced to sign coerced confession statements. Similar to the crackdown under Mubarak, detained (alleged) LGBTQ people face discrimination based on their alleged sexual or gender identity: mistreatment of these individuals is significantly worse than the treatment faced by other detainees, *"including the denial of food and water, family and legal representation, and medical services as well as verbal, physical, and sexual assault"* in police custody (Younes 2023; Human Rights Watch 2020). In many cases, they are forced to undergo humiliating 'virginity tests' or anal probes by the Forensic Medicine Authority to 'prove' their same-sex activities. Many detainees have also reported physical and sexual assaults by fellow inmates, who were incited by the police staff to abuse them (Trew 2015; Younes 2020a).

When it comes to trial and, ultimately, conviction, what stands out most is the speed of trial and conviction and the severity of the sentences handed down under al-Sisi's presidency (Kingsley 2014). The sentences that have been given since al-Sisi came to power have often been extremely severe, with prison sentences as high as seven or eight years (Azer 2016; Kingsley 2014). The speed of referrals in debauchery cases and trials under al-Sisi's rule is exceptional as well, which is unique for this type of case: the life cycle of debauchery cases, from the defendant's arrest to the moment of appeal, is on average one to two months (Abdel Hamid 2017). However, this is not without consequences: it makes it impossible for lawyers to raise ill-treatment or illegal procedures, such as anal examinations, and also makes it very difficult for lawyers to challenge the legality of their clients' detention. By this practice, the right to sufficient time and facilitations to prepare an adequate defense, or sometimes even the right to a lawyer in the pre-trial phase, is also compromised. In short, the speedy handling of debauchery cases of LGBTQ individuals or people suspected of homosexual behavior jeopardizes the right to a fair trial of the detained individuals in question (Abdel Hamid 2017).

Since al-Sisi came to power, state-sponsored repression of LGBTQ people is no longer limited to Egyptians: henceforth, foreign LGBTQ people residing in Egypt are not safe either (Abdel Hamid 2017). In 2015, an Egyptian court ruled that LGBTQ foreigners could be deported or banned from entering the country "*to protect the public interest and religious and social values*" (Williams 2015). The recent arrests of foreigners who were eventually deported, were mostly carried out in the same way as other arrests of (suspected) LGBTQ people: through online entrapment or house raids. Little consideration is given to the nationality of those deported: both Arab refugees as well as Europeans and even people with dual Egyptian citizenship have been deported or banned from the country in recent years. Since the beginning of the crackdown, around ten cases of deportation based on the habitual practice of debauchery have been identified (Abdel Hamid 2017).

3.3.3.2. Sexual scandals in the media

Al-Sisi's crackdown on LGBTQ people and people who are perceived as such, is marked by some large-scale and highly mediated cases of police raids and arrests. Below we will briefly discuss the three main cases.

The first large-scale, high-profile operation under al-Sisi is known as the 'Gay Wedding' or – as it was called by the Egyptian media - the 'Deviants' Wedding' case. This case took place in the summer of 2014, following a video that rapidly circulated on Egypt's social media platforms. The video showed a group of men on a boat on the Nile in Cairo, celebrating an alleged marriage ceremony between two young men, exchanging rings and kissing each other on the cheek (Abdel Hamid 2017; Azer 2016). When television host Tamer Amin broadcast parts of the video and called for police action because of this display of 'debauchery and vice', this led to a manhunt for and eventually the arrest of eight men featured in the video on September 5, on the grounds of habitual practice of debauchery, incitement of debauchery, publicizing materials that offend public decency and publishing materials that advertise debauchery. After their arrest, the men were referred by the prosecution to the Forensic Medicine Authority, where they had to undergo torture in the form of anal examinations. Regarding the weeks in prison following their arrest, the men testified about constant beatings and verbal abuse (Abdel Hamid 2017; Abdella 2015). In November of that year, the

men were eventually acquitted of habitual practice and incitement of debauchery. However, they were still sentenced to three years in prison for publicizing and advertising debauchery, which was eventually reduced to one year upon appeal (Abdel Hamid 2017; Azer 2016).

Later that year, a second large-scale, highly mediated case took place, known as the 'Ramses Bathhouse' case. In December 2014, Cairene police officers conducted a large-scale raid at the Bab al-Bahr *hammam* in Ramses, an area of Cairo, arresting 26 men on suspicion of the habitual practice of debauchery. Not only was the scale of the arrests striking, but especially the presence of local television reporter Mona Iraqi and a film crew from the pro-government new channel Al Kahera Wal Nas, was unprecedented. Mona Iraqi and the film captured the entire arrest on camera and filmed the men being herded half-naked into a police van (Abdel Hamid 2017; Abdella 2015; Trew 2015). This coverage of the allegedly homosexual men's humiliation quickly spread across the country via social media (Loveluck 2014). The men were eventually acquitted (Azer 2016).

The third and most recent high-profile case under al-Sisi's presidency is generally referred to as the 'Rainbow Flag' case by the Egyptian media. It took place in the fall of 2017. On September 22, the popular Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila performed in Cairo, openly advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights. Several concertgoers considered the concert a safe context for waving the rainbow flag, an international symbol for sexual and gender diversity (Ameling 2022; Abdel Hamid 2017). When photos of the flag raising were posted on social media, they quickly circulated nationwide on all kinds of social media platforms, eliciting thousands of hateful messages and positive counter-comments and sparking a fierce online debate (Younes 2023). The result was the most extensive crackdown on LGBTQ individuals in Egypt's history: dozens of alleged LGBTQ individuals, mostly men, were arrested. Some were identified through the photos and video footage of the concert on social media as concert goers, others were arrested through (gay) dating apps and websites or were picked up in cruising spots for middle- and working-class gay men in Cairo and Giza, and some were randomly picked up on the street based in their appearance (Ameling 2022; Younes 2023). Ameling speaks of 75 arrested within a month of the concert (2022), while Younes' report for Human Rights Watch speaks of hundreds of arrests (2023). One of those arrested was Sarah Hegazy, an Egyptian lesbian feminist and LGBTQ activist, who was photographed at the concert, waving a rainbow

flag. During her detention, she was subjected to torture, including electric shocks and solitary confinement, and had to endure sexual assault and verbal abuse by fellow detainees who had been urged to do so by police and supervisors. She was only released after three months, after which she sought asylum in Canada. She eventually took her own life in 2020, which caused a shock wave in the LGBTQ community worldwide, especially in Egypt. Sarah became a symbol of the queerphobic violence and repression by the Egyptian government (Younes 2020b; Acconcia et al. 2022).

What is striking about the three cases mentioned above is the extensive, sensational, and often aggressive media coverage by local Egyptian government-friendly and government-controlled news outlets (Azer 2016; Acconia et al. 2022). A key element of this coverage is the blatant invasion of privacy that arrestees often face: in very many cases of arrests and trials, the full names, ages, residences of the suspects and other personal details and information, such as their employers, are published by pro-government media outlets, often even before the suspects are convicted, ruining reputations, career prospects and lives. In some cases, even the passport numbers of deported gay foreign nationals have been published (Abdel Hamid 2017; Loveluck 2014). Moreover, officials also often leak photos of the arrestees to media outlets, sometimes showing them as they are posing wearing makeup or women's clothing. It is clear that these media outlets would have never been able to gather this information without the active cooperation of the police or other government officials (Abdel Hamid 2017; Londoño 2014).

In the report "The Trap: Punishing Sexual Difference in Egypt" (2017), Abdel Hamid argues that such sensational reporting and news outlets' "*insistence on publishing numerous photos with relatively small news, not exceeding a paragraph or two, confirms that what drives these websites is not the right of the public to know, but rather to create scandals*" (2017: 46). Through their coverage of arrests of alleged LGBTQ individuals, Egyptian media play an important role in the repression of and incitement against these individuals. In doing so, they often reproduce the narratives that were created by officers of the Morality Police: with the shift from raids of LGBTQ cruising venues to arrests via (LGBTQ-) dating applications and websites, large-scale arrests have become rare, and arrests are mostly limited to one or two individuals. Consequently, police often report several arrests in one statement, framing these

as a chain of arrests of big 'rings of sexual deviants', even though those arrested are in no way connected to each other. The same narrative is sustained in the media when they report on these arrests, again feeding the narrative of sexual scandals (Abdel Hamid 2017).

As we have seen in the case of the 'Gay Wedding' case and the 'Ramses Bathhouse' case, the media's involvement does not end there: in some cases, news outlets even act as instigators for the police against LGBTQ people, going as far as reporting alleged individuals engaging in same-sex sexual activities (Abdel Hamid 2017). By dramatizing and framing crackdowns against LGBTQ people as major sexual scandals and paying extraordinary attention to them, as has been the case with the 'Gay Wedding' case, the 'Ramses Bathhouse' case or the 'Rainbow Waving' case, among others, the media create a state of 'moral panic' among the Egyptian population (Ameling 2022; Abdel Hamid 2017). This is achieved by depicting LGBTQ people or people perceived as such "*as a threat to the morals of society, and as violent and dangerous to other citizens*" (Abdel Hamid 2017: 42). In chapter six of this dissertation, we will elaborate more on the mechanisms and language used that enable this stigmatization and oppression by the media.

3.3.3.3. Al-Sisi's national and international policies

Repression of (perceived) LGBTQ people under al-Sisi not only takes the form of arrests and prosecutions, but also continues in domestic policy decisions and on the international stage. Under al-Sisi, several decisions have been made in recent years within the legal and legislative framework of Egypt's domestic policy regarding LGBTQ individuals. Following the 'Rainbow Flag' case, measures were taken by the Supreme Council for Media Regulation on September 30, 2017 to restrict Egyptian media coverage of LGBTQ individuals. Henceforth, local news outlets were not allowed to report on homosexuality without stating that homosexuality is "*improper conduct, a disease and a disgrace that should be hidden*" (Ameling 2022: 26). In addition, LGBTQ individuals who are featured in media coverage on homosexuality or LGBTQ people, should always be portrayed as remorseful (Ameling 2022). Less than a month later, MP Abdel-Moneim Al-Alimi introduced a bill that would legally define homosexuality and make it punishable by up to 15 years in prison. In addition, the identity of those persecuted could be made public, making them more vulnerable to violence from state and non-state

actors. Although this bill did not pass, it had the support of 67 other members of parliament, which is illustrative of the intensification of repression and increasing criminalization of homosexuality (Ameling 2022; Abdel Jalil 2017).

In the fall of 2022, al-Sisi's Egyptian regime took an additional step in its quest to curb homosexuality in the country, as the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, Egypt's highest media regulatory body, implemented a new set of regulations and licenses to be issued to online streaming platforms such as Disney+ and Netflix, aiming to limit the visibility of LGBTQ+ relationships or sexual acts in series and films. In a statement, the Council noted that "*the licenses and regulations include obligating these platforms to abide by the societal norms and values of the state and taking the necessary measures in the event of broadcasting materials that conflict with the values of society*" (Al-Monitor 2022). Recently released films such as Pixar's animated children's film "Lightyear" and Marvel's "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness", which contain 'homosexual references', were banned in the country (The New Arab 2022). The decision allegedly came in response to an increasing number of Egyptian subscribers to Netflix and Disney+ calling for measures to regulate the streaming platforms' content, according to the Council (Al-Monitor 2022).

This decision by the Supreme Council for Media Regulation was accompanied by a decision by the Egyptian Ministry of Education to organize anti-homosexuality campaigns in schools, to combat the content of streaming platforms that 'promote homosexuality', to provide 'correct' sex education to school-age children, and to prevent children from engaging in behaviors that are considered 'sexually deviant' in Egyptian society (The New Arab 2022; Khaled 2022; Holleis 2023). Specifically, this will be done by including sex education in the curriculum of Egyptian schools and by organizing seminars and lectures in schools (Khaled 2022; Al-Monitor 2022). Similar to the Supreme Council for Media Regulation's decision, this measure is being implemented in response to the alleged high demand from parents to prevent their children from deviant sexual behavior, according to the Ministry of Education (Khaled 2022).

This trend continues in Egypt's stance in the international political arena. In 2015, all member states of the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Thiaw

2016). SDG 5 reads as follows: "*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" (Khalil 2014). This goal includes ensuring sexual and reproductive rights. However, a statement in which Egypt comments and explains its commitment to the SDGs underlines that "*the interpretation of sexual and reproductive rights as including (...) promoting LGBT issues*" is not acceptable and will not be a focus of Egypt's policy plan (Khalil 2014). In 2016, one year after signing the SDGs, Egypt led a group of 57 countries that refused to adopt a UN resolution on the protection of LGBTQ+ persons, which sought the appointment of an Independent Expert to investigate violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (State Information Service 2016; Shihab-Eldin 2023). In March 2020, at the third United Nations Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, Egypt decisively rejected the recommendations of several UN member states to put an end to the arrests and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In its response to these recommendations, Egypt's representative stated that the country "*does not recognize the terms mentioned in this recommendation*" (Younes 2020a; Human Rights Watch 2020).

3.3.3.4. Effects on the community and LGBTQ activism

The queerphobic crackdown on the LGBTQ community and individuals engaging in same-sex relationships or sexual activities under al-Sisi has a major impact on the community in Egypt. While under ex-President Morsi the community was able to cautiously begin to unfold and activists could begin to organize more and more, the LGBTQ community in Egypt is now more repressed and silenced than ever, and LGBTQ organizations or NGOs are being forced into exile or dissolution. As LGBTQ activist Scott Long put it, "*anyone who can is going underground*" (Azer 2016). Yet, it has not become completely impossible for Egyptian LGBTQ people in Cairo and Alexandria continues to exist: support networks, however fragile, continue to exist primarily online and through apps (Acconcia et al. 2022; Shihab-Eldin 2023). Activism also continues online, through cyber-advocacy tools such as Facebook pages (e.g., Solidarity with Egyptian LGBT), videos on YouTube, and hashtag campaigns on Twitter, using international symbols such as the rainbow flag and sharing slogans such as 'M-Society', the M referring to the first letter of the LGBTQ acronym in Arabic (Magued 2023).

4. Al-Sisi's nationalist project

In the second chapter of this dissertation, we argued that nation-building can be understood as a hegemonic project, which is never finished and is constantly subject to contestation. Political and nationalist groups are continuously involved in a struggle to anchor their nationalist narratives and their conception of national identity in society, in an attempt to establish hegemony and attain *"political, intellectual, and moral leadership"* (Jessop 2008: 12). In Egypt, too, nationalism is not a fixed entity, as each political leader is preoccupied with building and reproducing their imagination of the Egyptian national identity as the hegemonic nationalist narrative, in their search for legitimacy for their rule. In the following chapter, we will briefly summarize the nationalisms of al-Sisi's predecessors, from the early twentieth century up to al-Sisi's predecessor, Mohamed Morsi. In the second section of this chapter, we will delve deeper into the nation-building project of current President al-Sisi.

4.1. Al-Sisi's predecessors

It is crucial to understand Egyptian nationalism under Nasser – and the decades before his rule – in the context of Egyptian resistance to the colonial presence of the British (Adly 2014). Although a form of *Egyptianism was* already present before the British occupation in 1882, it was the European colonial presence that really catalyzed Egyptian nationalism. Fear that the achievements of the modernization projects of Mohamed Ali and his successors would be undone by the British occupation prompted Egyptians to resist the British occupiers. What followed, were popular insurgencies and the creation of the National Party. This resistance eventually culminated in the 1919 revolution, which led to the British recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922 – even though the British would continue to govern Egypt by proxy until 1945 (Osman 2007). Thus, in the beginning in the late nineteenth century, Egyptian nationalism was strongly anti-colonial, which took on a more anti-imperialist interpretation under former President Nasser, who was in power from 1956 to 1970 (Adly 2014). Influenced by nationalist and communist political movements, he developed a nationalist and socialist project that was committed to class struggle, independence, and the struggle against imperialism. Moreover, Nasser was strongly inspired by Arab nationalism, which emphasized

Arab and Muslim solidarity and was boosted by the Palestinian question in particular. Pan-Arabism was consequently an important aspect of Egyptian nationalism (Sobhy 2015; Yefet & Lavie 2021). In summary, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, Arab unity and class struggle were framed under Nasser as core elements of the Egyptian identity (Sobhy 2015; Adly 2014).

Anwar Sadat, who ruled from 1970 to 1981, no longer conceived of Egyptian nationalism as a project of social justice, anti-imperial struggle and Arab nationalism. He placed the Egyptian nation above Arab unity again: pan-Arabism had to give way to Egyptian patriotism and Arab solidarity was reduced to economic cooperation (Adly 2014; Yefet & Lavie 2021). Moreover, Islam was also given a prominent place in his nationalist project: as a devout Muslim, Sadat placed Islam at the center of the Egyptian moral and political identity (Sobhy 2015).

Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, ruled from 1981 to 2011. Yefet and Lavie (2021) argue that his rule was characterized by a lack of ideological vision or distinct nationalist project. Therefore, in the early years of his rule, there was no major shift from his predecessor and the new president maintained the same political direction as Sadat: Arab unity, social justice and class struggle were no longer part of Egyptian identity under Mubarak either (Sohby 2015; Osman 2007). Egypt did witness a more profound Islamization during this period. This took shape as a depoliticized piety that opposed the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and was considered central to the Egyptian identity (Sobhy 2015).

When the 2011 uprisings brought an end to Mubarak's decades-long dictatorship, free elections were held in 2012, with the winner being Mohamed Morsi, who emerged victorious in the second round with 51.7% of the votes. As a member of the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, his nationalism had a divisive nature, based heavily on a Sunni Islamist Egyptian identity:

> *"There was a growing sense of "us" versus "them" in media discourse. 'Us' was the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters, while 'them' were the supporters of the old regime, secular revolutionaries, the Christians, who make up about 10% of the people, and the small Shia minority."* (Salama 2017)

4.2. Egyptian nationalism under al-Sisi

In order to understand al-Sisi's nationalist project, a brief sketch of the current political and economic situation in Egypt is necessary. The country faces a desperate economic crisis, which has persisted since the drop in tourism following the 2011 uprisings (BBC 2020). Despite al-Sisi's electoral promises to fight poverty in Egypt and improve the living standards of Egyptians within two years, in reality the living standards of many Egyptians have drastically deteriorated in recent years (BBC News 2020). The country has been witnessing the devaluation of Egypt's currency since 2016, inflation is high, and unemployment has reached alarming levels, while the population is rapidly growing (Choucair 2023; Salama 2017). Al-Sisi's strategy to tackle this crisis and revive the economy includes a number of extremely costly mega-projects, such as the construction Egypt's new administrative capital and the expansion of the Suez Canal, in order to attract investment. However, these projects are met with misunderstanding and frustration from the struggling population, with many questionings why this money is not used to improve public services and the country's infrastructure, as the education and public health care systems are rapidly deteriorating (Choucair 2023; Cook 2016). Moreover, Egypt has remained deeply divided after the 2011 uprisings and al-Sisi is faced with the unstable security situation in the Sinai Peninsula, where militant jihadist groups are active (Ameling 2022; BBC 2020).

This political and economic situation causes the al-Sisi regime to struggle for legitimacy (Ameling 2022). This struggle is accompanied by a surge in nationalist discourse, which has been ongoing from the very beginning of al-Sisi's rise to power: ever since the June 30 revolution in 2013, and to a much greater extent since al-Sisi was elected president in 2014, Egypt has witnessed a *"widespread intensification of nationalist rhetoric"* (Sobhy 2015: 805) in the form of nationalist songs, official speeches, commemorative practices and articles by pro-regime media outlets (Sobhy 2015; Van de Bildt 2015). This diffusion of nationalist rhetoric - via what Gramsci calls *civil society* - serves one distinct purpose: creating legitimacy for the authoritarian al-Sisi regime and consolidating the current president's power (Koehler 2016).

But what exactly does this nationalist rhetoric entail? Koehler (2016) claims that al-Sisi "*has cultivated a vague nationalist ideology*" and argues that this results from the president's hesitance "*to align himself with any particular institution or group*" (Koehler 2016). This lack of a strong ideological component for al-Sisi could to fall back on, was already discernible in the June 30 revolution: the protesters who overthrew Morsi's regime had formed a coalition based on a shared concern about the economic conditions and the Islamization process that was launched by the Muslim Brotherhood, but did not form an organized opposition movement based on a "*consensual ideological alternative*" for the Egyptian national identity (Winter & Shiloah 2019: 67).

Nevertheless, we can discern a clear trend in nationalist discourse under al-Sisi. His nationalist narratives rely heavily on a rhetoric of security, presenting Egypt as a nation in crisis "*yearning for stability*" and protection from "*terror and traitors"* (Sobhy 2015: 805; Tonsy & El-Raggal 2021). Egypt is exposed to both internal and external threats of terror and conspiracies – these narratives even go so far as to fuel a panic over the possibility of a civil war. The Islamists' religious fascism, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Jihadist militant groups, poses the greatest threat to the internal security and stability of the country and even to the survival of the state (Sobhy 2015; Tonsy & El-Raggal 2021). However, Islamists are not the only threat to the country's security: Egypt is also menaced by international, foreign conspiracies. State-led discourses fuel fears of Western schemes, which aim to divide the Egyptian society, destroy the country's social fabric and ultimately cause Egypt's downfall (Adly 2014). Additionally, according to this state-led rhetoric, the presence of Islamic groups in the country should be understood as a conspiracy of the West, which deploys these groups "*as mere instruments in instigating and perpetuating internal conflicts*" (Adly 2014; Sabry 2013). This discourse of crisis pays particular attention to the Muslim Brothers, who are demonized as a threat to the nation and were therefore according to the al-Sisi regime rightly ousted from power in the June 30 revolution. According to the state's narrative, the Muslim Brotherhood under Morsi intended to lead Egypt down a path of totalitarianism and religious conservatism, leading the regime to ban them and officially label them a terrorist organization (Van de Bildt 2015; Sobhy 2015).

This discourse of crisis has two main consequences. On the one hand, it allows al-Sisi to legitimize his rule by portraying himself and the military as the savior of the Egyptian nation and democracy, and as the backbone of the country, due to his 'war on terror' against Egypt's enemies (Van de Bildt 2015; Winter & Shiloah 2019). On the other hand, it enables al-Sisi to call on all Egyptians to unite under his military leadership and to respect Egypt's security institutions, as citizens loyal to their homeland (Naguib 2020; Sabry 2013). Consequently, al-Sisi can discredit Egyptians who oppose his regime as citizens who are not loyal to Egypt, who are unpatriotic and endanger the country (Winter & Shiloah 2019; Naguib 2020). This enables al-Sisi to produce a nationalist discourse that defines who is a true patriot and who is an enemy of Egypt and thus, *un-Egyptian*. Nationalist narratives under the current regime prescribe the behavior of 'good' Egyptian citizens and formulate it in terms of the common good in times of crisis. In other words, al-Sisi's nationalism formulates an ideal to which 'real' Egyptians should aspire. This exposes a desire of the regime to guide its citizens toward 'correct' patriotic behavior (Sobhy 2015). The good Egyptian supports the state, is a conformist to al-Sisi's regime and cooperates with his policies (Winter & Shiloah 2019; Koehler 2016). Moreover, the patriotic citizen is also willing to elevate the nation through sacrifice, "*by withstanding economic hardship*" (Sobhy 2015: 822), which, according to al-Sisi, is an inevitable part of the initial phase of his ambitious neo-liberal economic policies.

By doing this, al-Sisi has been able to mold an Egyptian identity that mandates loyalty to his regime and policies and that *"suited his needs"* (Winter & Shiloah 2019: 66), while also providing an alternative to "*competing and revolutionary identities - particularly the Islamist identity - that threaten his hegemonic agenda"* (Winter & Shiloah 2019: 66) and that seek to undermine the Egyptian nation. Nationalism under al-Sisi thus consists of delineating the parameters of correct civic behavior for the Egyptian (Sobhy 2015). This nationalist project, according to Sabry (2013), is therefore not based on ethnic lines, but is a *civic* nationalism. In this way, al-Sisi's nationalism becomes a very exclusive project (Salama 2017). Obedience and loyalty to the regime and its security institutions is a marker to determine who belongs to the nation and who does not. Anyone who opposes the al-Sisi regime and its norms and values is therefore *un-Egyptian* and excluded from his nationalist project.

From this, unprecedented repression ensues, with major crackdowns on opponents of the government, the expansion of the security apparatuses and the introduction of laws that increasingly limit the freedom of Egyptian citizens (Serrano 2021; Koehler 2016). Serious human rights violations, detentions, torture, forced disappearances and highly restricted freedom of expression are the result (Salama 2017:42). Thousands of people have already been killed by the regime in recent years and tens of thousands of people are detained (BBC News 2020). One of the main targets of this repression is the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the list of perceived enemies of the state is not limited to them or to other Islamist groups: journalists, activists, human rights defenders, artists, academics and intellectuals – anyone who dares to question the social and economic status quo – are also widely targeted and eliminated, dismissing any form of dissent as anti-national (Koehler 2016; Serrano 2021; Salama 2017). As we discussed at length in the previous chapter, individuals who are (allegedly) homosexual are a main target of al-Sisi's repression as well: after all, they too pose a danger to the Egyptian nation and Egyptian culture – or rather, the Egyptian nation as al-Sisi conceives of it. The way in which they pose a danger is framed in two different ways: on the one hand by referring to Islam, and on the other by referring to anti-Western sentiments – two key pillars of al-Sisi's nationalism and his conception of Egyptian identity, as will become apparent in chapter six of this dissertation, where we will explore this further through al-Sisi's anti-LGBTQ policies and discourse.

5. Methodology

In chapters two of this dissertation, we attempted to outline the situation of the LGBTQ community in Egypt under former Presidents Mubarak and Morsi and under current President al-Sisi. In doing so, we focused on the state-led repression of LGBTQ individuals. In the third chapter of this dissertation, we took a closer look at Egyptian nationalism under al-Sisi and outlined the ways in which his regime shapes it. In this section of the dissertation, it is time to reflect on the empirical component of our research. In order answer the research question, we chose a critical discourse analysis as our main methodology, which we will supplement with a literature review. We will first briefly discuss critical discourse analysis as a research tradition. Next, we will describe the data collection process for the critical discourse analysis. In this section the research materials and the selection method will be presented as well.

5.1. Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach that emerged in the early 1990s and has since become one of the most influential branches of discourse analysis. Key figures in the development of this research approach include Fairclough, Wodak, and Van Leeuwen (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000). The main goal of CDA is to uncover the discursive production and reproduction of social inequalities. In other words, CDA analyzes language as a power resource and seeks to reveal power relations and social inequalities – or resistance to those structures – in discourses (Mullet 2018).

CDA starts from the premise that language and discourse are not merely a vehicle of communication. Rather, discourse plays a central role in the exercise of power (Wodak & Meyer 2016). For the critical discourse analyst, discourse tends to be ideologically based. It is possible for speakers to be conscious of the ideologically charged nature of their discourse – however, this is usually not the case, as these ideological beliefs and attitudes are so deeply ingrained in society that they seem self-evident, natural or "common sense," even though they are in fact ideologically driven (Bloor & Bloor 2007). More specifically, the moral, political and cultural values of the *dominant groups* are diffused in society and adopted by the *subordinate groups*. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is thus a central tenet in CDA (Machin & Mayr 2012). The attitudes, opinions and beliefs that are hegemonic within a given system

strongly determine or shape the discourse that emerges within that system, as discourse reflects these social structures. At the same time, however, discourse is not only determined by society and the dominant culture, but also shapes society itself by sustaining and reproducing the status quo and hegemonic ideology within society (Montessori et al. 2018). Discursive practices therefore have ideological effects: discourse maintains domination and unequal power relations (Mullet 2018). Fairclough (2013) speaks of a dialectical relation: discourse is a social practice that is constituted by the social context and, at the same time, constitutes society. CDA aims to "*illuminate taken-for-granted hegemonic power relations that are reproduced through discourse*" (Mullet 2018: 134). CDA is therefore not an analysis of discourse *in itself*, but offers an analysis of the dialectical relations between discourse and society (Fairclough 2013).

An important pillar of CDA is the fact that the researcher always focuses on unequal power relations and phenomena related to "*power abuse or breaches of the principles of democracy, equality, and justice by those who hold power*" (Mullet 2018: 134). Moreover, CDA does not merely seek to explain dominant social structures, but aims to expose forms of domination, discrimination, power, and hegemony in order to contribute to social change supporting oppressed social groups – which explains why CDA describes itself as *critical* (Montessori et al. 2018; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Because of this central premise, I have chosen CDA as the analytical approach to answer the research question of this dissertation.

5.2. Data collection

5.2.1. Research object

For the critical literature review I aimed to study linguistic utterances from al-Sisi or his government on the topic of homosexuality or LGBTQ identity. However, finding (transcripts of) speeches or other officials forms of communication on this topic proved to be a very difficult task. I could only find snippets of statements by Egyptian government officials or Egyptian UN representatives in the form of paraphrases or short direct quotes in Egyptian media outlets in response to current events, new laws or UN resolutions. For this practical reason, we chose not to conduct a critical discourse analysis based on speeches or interviews of al-Sisi or his entourage, but opted for a discourse analysis based on online newspaper

articles from two leading Egyptian news outlets, *Al-Ahram* and *Youm 7*. We will also include opinion pieces published in these newspapers in our research.

However, the lack of speeches, interviews or other direct source material from al-Sisi or his entourage is not the only reason behind the decision to analyze news articles from these newspapers. As we discussed in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, ruling groups seek the consent of ruled groups through "*subtle mechanisms of ideological integration rather than direct recourse to arms*" (Singer 2017). Gramsci argues that, in order to gain consent, the cultural and ideological values and ideas of the dominant class are propagated among the dominated groups via civil society under the guise of common sense, transforming the popular consciousness (Woolcock 1985). One of the most important and powerful institutions of civil society is mass media, as they are employed for the purpose of the "*production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony*" (Singer 2017). Media are subject to certain formal protocols or broadcasting established by the state. For this reason, media can be considered as "*ideological state apparatuses*," representing the world in accordance with the dominant group's views and thus reproducing hegemonic ideology (Singer 2017). Singer summarizes, "*Media institutions (...) do not only reflect and sustain the consensus but they help in producing the consensus and manufacturing consent in order to establish hegemony*" (Singer 2017). In light of al-Sisi's search for legitimacy for his rule and the ensuing widespread diffusion of nationalist rhetoric through civil society, this Gramscian conception of media becomes all the more relevant. Hence, the choice to conduct a critical discourse analysis on newspaper articles from the media outlets appears to be the most appropriate for our research.

The media outlets that were selected for this dissertation, are *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7*. *Al-Ahram* is a state-owned daily newspaper, that was established in 1875 and counts as Egypt's leading newspaper. The newspaper is considered the country's most influential and authoritative news outlet (Badr 2019; Ameling 2022). *Youm 7* is a privately-owned newspaper, owned by Egyptian Media Group. Nevertheless, an important caveat must be made here: Egyptian Media Group is a company that is for 51% owned by the Egyptian intelligence service. Despite claims that the newspaper is not partisan, its editor-in-chief,

Khaled Salah, announced in 2017 that he swore allegiance to the regime of al-Sisi (Media Ownership Monitor 2018). Both newspapers publish both in print and online and are accessible to any Egyptian with access to internet. Both *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* are subject to state censorship (Ameling 2022). As argued above, we assume that analyzing articles from these media outlets will give us insight into the state-regulated and state-guided discourse and the ideology that al-Sisi wants to propagate.

5.2.2. Selection method and criteria

Before one can start the process of data collection, a selection method and selection criteria must be established. Since this study uses a qualitative research method, it is common to work with a *purposive sample* (Mortelmans 2018). To arrive at such a sample, criteria must first be established to ensure that the selected units are rich in information and will contribute to finding an answer to the research question. A purposive sample consists of cases drawn from the research population, which is a well-defined collection of units that are related to the research (Mortelmans 2018). In this case, the research population consists of all articles from *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* from the entire rule of al-Sisi. The purposive sample includes all articles published on the websites of *al-Ahram* and Youm *7* during al-Sisi's rule that deal with homosexuality, the LGBTQ community, public morals, 'sexual deviance' or 'debauchery' within an Egyptian context.

We selected a sample based on intensity, meaning that we only searched for relevant texts in which the research topic was centrally present (Mortelmans 2018). In doing so, we focused, among other things, on the three high-profile arrest campaigns described above, which were very widely reported on in the media and which fueled a deep moral panic in the country: the 'Gay Wedding' operation, which took place in summer 2014, the 'Ramses Bathhouse' case, which occured in December 2014 and the arrest campaign following the Mashrou' Leila concert in 2017. However, we did not limit ourselves to articles reporting on these three events and searched more broadly for articles and papers that covered other topics as well, rather than limiting ourselves to the arrests of (alleged) LGBTQ individuals. We set no limit in advance: the data collection process continued until saturation occurred. More specifically, we collected and analyzed 61 articles.

5.3. Data analysis

Within CDA, there is no unitary set of methods. Instead, this analytical approach draws on insights, techniques and analytical tools from a large number of disciplines and traditions, including linguistics, ethnography, sociology, anthropology, neo-Marxism, and (post)structuralism. This means that researchers can choose from a wide range of possible methods and approaches (Mullet 2018). This research will be guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional approach. According to this model, every instance of language use should be interpreted on three levels: the language expression as a text (this can be such as speech, writing, and a visual image, or a combination of these), as a discursive practice and as a social practice. The premise of this model is that discourse cannot be understood in isolation: it must be analyzed in relation to the social context and in relation to other discourses (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002).

The first dimension considers discourse as a text. This requires a detailed textual analysis, examining the linguistic characteristics of the text and detecting which particular tools are used to shape the discourse linguistically (Bloor & Bloor 2007). Specifically, it focuses on the structural organization of the text, omitted or implicit information, lexical fields, word choice, metaphors grammar, metaphors, and modality, among other things (Machin & Mayr 2012). Such an analysis reveals that the author - consciously or unconsciously - made certain textual choices based on ideologically motivated reasons. Consequently, this dimension allows us to begin to reveal underlying beliefs, norms, or values (Wodak & Meyer 2016).

According to Fairclough, textual analysis does not suffice as a discourse analysis, since it does not reveal any links between the text and the societal and cultural processes and structures in which the text exists (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Therefore, the remaining two dimensions are crucial. The second dimension relates to discourse as a discursive practice: discourse is "*something that is produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society*" (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000: 448). In this phase, the researcher analyzes the processes associated with the production and consumption of the text (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Central questions are: who produced the text and in which circumstances? How did this influence the discourse? This stage also includes the genre of the text. Intertextuality is of importance for this

dimension as well: the researcher analyses how the author draws on already existing discourses and genres and investigates which themes recur (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000). The way in which the text will be consumed and interpreted is also taken into account in this phase of the analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). For our research, it is of importance to take in consideration that the analysis will be conducted on newspaper articles, and that these are sourced from two leading news outlets, which are considered highly authoritative and influential in Egyptian society, but which are also state-owned or state-regulated.

The third level of analysis studies the broader social practice to which the discourse belongs and connects the text to the broader hegemonic ideological, social and cultural circumstances in which the discursive event is embedded and related to (Fairclough 1992). This stage of the research is concerned with how the text interacts with power relations and ideologies in wider society. The analysis of this dimension consists of exploring and critically analyzing the existing power relations, social structures, and ideologies the text reproduces - or challenges (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). The literature review of the two previous chapters allows us to understand this larger social context. The articles must thus be understood against a background of unprecedented, large-scale LGBTQ repression and within the context of al-Sisi's attempts to legitimize and consolidate his power through, among other things, the diffusion of nationalist narratives.

5.4. Positionality

CDA analysts assume that science cannot be objective or value-free. Researchers do not stand outside of the world they are investigating and consequently their discourse is also influenced by the dominant social structures (Van Dijk 2001). Therefore, critical discourse analysts must be aware of their position within those structures and of the personal social and political motives behind their research (Wodak & Meyer 2016). Therefore, my positionality as researcher ought to be acknowledged, in order to attain transparency and to reach partial objectivity in my research.

As a white, middle-class, non-Muslim Belgian citizen studying Egyptian nationalism and identity, it is important for me to recognize and avoid the trap of neo-oriental imaginaries and acknowledge the existence of different complex identities, experiences, and realities within

Egyptian society. Moreover, I personally describe myself as a feminist, which implies that during my research, I start from the premise of the universal right to freedom of expression and to self-definition with regard to sexual orientation and gender, which can be understood as biased. Additionally, I am aware of the trap of 'homocolonialism', the process of imposing Western norms regarding LGBTQ rights in the Global South and thereby reinforcing and legitimizing the idea of Western exceptionalism (Delatolla 2021). I am aware of these pitfalls and my positionality within the existing power structures and have practiced self-reflexivity throughout the research process, especially while processing and interpreting the data from the critical discourse analysis, in an attempt to reach an objective analysis.

6. Empirical findings

In the following chapter, we will elaborate on the research findings that emerged from the textual, discursive, and social analysis of the research objects. These findings will be complemented by additional insights from a literature review. It has become clear from our research that, in order to understand al-Sisi's anti-LGBTQ attitudes and policies, it does not suffice to interpret his rule as a mere continuation of the past state-led LGBTQ repressions under his predecessors, particularly under Mubarak. Beyond the intensification of the LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi's rule, there appears to be an additional layer to al-Sisi's anti-LGBTIQ policies, that was not present under Mubarak. As was discussed in chapter two, the repressive anti-LGBTQ campaigns under Mubarak have to be linked to failed government socioeconomic policies, and should be interpreted as a 'lightning rod' or as an attempt not to appear un-Islamic to the population against the backdrop of large-scale arrests of members of the Muslim Brotherhood (El-Menyawi 2006; Awwad 2010). Under al-Sisi, however, LGBTQ repression requires a different interpretation, which is related to his nationalist project, as we will discover below. We start off this chapter with a discussion of the media's portrayal of LGBTQ individuals and homosexuality. We will then delve deeper into al-Sisi's nation-building project and explore how LGBTQ repression under the current regime relates to two key pillars of al-Sisi's nationalism: religious moralism and the dominance of the West. Finally, these results will be analyzed in connection with the theoretical framework in order to formulate an answer to the central research question.

6.1. Portrayal of homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals in the media

We start off this chapter with a discussion of the semantic choices and associations surrounding homosexuality and (perceived) LGBTQ individuals in the analyzed media outlets. Regarding the terminology used to designate LGBTQ individuals and homosexuality, the authors' choice of words in the analyzed articles is in line with the findings of Ricarda Ameling's research on the coverage of the 2017 Mashrou' Leila concert in Egyptian media outlets (2022). The majority of the articles from both *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* use the term *al-mithlyya al-jinsya* and its derivative *al-mithlyyin*, which are the direct, neutral translation for *homosexuality* and *gays* (Ameling 2022). In a significant proportion of the analyzed articles,

however, far less neutral language was used, and journalists frequently resorted to the pejorative term *al-shudhūdh*, which translates to *anomaly*, but can also be used as *perversion* or *deviance*. The derivative *shūādh* is used to refer to homosexual individuals, but carries a meaning of *deviants* or *animals* as well (Ameling 2022). Other examples of pejorative references include *al-fāsiqūn*, a term used in the Quran as *defiantly disobedient*; *al-marḍūn al-nafsyyin*, which translates to *mentally ill;* and *al-inḥirāf*, which refers to homosexuality as a *perversion* or *deviation* (Ameling 2022).

Other than the words used to designate homosexuality and homosexual individuals, the descriptions surrounding LGBTQ people and homosexuality reveals a strong disapproval as well: words such as *fisq* (*debauchery*), *fujūr* (*deviance*), *ghayr akhlāqī* (*immoral*), *jaramī* (*criminal*), *ghayr maqbūlah (unacceptable*) and *mushīnah* (*shameful*) were numerous in the research corpus. Moreover, in the analyzed articles LGBTQ individuals are associated with licentious behavior, such as consuming alcohol and drugs, and crime. In one article, LGBTQ individuals were described as innately aggressive and sadistic individuals. To bolster these assertions, the authors of the articles frequently call upon an expert, such as psychiatrists or religious scholars from al-Azhar or the Egyptian Dār al-Iftā. Similar to what was revealed in Ameling's research (2022), no opportunity was given in the articles to LGBTQ persons or people who were pro LGBTQ rights to counter the deeply negative image of LGBTQ persons spread in the media. It is important to note that this portrayal of LGBTQ individuals recurs throughout the complete corpus, which includes articles from 2014 through 2023. It was striking that even prior to the 2017 measures by the Supreme Council for Media Regulation regarding the coverage of LGBTQ individuals that were discussed in chapter three, this coverage in *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* was highly negative and stigmatizing.

This dominant negative portrayal of homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals has important implications. Not only does the one-sided, strongly negative attitude in the reporting on LGBTQ individuals contribute to the dehumanization and criminalization of these groups in Egyptian society, but these heavily charged semantic choices and associations also promote the process of *othering* of LGBTQ individuals, creating a categorized Other, an outside who is not only different, but abnormal as well. The same tendency emerged in Ameling's research

(2022). This process of *othering* not only creates distance, but also reinforces the notion of a 'pure' and 'authentic' Egyptian identity (Ameling 2022). This was further highlighted in many of the articles by the frequent use of the pronouns *we* or *our*, as in the following sentence:

> *"(...) our religion, our civilization, our values, our morals and our humanity reject this vulgar anomaly (...)"* (Al-Khalafawi 2023, personal translation)

In this and other articles, it is never explicitly explained to whom or which groups the pronoun *our* refers, but it is implied that it refers to the 'true' Egyptian nation or culture. This linguistic intervention also helps to create an *other*, who is in opposition to the shared Egyptian identity and the shared ideas behind that identity.

However, the portrayal of LGBTQ individuals in *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* goes beyond the dehumanization, criminalization, and *othering* of LGBTQ individuals: a clear theme emerged in the texts analyzed, namely homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals as a danger to the Egyptian nation and a threat to Egyptian security. This was accompanied by a deep concern that Egypt's youth – the nation's future – would fall victim to this danger and could be corrupted by this enemy of the nation. An explicit reference to this danger is the repeated use of the word *khutūrah* (*danger*). Other indicators are the metaphors and comparisons that appear in the articles. Examples include the comparison to cancer penetrating the cells of Egyptian youth (Juyida 2017), a war against Egypt (Hussein 2020) and the comparison to launching an atomic bomb (Omar 2017). Moreover, articles reporting on arrested (alleged) LGBTQ individuals refer almost exclusively to 'networks', as we have discovered in chapter three with regard to the media-induces moral panic. Homosexuality is also frequently associated with the words *nashara* (*to spread*) and *rawaja* (*to promote*), implying that homosexuality is an orchestrated conspiracy, involving LGBTQ individuals enticing Egyptian citizens to join them in their deviant acts, with the aim of corrupting and undermining the Egyptian nation. This evocation of homosexuality and LGBTQ people as a threat to Egypt allows these news outlets to (implicitly) call for government intervention to protect Egyptian society and ensure the survival of the imperiled nation. In the following sections of this chapter, we will attempt to identify *why* homosexuality, according to these state-controlled narratives, is *un-Egyptian* on the one hand and a threat to the nation on the other.

6.2. Egyptian nation-building and Islam

6.2.1. Religious moralism

The textual examination of the critical discourse analysis revealed moralism to be a major theme, that recurred in a very large portion of the articles analyzed. More specifically, the following assertion was raised time and again: homosexuality goes against traditional Egyptian values and norms, is incompatible with Egyptian moralism and is an indication of the decline of Egyptian moral norms.

This focus on moral values should not be surprising: after all, Al-Sisi's policies are characterized by a drive for renewed moralism in response to "*what is presented as a decline in morals and a loss of traditional values*" (Grimm 2014). The result is a fierce campaign by the regime against anything considered immoral, aiming to control the moralism of the Egyptian public and to guide Egyptian citizens in 'correct' moral behavior. Some of the targeted groups include atheists and Muslims not observing the Ramadan fast (Grimm 2014; Sobhy 2015). A third important group are – of course – (alleged) LGBTQ individuals.

Based on the critical discourse analysis, the Egyptian moralism that was referred to, was found to be strongly religious in nature, which was frequently made explicit in the articles. A significant number of the articles referred to the moral values and norms of the three monotheistic religions, which reject homosexuality. Not only do the articles repeatedly state explicitly that "*all three monotheistic religions prohibit homosexuality*" (Salameh 2017), but this was in some articles also underlined by citing the story of Lot, a figure found in the Tenach, the Bible and the Qur'an. In doing so, the articles refer to a united position shared by all religious groups in Egypt. This narrative is in line with al-Sisi's attempts to portray his policies as inclusive, specifically including Egyptian Coptic Christians in the national body as well (Sabry 2013; Ameling 2022).

6.2.2. Homosexuality and Islam

Despite the mention of the three monotheistic religions as a basis for morally rejecting homosexuality, the textual analysis of the critical discourse analysis revealed that the Egyptian

values and Egyptian moralism against which homosexuality is opposed, should be primarily understood as deeply rooted in Islam. The articles revealed a clear assimilation between Islamic moralism and "traditional" Egyptian norms and morals. Consequently, Egyptian identity, was strongly represented as '*our Islamic identity*'. An example of this is the following headline about the arrests following the Mashrou' Leila concert:

"*Representatives praise arrests of spreaders of immorality and debauchery and confirm: behavior contradicts our Arab and Islamic identity, and what they* [the concertgoers] *have done, undermines social order*" (El-Sayed & Sobhy 2017)

In short, the perceived incompatibility between Islam and homosexuality appears to be the main argument regarding moralism to strictly reject homosexuality. Homosexuality is associated in the articles with "*the path of Satan*" (Al-Sunni 2017) and is presented as contrary to the human *fitrah*, the Islamic concept of the innate nature within human beings that leads them to recognize the unity of God and follow His guidance and that allows them to distinguish between good and evil (Rassool 2021). Moreover, the argument that homosexuality should be rejected because of its irreconcilability with Islam is also reinforced by Islamic authorities, such as religious scholars from al-Azhar or from Dār al-Iftā, who are frequently given a platform in *al-Ahram* and *Youm* 7, as illustrated by the following headline:

"*Fatwa from al-Azhar: homosexuality is an evil abomination and an abhorrent moral decay*"(Ali 2022a)

Islam is thus clearly employed as a legitimizing force for al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ policies and arrest campaigns of (alleged) LGBTQ individuals.

Homosexuality is placed in stark contrast to Islam in the articles and is consequently represented as the corruption or perversion of traditional Egyptian values and norms. In other words, homosexuality becomes a marker of difference for Egyptian identity and is classified as *un-Egyptian* on the basis of religious moralism. The strong emphasis on this in the articles leads us to argue that Islam is an important pillar of Egyptian national identity according to al-Sisi and that behavior that deviates from the Islamic religious norm is consequently *un-Egyptian*. Similarly, Hania Sobhy (2015), in her research on nationalism in Egyptian textbooks

under al-Sisi's rule, distinguished Islam as an important source for defining Egyptian national identity and as a central guide to guide the behavior of the "good" citizen. Pratt (2007) points out that Islam is an important component in the nation-building project because it can be raised as a marker of national difference from the West. This also emerged in the textual analysis of the articles, for example in the following sentence:

> "*(...) the viewpoint of Egyptian society differs from Western societies because we have social and religious steadfastness*" (Shaarawy 2017)

However, the role of the evocation of the West in in al-Sisi's construction of Egyptian identity will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

6.2.3. Al-Sisi as reformer of Islam

However, not every interpretation of Islam is considered a marker of Egyptian identity by al-Sisi. Ever since al-Sisi came to power, religion occupied a central place in his discourse (Al-Anani 2014). Crucial to this discourse is al-Sisi's plea for a new, 'balanced' religious discourse, which he himself calls an *"enlightened religious discourse"* (Ahram Online 2019). He calls for a "*revolution in Islamic discourse*" (Sobhy 2015: 806) and propagates a 'moderate' Islam, which he claims the Egyptian nation is in dire need of (Ahram Online 2019; Sabry 2013). In a 2021 speech to celebrate the birth of Prophet Muhammad, al-Sisi said the following:

> "*It is necessary for us to continue this mission and historic responsibility and to double the efforts exerted by the religious institutions and their honorable scholars to disseminate the values of tolerance and coexistence, the belief in the diversity of thoughts and beliefs, acceptance of the other, in addition to correcting and rectifying distorted conceptions and disseminating the tolerant teachings of the religion so as to maintain the fundamentals and values of Islam. (...) Bearing this in mind, I would like to reiterate that Egypt is proceeding in its mission to create awareness and rectify the religious discourse. This is a collective and joint responsibility that requires concerted efforts to build together an enlightened and wise intellectual trajectory that develop a stable personality, that is capable of countering challenges and building the state of the future.*" ("Celebration of the Prophet's Birth" 2021)

These efforts to develop and propagate a new Islamic discourse are part of the regime's efforts to fight against Islamic extremism and terrorism – primarily the Muslim Brotherhood – which, according to the president, poses a major and acute threat to Egypt, as we have already uncovered in chapter four (Al-Anani 2022). In the words of the Egyptian state, the regime aims at "*confronting destructive extremist ideology*" (Ahram Online 2019) and "*correcting religious concepts advocated by terrorists who believe they can intimidate innocent people*" ("Sisi Calls for Renewing Religious Discourse Based on True Understanding of Islam" 2016).

In this process of reforming Islamic discourse in Egypt, al-Sisi casts himself as a 'reformer' of Islam (Ameling 2022). Al-Anani analyzes this as an attempt to impose "*a specific lifestyle and values*" on the Egyptian population and to *"influence the attitudes and behavior of the people"* (Al-Anani 2014). In other words, as the self-proclaimed reformer of Islam, al-Sisi seeks to be in full control of the religious sphere, with little to no tolerance for opposing views (Van de Bildt 2015; Elbenni 2017). Accordingly, al-Sisi envisions a major role for the state in 'protecting' religion in society. Consequently, al-Anani refers to the president's religious discourse as "*ultranationalist*": *"(...) he* [al-Sisi] *believes that the dissemination of religious awareness is the responsibility of the state and its apparatuses (...) to counter extremism*" (Al-Anani 2014). However, the current regime's state monopoly over the religious sphere goes beyond merely policing the religious discourse. In recent years, the al-Sisi regime has sought to strengthen its grip on mosques and imams through a number of strict measures. The Ministry of Religious Endowments has already closed more than 27,000 small mosques and dismissed more than 12,000 non-certified imams. In 2014, the Friday sermon was centralized: imams have since had to adhere to a weekly topic and outline determined by the Ministry (Elbenni 2017; Van de Bildt 2015; Fahmi 2014). Moreover, since the 2013 coup, al-Sisi has also sought to gain greater control over the two key religious institutions in Egypt, al-Azhar and Dār al-Iftā, and has attempted to instrumentalize these institutions as *"a propagandistic arm of the state"* (Elbenni 2017) in order to promote and police the Islamic views that the president envisions (Sabry 2013; Al-Anani 2022).

This background is crucial for a better understanding of the LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi. Some interpretations of this repression argue that al-Sisi seeks to prove through this repressive discourse and policy that he is just as pious as the Muslim Brotherhood, as an effort to undermine their popularity (Grimm 2014; Kingsley 2014; Azer 2016). While we do not contradict these analyses, we argue that there are additional layers to this criminalization and defamation of homosexuality. Anti-LGBTQ policies and discourse should be interpreted as a form of *boundary maintenance* and an attempt by the regime to define and reproduce Egyptian national identity as Islamic. In this context, however, 'Islamic' should be understood in a very specific manner, denoting a highly regulated form of Islam, that is strictly defined by al-Sisi, in the name of security and stability.

6.3. Egyptian nation-building and the West

In the previous section, we briefly mentioned the role of the West in the construction of Egyptian national identity: Islam is a marker of Egyptian identity as it is also a marker of difference from the West. In this section, we will further explore the role of the West in al-Sisi's nation-building project in the context of his LGBTQ repression. To better understand this, we will first offer a brief general outline of al-Sisi's relationship to the West, before delving deeper into the specific context of the ongoing LGBTQ repression and the results of our research.

6.3.1. Al-Sisi's internal and external position toward the West

Under al-Sisi's rule, Egyptian foreign policy in recent years has been characterized by pragmatic efforts to seek rapprochement with the West and to strengthen international ties and cooperation with the US and Europe (Elbenni 2017; Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017). This manifests itself in attempts by the al-Sisi regime to present to the West an image of Egypt as a beacon of stability in a tumultuous region and to cultivate the image of Egypt as an "*indispensable actor in macro-regional dynamics*" (Dentice 2021) and consequently "*a natural Western partner*" (Dentice 2021; Elbenni 2017). Egypt's role as a partner to guard stability in the region — via al-Sisi's war on terror — is crucial in these attempts at rapprochement (Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017; Dentice 2021). Through reinforced international relations with the

West, al-Sisi successfully seeks to garner support from the US and Europe, in the form of financial aid, economic investments and military aid or equipment (Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017). For instance, in 2017 al-Sisi struck a deal with former US President Trump for $1.5 billion of annual aid (Elbenni 2017). Last year, he closed a $2.5 billion arms deal with current US President Biden (Ghafar 2022).

However, al-Sisi cooperative foreign policy is inconsistent with the position on the West that the regime proclaims and spreads internally, as it spreads a fierce anti-Western rhetoric among the Egyptian population (Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017). The anti-Western sentiments that were already present in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt toward the colonial occupation and that were successfully mobilized under Nasser in the anti-imperial struggle, still live on among the Egyptian population today. According to Youssef Kodsy (2015), the 2011 uprisings uncovered that the Egyptian people's anti-imperialist struggle against the West is still ongoing, as Egyptians feel exploited by the neo-colonial economic model of neoliberalism in ways that are similar to the British occupation. Under al-Sisi's rule, conditional aid from the U.S. and Europe, often accompanied by demands for change regarding human rights, is perceived as a paternalistic practice by the West, fueling anti-Western sentiments (Dentice 2021; Debeuf 2021). The notion of Western arrogance and Western dominance is seized upon by al-Sisi, to forcefully mobilize anti-Western sentiments among the Egyptian population and to spread hatred toward the West. The Egyptian media are an important tool for the government in this endeavor (Sobhy 2015; Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017). The president also successfully instrumentalizes these anti-Western sentiments by framing any form of opposition to his regime as pro-Western and as a betrayal of the Egyptian nation, through Western *"affiliation, support or financing"* (Sobhy 2015: 818) or by adopting Western norms. This rhetoric is central to al-Sisi's efforts to discredit the Muslim Brotherhood, but isn't limited to them, as human and civil rights activists and organizations are portrayed by the regime as traitors to the nation by accusing them of being pro-Western as well (Sobhy 2015; Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017).

6.3.2. Homosexuality and the West

This context of widespread anti-Western sentiment is of great importance to understand the LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi. The notion of Western arrogance and dominance extends not only to the political and economic sphere but also to the cultural sphere: there is a perception that the West seeks to impose its cultural values and norms on Egyptian society, as a *"threatening cultural outsider"* (Dalacoura 2014: 1291) against which the nation and its cultural authenticity must be protected (Dalacoura 2014; Ameling 2022).

This idea of the culturally dominant West was strongly present in the analyzed newspaper articles as well. In a large proportion of the articles, homosexuality was referred to as a Western phenomenon, an externalization of Western decadence promoted by Western societies and imposed on Egyptian society, often under the guise of freedom. Some examples of this from the articles include "*Western cultural invasion*" (Khairy 2021), "*Westernization*" (Hadi 2017) and "*the return to intellectual domination in colonial times*" (Ali 2022b). The articles also framed UN measures such as the appointment of an Independent Expert to protect LGBTQ people worldwide or the presence of LGBTQ characters in films and series on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Disney+, often for underage audiences, as attempts by the West to promote and impose homosexuality on Egyptians. The analyzed articles revealed a strong binary between Egypt and the decadent West. The dividing line between Egyptian society and Western societies was defined in terms of sexuality. Homosexuality was thereby associated with the West, as opposed to the normative heterosexuality associated with Egypt.

For a better understanding of the ideas that were formulated in the analyzed newspaper articles, the concept of *homocolonialism* is crucial. Andrew Delatolla (2021) defines homocolonialism as "*the imperialist export of specific norms, politics, and rights regimes related to homosexuality,*" which "*encapsulates assumptions of progress and civilization that reproduce historic notions of Western exceptionalism*" (Delatolla 2021). A Western-centric framing of LGBTQ rights is used in non-Western societies as a measure of (a Western understanding of) modernity and progression (Rahman 2014). Rahman argues the following:

"*This serves to provoke and then to define Eastern cultures as against modernity, confirming that queer identities and rights are possible only in the West. In this sense, queer rights are positioned at the apex of Western exceptionalism (...).*" (Rahman 2014: 279)

Homocolonialism thus exposes dynamics of Western exceptionalism and imperialism. These dynamics are also highlighted under al-Sisi's rule to mobilize anti-Western sentiments: the population is urged to oppose the imperially imported phenomenon of homosexuality, which threatens Egypt's cultural integrity. According to Rahman, such an application of homocolonialism is common in repressive regimes (2014).

Based on our critical discourse analysis and literature review, we argue that homosexuality is interpreted by al-Sisi's regime as a Western concept, alien to Egyptian society and consequently *un-Egyptian*. This is consistent with what we described in chapter four: adopting Western cultural norms and customs under al-Sisi rule is labeled as treason of the nation (Sobhy 2015). This is in line with Sobhy's observation that 'good' patriotic behavior in textbooks is juxtaposed with the 'bad' citizen, who engages in 'foreign' behaviors (2015). From this we can conclude that the Egyptian national identity according to al-Sisi is not only grafted onto Islam, but that the Egyptian nation is also defined *ex negativo*, in opposition with the West. Once more, this leads us to argue that homosexuality is an important marker of Egyptian national identity, this time as a marker of difference from the West.

The newspaper articles reveal a clear need to protect Egyptian identity, national cultural integrity, and even Egyptian sovereignty from Western domination and Western-imposed decadence, as the Egyptian cultural authenticity is under attack. Al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ policies and discourse should thus be interpreted by the Egyptian people as part of al-Sisi's ongoing effort to guard Egyptian identity, in a context of Western domination and intervention.

Al-Sisi's discourse, however, goes beyond proclaiming that the West is trying to impose its cultural values, norms, and decadence on Egyptian society. Al-Sisi's regime seeks to create widespread hatred against the West among Egyptians, including by using the media as a tool

to spread anti-Western conspiracy theories. The media frequently alludes to Western conspiracies aimed at undermining the harmony, security, and stability of the Egyptian state (Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017). For instance, claims are regularly repeated in the Egyptian media that there is an alliance between Western actors and the Muslim Brothers. The Muslim Brotherhood supposedly does not not only have links with the West, but is said to be a pawn of Western powers in order to attack the Egyptian state from within, as was already mentioned in chapter four (Adly 2014; Sabry 2013). Egyptian human rights activists and organizations are accused of being part of Western plots as well, "*serving the interests of foreign enemies and weakening the Egyptian state*" (Khorshid 2022).

We can find this conspiracy rhetoric in the analyzed newspaper articles as well, but tailored to homosexuality and LGBTQ people. *Al-Ahram* speaks of, among other things, *"targeted and systematic campaigns, which aim to distort Islamic and Arab culture and civilization"* (Hadi 2021) and an "*attack*" (Hadi 2017), while in *Youm 7*, homosexuality is referred to as *"a conspiracy and a shift that threatens society"* (Ismael 2017). In the aftermath of the arrests following the Mashrou Leila concert, *Youm 7* published the following headline:

> *"Prosecution reveals the existence of foreign funds behind the raising of the gay flag at 'Mashrou' Leila'"* (Al-Muji & Abdel-Bari 2017)

The same article reports that "*the initial investigations by the security authorities revealed that certain foreign parties funded a group of young people to implement a foreign scheme calling for the dissemination of ideas that call for the destruction of society*" (Al-Muji & Abdel-Bari 2017). It is clear that homosexuality is presented not only as a foreign, Western – and therefore *un-Egyptian* – phenomenon, which seeks to influence Egyptian values and norms, but that homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals figure in the narratives of al-Sisi's regime as part of foreign conspiracies and as pawns of Western actors, whose goal is to undermine and destroy Egyptian society. The danger of an internal and external enemy implies the need for a strong regime and a powerful state security apparatus that acts decisively, in order to protect the Egyptian nation. Al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ discourse and policies supposedly meets that need.

6.4. LGBTQ repression, nation-building, and hegemony

By employing a critical discourse analysis in combination with a literature review, we examined whether and how the anti-LGBTQ discourse and policies under current Egyptian President al-Sisi fit within his nationalist project. As was mentioned in the theoretical framework, our research question presupposes that the ongoing repression of LGBTQ individuals under al-Sisi's should be interpreted from a nationalist angle. Therefore, in this dissertation, we do not analyze this repression as an attempt to frighten the Egyptian population by demonstrating what the state security apparatus is capable of, as Scott Long (2015) argues, or as merely the externalization of the widespread homophobia that characterizes Egyptian society.

On the contrary, based on our critical discourse analysis and literature review, we argue that this repression, which manifests itself in the form of policy decisions, arrest campaigns and extensive homophobic coverage of topics relating to homosexuality and (alleged) LGBTQ individuals, is an integral part of the nation-building project of the al-Sisi regime. Under the current president, the Egyptian state is engaging in enormous efforts to control and regulate the sexuality and sexual behavior of its people, thereby rigorously enforcing heterosexuality as the sexual norm and framing it – in opposition to homosexuality – as a fundamental characteristic of the authentic Egyptian identity and culture, as it is being molded by al-Sisi. The anti-LGBTQ discourse and policies under al-Sisi should therefore be interpreted as a form of *boundary maintenance*: the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are constructed and defined along the lines of sexual behavior, defining the 'authentic' Egyptian as heterosexual, in opposition to the homosexual Other, who does therefore not belong to the national body.

As we have seen, this is done on the basis of two elements: Islamic moralism and anti-Western sentiment. First, in the discourse of the analyzed state-led media outlets, homosexuality is diametrically opposed to traditional Egyptian values and norms. Traditional Egyptian values and norms are thereby equated with Islamic moralism. It is important to note that this Islamic moralism under the al-Sisi regime should be interpreted as a specific 'moderate' Islam, shaped and propagated by the president as the 'correct' interpretation of Islam. Second, in the analyzed articles, homosexuality was also consistently presented as an imported Western

phenomenon, which consequently cannot be part of Egyptian identity or culture. Indeed, the regime defines the Egyptian nation and culture as in opposition to the – morally corrupt – West, mobilizing strong anti-Western sentiments in the process. Thus, based on the discursive and effective repression of LGBTQ individuals under al-Sisi, we were able to identify two crucial pillars on which al-Sisi's nationalist project rests: Islam and an aversion to the dominance of the West. These findings are in line with other research that was conducted on the place of Islam and the West in al-Sisi's policies (Grimm 2014; Sobhy 2015; Dihstelhoff & Lohse 2017; Winter & Shiloah 2019; Ameling 2022). Both elements were strongly present in the newspaper articles and served as arguments to argue why homosexuality is *un-Egyptian*. Thus, heterosexuality becomes a fundamental marker of the 'true' Egyptian identity according to al-Sisi. Consequently, al-Sisi's repression of LGBTQ individuals is an attempt to define and reproduce Egyptian identity. In short, nation-building and sexuality are strongly intertwined under al-Sisi's rule.

The second part of the theoretical framework focused on Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*. In line with the Gramscian tradition and following Miley's analysis (2018), we defined nation-building as a hegemonic project, in which the ruling group makes constant efforts to disseminate and entrench its conceptions of the nation and national identity in society as the dominant narrative, accepted and supported by the subordinate groups, in an effort to legitimize its rule and to secure its leadership (Miley 2018).

We found that al-Sisi, who is struggling to establish legitimacy, relies heavily on nationalist rhetoric and building an 'authentic' Egyptian identity that can support his quest for legitimacy. We argue that the LGBTQ repression under his rule should be interpreted against this background and is part of his nation-building project.

As we argued above, al-Sisi's anti-LGBTQ repression allows him to formulate his vision of Egyptian identity, with heterosexuality as an important marker. In our literature review, we found that this heteronormative prerequisite to Egyptian citizens is established not only through arrest campaigns, but also through, among other things, coverage in the (state-led or state-censored) media, the censorship of international films and series, and curricula in schools – in short, through *civil society* institutions. The regime's discursive and effective

repression of LGBTQ individuals creates an opportunity for al-Sisi to entrench his interpretation of 'true' or 'authentic' Egyptian identity as the dominant, hegemonic ideology and, consequently, are part of his nation-building project in an attempt to build legitimacy.

But how exactly does al-Sisi seek to create that legitimacy? This state-led LGBTQ repression also allows the Egyptian president to build on the already highly cultivated idea of 'the nation under threat'. As we discussed, the threat of Islamist groups – primarily the Muslim Brotherhood – and foreign conspiracies is central to al-Sisi's discourse. Through critical discourse analysis, we discovered that LGBTQ individuals embody that threat as well. On the one hand, they threaten Egyptian traditional values and norms, Egyptian Islamic moralism, and Egyptian culture – in short, Egyptian identity, which they seek to corrupt. On the other hand, they also threaten the security and stability of the Egyptian state and the Egyptian sovereignty, as they are pawns in (Western) conspiracies. Such a narrative allows al-Sisi to cast himself as the guardian of the 'authentic' Egyptian identity and protector of the nation against internal and external threats (Sobhy 2015; Hamid 2017).

The regime's anti-LGBTQ discourse and policies should thus be interpreted as an attempt to gain legitimacy, not on the basis of coercion, but by demonstrating that al-Sisi is acting decisively and effectively as president to protect the common good – or rather, what he wants the subordinated groups to believe is the common good. This repression is thus an essential part of al-Sisi's nation-building project, which is an attempt to establish hegemony and legitimize and consolidate his power.

Sisi's efforts to gain legitimacy and to consolidate his power do not exclude forms of coercion, quite the contrary. This is not contradictory, as consent and coercion always coexist. However, hegemony, being the result of the production of consent, allows the ruling group *"to embed coercion within that consent"*, which differs from brute coercion (Salem 2021: 86). Coercion via political society – even excessive use of force and violence – exists under hegemonic rule, as long as the subordinate groups give their consent for this use of force by agreeing that it is and in the interest of the common good and therefore necessary and legitimate (Salem 2021). We can conclude that this process is at work under the current Egyptian regime: al-Sisi, through the media and other civil society institutions, seeks to gain

broad-based consent for his violent repression of LGBTQ individuals, as it is for 'the common good' of Egyptian society.

Finally, it is important to note that what we have researched and described in this dissertation are *attempts* to establish hegemony and build legitimacy. In no way does this dissertation claim that through his nation-building project and his LGBTQ repression, al-Sisi was able to effectively achieve hegemony, gain the consent of the Egyptian people to his nationalist project, or build legitimacy for his rule. Yefet and Lavie summarize this as follows: "*analyzing legitimacy claims indicates what incumbents want citizens to believe but does not indicate whether the citizens accept these claims*" (Yefet & Lavie 2021: 173). Indeed, offering an answer to the question of whether al-Sisi's hegemonic project has succeeded would be an entirely different research question and would require different research methods. However, this could be a suggestion for further research regarding al-Sisi's anti-LGBTQ repression and his nationalist project. In addition, it might also be interesting to build on Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, which, according to Gramsci, is constantly being challenged and resisted (Singer 2017). It might be worthwhile to explore if and how Egyptian citizens counter al-Sisi's widespread nationalist narrative about Egyptian identity and the role of homosexuality as a marker of difference – in other words, to study what Gramsci calls *counter-hegemony* (Singer 2017).

7. Conclusion

The goal of this dissertation was to take a closer look at al-Sisi's fierce anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies in order to assess how this state-led repression is part of his nationalist project. In the first half of the dissertation, we elaborated on the two elements of this research question – the LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi's rule and al-Sisi's nationalist project – by outlining the concrete arrest campaigns and national and international policies regarding LGBTQ people, and by expanding on how al-Sisi is trying to shape the Egyptian national identity. We found that al-Sisi's nationalist project is based on a civic interpretation of nationalism and sharply defines the boundaries of the behavior of the 'good' citizen (Sabry 2013; Sobhy 2015, Winter & Shiloah 2019). This makes al-Sisi's nationalism a very exclusive project (Salama 2017). In the second half of the dissertation, we aimed to answer the research question using a critical discourse analysis of 61 newspaper articles from *al-Ahram* and *Youm 7* newspapers, combined with a literature review. Conducting this critical discourse analysis on a corpus of articles from influential, state-controlled media outlets allowed us to analyze in what direction al-Sisi is trying to manipulate the popular consciousness through *civil society* and what notions of Egyptian identity he is trying to make dominant.

This analysis first allowed us to understand that while state-controlled repression of LGBTQ people has a long history in Egypt, particularly under the rule of former President Mubarak, we cannot simply speak of a continuation of these policies under al-Sisi. Not only has the intensity of this repression increased greatly under al-Sisi, but the motives behind his repression are different from those under Mubarak. Under Mubarak, large-scale arrest campaigns served as a lightning rod to divert the attention of the Egyptian people away from the president's inability to tackle the economic crisis (El-Menyawi 2006; Awwad 2010). We argue that the LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi, however, serves a different, more complex purpose.

Via a critical discourse analysis, we were able to uncover that state-controlled discourse under al-Sisi portrays homosexuality and LGBTQ people in a highly negative way, as subhuman and criminal. Through a process of *othering,* homosexuality is constructed as *un-Egyptian* – the 'good', 'true' Egyptian citizen does not engage in this behavior. Moreover, the analyzed

newspaper articles relied heavily on a narrative that affirmed that homosexuality is a threat to the Egyptian nation. Following these findings, we delved deeper into *why,* according to these narratives, homosexuality is *un-Egyptian* on the one hand and a threat to the Egyptian nation on the other. This led us to argue that al-Sisi's interpretation of the Egyptian national identity rests on two central pillars: religious moralism and anti-Western sentiments.

The religious moralism on which al-Sisi's Egyptian national identity is based must be understood as Islamic moralism. Homosexuality is presented as a phenomenon that is irreconcilable with Islam and therefore *un-Egyptian*. However, we discovered that not every interpretation of Islam is acceptable for the 'true' Egyptian to adhere to according to the al-Sisi regime. Al-Sisi foresees for himself - as the 'reformer of Islam' - and for the state an important role in determining the 'correct' religious awareness among the Egyptian population and thus seeks to establish a monopoly on the religious sphere.

The second pillar of al-Sisi's nation-building project is anti-Western sentiments. We discovered how al-Sisi instrumentalizes the media as a tool to spread these sentiments and narratives of Western arrogance, dominance and even conspiracies of Western schemes. The LGBTQ repression under al-Sisi should be interpreted as a way to further fuel these anti-Western sentiments, since homosexuality is a foreign phenomenon which the West seeks to impose on Egyptian society. Egyptian identity, according to al-Sisi, is not only defined and reproduced as Islamic, but is also defined by the president *ex negativo*, in opposition to the West. Consequently, homosexuality is framed as *un-Egyptian* and as a phenomenon against which the Egyptian people must be protected in order to guard their integrity and authentic national identity.

In conclusion, al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ policies and discourse constitute a form of *boundary maintenance*. The repression of LGBTQ individuals is instrumentalized by the president to shape his nationalism and reproduce the 'authentic' Egyptian identity – or rather, his interpretation of that identity. Heterosexuality is mobilized by al-Sisi as an important marker of difference for Egyptian national identity. Moreover, al-Sisi seeks to spread through the media a narrative of homosexuality and LGBTQ individuals as a threat to the Egyptian nation, its values and norms, its integrity, its sovereignty, and its stability. His decisive action

against this threat should confirm that al-Sisi is the right leader for Egypt and consequently legitimize his power. In conclusion, al-Sisi's repressive anti-LGBTQ discourse and policies are part of his nation-building project, which is an important tool in his efforts to establish hegemony and legitimacy.

Our research has demonstrated that al-Sisi's nationalism is very exclusive. Ironically, however, al-Sisi seems to need the LGBTQ community – despite his frantic efforts to oppress and eradicate them from Egyptian society – to build his nationalist project.

8. Bibliography

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