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Egyptian Salafism between Religious Movement and Realpolitik

Adapting to the Demands of the Political Game

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The Salafi Nour Party's explicit endorsement of the July 2013 coup, its continued criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood and its cooperation with secular forces took many observers unawares. Of course, the first surprise was the party's strong showing in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections. Since then the Nour Party and Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya (the Salafi Call movement) have emerged as important political actors. Access to the political scene has impacted their internal structures, positions and interactions with other players, initiating a process of moderation, albeit within limits dictated by doctrinal strictures. While not necessarily compatible with liberal democratic values, their record thus far suggests that they will remain committed to the rules of the political game and contribute to the inclusion of groups that might otherwise be susceptible to unequivocally anti-democratic forces, such as jihadis. At the same time, the Nour party has been faced with strong criticism from its constituency, which might lead to a fragmentation of the Salafi vote in upcoming elections. Still, Salafi actors will remain a force to reckon with in Egypt. Europe should therefore not shy away from engaging in dialogue.

The spectacular entrance of the Salafi current into Egyptian politics took many politicians and analysts by surprise. Originally, its various strands had taken an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the popular uprising that brought down Hosni Mubarak. While several prominent sheikhs rejected the demonstrations as *khuruj* (disobedience of the ruler, religiously unacceptable in Salafi thought), many adherents participated on the basis of *fatwas* issued by others calling for active participation. The Salafi movements underlined their capacity for mass mobilization on 29 July 2011 in the first demonstration called exclusively by Islamist-leaning organizations, and went on to achieve stunning electoral success in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections. The Salafi alliance achieved 27.8 percent (or 7.5 million votes), second only to the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, with 37.5 percent (10.1 million votes). Once in office, they further surprised observers with their pragmatism and readiness to

work with non-Islamist actors, contrary to their conventional image of ideological rigidity.

What Is Salafism?

Salafism is a religious current that accepts religious guidance only from the Quran and the *Sunna* (the religious and life practice of the prophet), rejects innovation in religion, and emulates the mode of worship and ethics of the first three generations of Muslims (*Al-Salaf al-Salih,* or righteous forefathers, from which these trends derive their name). This purist orientation is reflected in their approach to doctrinal matters, which is characterized by rigidity, rejection of oral traditions and later interpretations, and a strong emphasis on the literal meaning of textual sources. Salafism holds that there is only one truth, and differences of opinion are frowned upon as they may lead to discord *(fitna)* and thus jeopardize the paramount unity of the religious community. Accordingly, Salafis were traditionally skeptical of Western and contemporary modes of institutionalized political expression and contestation. Beyond the lack of legitimizing precedents in the textual tradition, the institutionalization of political competition was considered liable to lead to a permanent state of discord, and the idea of humans making their own laws as usurping an authority that is God's alone.

(See also Mohamed Masbah, *Moving towards Political Participation: The Moderation of Moroccan Salafis since the Beginning of the Arab Spring*, SWP Comments 1/2013, January 2013.)

The Spread of Salafism

Since most Salafi sheikhs traditionally focused on individual piety and religiously correct behavior, and advocated obedience to worldly rulers to avoid discord, the Mubarak regime initially tolerated or even encouraged the spread of the Salafi religious call or mission through satellite channels and in mosques, hoping that a rival Islamist force would undermine the social basis of the Muslim Brotherhood. Conversely, Salafi sheikhs who criticized the leadership's domestic, social, or foreign policies became targets of police harassment and imprisonment.

The spread of Salafism was also furthered by their decentralized network structures, which reduced the need for material resources to a minimum and further lowered the threshold for affiliation. Unlike the highly hierarchical Muslim Brotherhood, where new members have to undergo a challenging screening process, all it takes to become a Salafi is to follow Salafi thought.

The economic policies of the last Mubarak years, which brought high unemployment and rising cost of living, further increased the appeal of Salafi sheikhs, who focused on social justice and led prayers and charitable projects in disadvantaged areas. In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose platform is strongly in favor of private property rights and entrepreneurship, was reluctant to espouse social demands and instead concentrated on the application of *sharia* (religious) law.

Last but not least, private and public funding, mainly from Gulf monarchies, helped the dissemination of Salafi ideas in North Africa, in particular in Egypt. Such funding has been reflected in the establishment of Salafi-oriented satellite TV channels (in support of the pro-ruler and *da'wa* strand) and charities mainly active in rural areas.

Despite the assertion that there can be only one truth, in reality, various opinions exist within the Egyptian Salafi camp concerning their relationship with society and politics. This has translated into different currents and organizations that can be distinguished by their level of internal organization and the extent and modes of their participation in the political process. First,

there are highly organized movements without political ambitions, such as the *Da'wa for Good Manners* with branches in all Egyptian governorates and hundreds of thousands of followers, functioning in the mode of traditional civil society associations and mostly working in local charity.

There are also many loosely organized youth groups with Salafi orientation, most significantly the *Ahrar* (Free People) Movement, which partly overlaps with the *Ultras* (the fans of the Cairo football clubs Al-Ahli and Al-Zamalek), and engages in street politics rather than the formal political process. Another group known, after their preference of meeting in Costa coffee houses, as *Costa* Salafis, have received some media attention for their liberal positions on equal citizenship rights (and probably also for the apparent dissonance between their supposedly traditionalist ideology and appearance and a meeting place associated with globalized capitalism), but wield little influence on the ground.

Finally, and as opposed to all the other groups, *jihadi* Salafis believe in and practice armed struggle to bring about political change. Since the 25 January 2011 revolution, they have been mainly active in the Sinai. While they have repeatedly declared that their actions are directed only against Israel, and have requested the army to leave them alone, the army has accused them of attacking state buildings, security installations and churches, as well as arms smuggling. Not much is known about their structures, but it is clear that their discourse attracts radical youth who are dissatisfied with the Islamic movements engaged in the political process.

Salafis as Emerging Political Actors

During the 2011 revolution, only the so-called "movement Salafists" *(salafiyya harakiyya)* explicitly called for open opposition, even non-violent rebellion, against the "unjust" rule of the Mubarak regime. In the post-revolution period, they formed the *Islah* (Reform) and *Asala* (Authenticity)

parties, which however failed to achieve significant political traction. Also, there are a number of charismatic sheikhs (some officially members of the Muslim Brotherhood) who are strongly influenced by Salafi thought and able to attract large crowds of supporters, without having an organization of their own. The most prominent among these, Hazem Abu Ismail, tried to set up his own party, *Ar-Raya* (the Flag), without, however, achieving a tangible presence on the ground.

The dominant force among politically active Salafis is currently the Alexandria "Salafi Call." Also known as Scientific Salafism, this group was originally established in the late 1970s in response to the perceived doctrinal laxness of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also in opposition to their friendly relationship with the revolutionary regime in Iran – and thus with a Shiite leadership considered heretical by the Salafis. Up to 2011, the Salafi Call advocated refraining from politics and proposed a gradual transformation of society rather than adopting what it considers Western models of institutional politics. After the revolution, they rapidly changed their stance and now play a vital role in shaping the political scene in Egypt.

Despite their diversity, there is wide agreement among the different strands over central tenets of Salafism, and the essential objectives of political participation, namely: defending Egypt's Islamic identity, in particular through the application of Sharia law, and resisting a perceived "Shiite cultural invasion" by preventing any rapprochement with Iran, which is seen as being behind supposed Shiite proselytizing. Accordingly, the Nour Party worked hard (and successfully) to have three specific articles included in the 2012 constitution: article 2 defining sharia as the main source of law, article 219 tying that principle to Sunni doctrine, and article 4 giving al-Azhar University a consultative role in the legislative process.

All Salafi groups (with the exception of the *Ahrar* movement and the *Costa* group)

grant the sheikhs a central role, with a special relationship between sheikhs and followers characterized by a high degree of commitment and spiritual obedience. Sheikh in this context can refer to any person who has great knowledge of Islamic sources, irrespective of formal training and age, although there is special respect for elder sheikhs. This premium on knowledge, which is held to be attainable through scholarship by any capable person, thus potentially provides the Salafi movements with equal opportunities (albeit much less so for women) with low barriers against new members, and implies a strong potential for recruitment and organizational growth.

From *Da'wa* to Institutionalization: the Rise of the Nour Party

Among all Salafi groups, the Salafi Call of Alexandria achieved the most extensive grassroots presence in Egyptian society, in particular in the countryside and the towns and medium-sized cities of the densely populated north. Its political arm, the Nour Party, emerged as the strongest single party within the Salafi alliance that contested the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections, securing 123 out of its 136 seats. The decision to establish the party had been taken in March 2011, and, according to its leaders, was largely driven by concern over the possibility of abolition of article 2 of the constitution (sharia as the main source of law). The leaders cite pressure from their base as the main reason to become an active and autonomous player in the political field, rather than simply mobilizing electoral support for the party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Structure and Decision-making

Entering the political sphere has confronted the movement with numerous challenges, starting with its organizational structure. Unlike other Salafi groups, the Alexandria Salafi Call possessed a semi-hierarchical structure. In fact, one reason behind the arrest of certain leading sheiks in 1994 was that the security services had uncovered these structures, and were determined to prevent the formation of a group as well organized as the Muslim Brotherhood. After the 2011 revolution the group worked to revive and strengthen both its networks and these hierarchical structures. Yet it faces challenges in making them effective in terms of decision-making and enforcement at the lower levels of the provincial structures. To this end, a three-tier structure for internal deliberation and decision-making has been established, which provides for a certain degree of participation and inclusion:

A board of trustees, consisting of the six founders, presides over the movement. They possess permanent tenure and broad authority over the lower councils, including the power to discipline and expel individual members. Such decisions are supposed to be taken unanimously. The second body is the executive council, consisting of sixteen sheikhs who attend to administrative matters and oversee the local executive councils. Finally, the *shura* (or consultative) council consists of two hundred affiliated sheikhs from different provinces nominated by the board of trustees. This body (which is later to be elected), is considered the general assembly of the *da'wa*; it elects the executive council, approves the annual budget, and takes final decisions on strategic issues where requested by the board, such as endorsing a presidential candidate, all by majority vote. During the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections its members, who generally wield significant spiritual and social authority in their constituencies, provided an essential boost to the candidates of the Nour Party, by telling people that they would apply sharia and solve social and economic problems.

In contrast, deliberating issues of doctrinal relevance that require consulting the sources and potentially involve new interpretations or revisions, remains the prerog-

ative of the board of trustees, who may take such decisions by majority vote, or delegate them to the shura council. For example, when the crucial question arose whether the movement and its followers were to consider President Mohamed Morsi a *religiously* legitimate ruler, against whom any rebellion or even opposition would be illegitimate, the board of trustees issued a religious opinion arguing that Morsi was a *civilian* ruler who can be legitimately opposed.

However, once the board of trustees has decided to delegate such a decision to the shura council, the latter's decision is considered to be final. For instance, when the trustees asked the shura council to decide which candidate to endorse in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, the council endorsed renegade Brotherhood leader Abdel Moneim Aboul Futouh. And although some of the trustees clearly opposed this choice, the decision stood. Thus, despite the still powerful role of the original founders, the movement has adopted semi-democratic elements that introduce a degree of inclusivity into the decision-making processes that in turn helps to maintain the loyalty of followers. Due to the heritage of decentralized organization, however, these structures lack leverage over individual sheikhs who refuse to implement decisions taken by the shura council in their home provinces. For example, in the run-up to the July 2013 military coup, some sheikhs defied a decision taken jointly by the Salafi Call and the Nour Party to abstain from demonstrations for or against then-President Morsi, and called their followers to the streets in support of the President.

Movement and Party

A second challenge concerns the relationship between the movement and its political arm, the Nour Party. Tensions surfaced after the opening of parliament in January 2012, due to party leader Emad Abdelghafour taking decisions without prior coordination with the *da'wa* sheikhs, who objected on several occasions that the Nour Party was deviating from the right path. The confrontation became especially pronounced between Abdelghafour and one of the most prominent trustees, Yasser Borhamy. Matters first came to a head over the visit of an associate of Abdelghafour to the Iranian liaison office in February 2012, which was considered a step to "normalizing" relations with Shiite Iran. The conflict escalated into a fully-fledged internal crisis and potential split in September 2012, when Abdelghafour called off internal elections (for party branch chairs, the supreme committee, and the party leadership) that Borhamy's followers appeared poised to win, and dismissed the supreme committee when it overruled his move. Intervention by one of the most influential trustees, Ismail El-Mokadem, finally forced Abdelghafour to back down. He then left to form a new party, *al-Watan*, but only 150 members followed him. To avoid future disputes, an inofficial coordination body including members of both party and movement was established. Still, the movement clearly dominates the party at the level of strategic decisionmaking, remains the undisputed final arbiter of intellectual and doctrinal matters, and rejects independence for its political arm. It is also clear that the final instance for internal conflict remains the undisputed authority of the founding sheikhs, to which both movement and party members defer.

Rigid in Religion, Pragmatic in Politics

Before the 2011 revolution, tight control by the ubiquitous security services severely limited the outreach of the Salafi Call of Alexandria. One of the results of this limited public exposure was a tendency to extreme doctrinal conservatism, and rigidity in relationships with others. Since their entry into the political sphere, the Salafis have been exposed to new actors and issues, and, under the pressure of this new reality,

their discourse has evolved. Their take on the revolution itself is a case in point: After their initial rejection of demonstrations as dangerous disobedience, the determination of the Salafi youth and their mostly peaceful conduct led the sheikhs to reverse their position. In an unprecedented and, for a movement professing a single truth and the superiority of the scholars, momentous move, they apologized to the Salafi youth, admitted that they had erred, and blessed their actions.

In the context of their participation in parliament (before it was dissolved in June 2012), the Constituent Assembly and the Shura Council (the upper chamber of the Egyptian parliament, dissolved after the July 2013 coup), Nour Party representatives found themselves obliged to interact and often cooperate with other actors, leading them to modify their behavior and accommodate actors and views they had not encountered before. In this context, the strong emphasis on doctrinal purity and coherence that has characterized the movement imposes limits on their capacity for pragmatic decisions and tactical compromise. On the other hand, precisely because significant decisions require doctrinal authorization, they are not easily reversed. Persuading the Salafis to compromise may require a long and torturous process, but once they come around they are likely to abide by their commitments.

In traditional Salafi thinking, actors professing what were seen as *secularist outlooks* were regarded as nothing more than atheists working against Islam. Parliament provided, for the first time, a space for interaction between the two groups. Most spectacularly, the Nour Party cooperated with the opposition National Salvation Front (NSF) to support the military coup of July 2013 and give it a civilian face. Previously, the two groups had already joined ranks in opposing the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to monopolize power, in particular after the 2012 constitutional referendum, and even explored the option of forming a coalition govern-ment. Al-Nour also joined forces with the socialist parties to oppose new loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), if for diverging reasons. The Nour Party rejects interest-based loans for religious reasons; socialists are primarily concerned about the adverse effects of structural adjustment measures on the poor and the burden on future generations. Salafis have thus ceased to perceive secularists as existential enemies, but rather treat them as opponents or allies on particular issues. In particular, political competition with and ideological rivalry to the Muslim Brotherhood appear to outweigh any remaining reservations vis-à-vis non-religious forces.

In addition, Salafi positions on Christians have been changing in a climate of domestic insecurity and sectarian tensions, as exemplified by events in Ameriya close to Alexandria in January 2012. Here, after reports of a Christian man harassing a Muslim woman and then disappearing, Muslims attacked Christian houses and shops and called for all Christian families to be expelled. Sheikhs associated with the Salafi Call played a vital role in calming Muslim families, avoiding the expulsion of Christian families and persuading families that had already left to return.

In response to satellite TV hate propaganda from (mostly Saudi-based) Salafi sheikhs that raised fears over the safety and status of Egyptian Christians, the sheikhs of the Alexandria *Da'wa* took the significant step of declaring that Egyptian Christians were citizens with full rights and autonomy in spiritual and personal status matters. They also welcomed the article in the 2012 constitution that permits Christians to follow their own rules and customs in personal status and spiritual matters. However, this did not quite mean accepting Christians as fully equal, as they also insisted that the top political positions, such as prime minister and president, must be reserved for Muslims (as is actually the case in most Arab countries). However, as they have also ruled that the presidency is a *civilian* post devoid of any spiritual dimen-

sion, there may be room for further developments here.

Similar observations hold for Salafi positions on women. On the one hand, female candidates for parliament were given list positions where they had no chance of winning – a practice adopted by nearly all Egyptian political forces except for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Nour Party also refrained from nominating any female representatives to the Constituent Assembly, and regards women as ineligible for the presidency under its interpretation of sharia law. On the other hand, there are active women's committees in the Nour Party, as well as in associations affiliated with the Da'wa. Also, it supported the appointment of a (Coptic Christian) woman to a parliamentary committee investigating sectarian incidents in Alexandria in February 2012.

Presence in the public sphere, and with it the challenge of dealing with issues they have not encountered before, as well as the necessity to win support with arguments rather than spiritual authority, have worked to create a distinction in the *Da'wa* discourse between everyday social, political and economic matters, where they behave with marked pragmatism, and issues seen as relevant to doctrinal principles, where the margin for compromise is minimal. For example, the Salafiyya Call and its Nour Party opposed establishing relations with Iran, to the point of refusing economic aid to help save the Egyptian economy from collapse. Rather, they strongly criticized the Brotherhood and President Morsi when they opened the door to cooperation with Iran in the tourism sector. This, the Salafis said, would normalize relations with Shiite Iran and might lead to a "Shiite invasion" that would threaten Egypt's Sunni identity. After Morsi's visit to Tehran, prominent sheikhs around Yasser Borhamy initiated an anti-Shiite campaign, delivering speeches in many villages. In fact, this hostile discourse, reinforced by satellite programs, might have incited the killing of Shiites in the Giza village of Zawyat Abomusalem.

The Future of Salafi Political Participation

Across the Arab world, different Salafi movements have reacted differently to the political openings created by the so-called Arab Spring. While *jihadi* Salafis in Egypt and Tunisia have completely refused to participate and resorted instead to violence, others have entered the political game and established political parties with different degrees of institutionalization and weight on the ground. The Egyptian Nour Party has emerged as an important actor in the Egyptian political landscape, capitalizing on widespread grassroots support for the *Da'wa* of Alexandria. It is likely to remain a factor in future elections.

However, after endorsing the coup against Morsi, the future of movement and party hang in the balance. The Nour Party provided cover for the actions of the military, a step that all other forces in the Islamist spectrum rejected. While fears of further destabilization and violence were certainly among the motives, the decision has exposed the party to strong criticism in the Islamist milieu. This makes it unlikely that the party will be able to pick up votes of disenchanted former supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in future (as yet unconfirmed) elections, as it appeared poised to do before the July events. Further criticism from these quarters focused on the appointment of Mohamed El Baradei as vice-president, after the Nour Party had successfully vetoed him as interim prime minister, and the inclusion in the interim government of figures from the former Mubarak regime. Most damagingly, many potential supporters hold the Nour Party responsible for the violence meted out by the security forces against followers of the ousted President Morsi. Consequently, many individuals from the Salafi milieu joined the demonstrations against the coup, and several influential members declared their withdrawal from the movement.

It now appears likely that the Nour Party will lose significant electoral support to

other Islamist parties, such as the Asala
Party, the Watan Party, and the Construc-
tion and Development Party (the political
arm of Gamaa Islamiyya). Not only are these
forces closer to the Muslim Brotherhood,
they also take a more uncompromising
position vis-à-vis liberal forces and criticize
the political role of the Coptic church
(especially after statements by the Coptic
Patriarch were construed as supporting
violence against Brotherhood supporters.
It is highly unlikely that supporting the
coup will gain the Nour Party any votes
from liberal Egyptians to compensate for
these losses. On the contrary, a leaked video
appeared to suggest that some representa-
tives of the secular elite wanted to exclude
the Nour Party from the political scene
along with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The outcome of these developments may
well be a fragmentation of the Salafi vote,
and thus a party spectrum that includes
several smaller religious parties alongside
the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice
Party (assuming the latter is allowed and
willing to run). Furthermore, a growing
number of formerly Salafi youth are likely
to abandon this political current alto-
gether. Some, in particular from among the
Ahrar movement, have started to open up to
other youth groups and movements that
are disenchanted by political developments
and have been calling for a third current
transcending the entrenched secular/reli-
gious divide. Others may soon conclude
that Islamists will not be allowed to win
democratic elections in Egypt. As in Algeria
and Palestine, that might lead some to
abandon the non-violent approach to do-
mestic politics.

Recommendations

Although a degree of understanding has
been acquired on traditional Salafi move-
ments (both their quietist and jihadist
strands), little is known about the new
political Salafism currently on the rise in
Egypt and − to a lesser extent − in other
parts of the Arab world. It is therefore
important to encourage comparative
studies on Salafi movements in the Arab
transition countries, but also to seek direct
contact with Salafi representatives in order
to better understand their developing
stances − rather than merely relying on
media coverage. That applies in particular
to the Egyptian *Da'wa* movement, whose
experience other Salafi movements in
North Africa are seeking to replicate. De-
spite reservations about the extent of their
commitment to democracy and liberal
values, Europe should open direct channels
of dialog with Salafi movements. The coun-
tries of the Arab Spring, and in particular
Egypt, are still in an early phase of their
transformation process, and all parties are
in a process of adapting, mostly by trial and
error, to the new rules of the game (see
Nagwan El Ashwal, *Egypt on the brink of un-
governability,* http://www.swp-berlin.org/
en/publications/kurz-gesagt/point-of-view-
egypt-on-the-brink-of-ungovernability.html).
Refusing to engage with such actors will
serve to confirm the image of Europe as
the supporter of past dictators, and enemy
of Islamists − or even Islam itself − today.
Thus, it is crucial that Europe insist that
Islamists be included the political process
in Egypt.