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SHEIKHS AND POLITICIANS:
INSIDE THE NEW EGYPTIAN SALAFISM

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INTRODUCTION

The major surprise of Egypt's recent parliamentary elections was not that Islamists won a large majority of the votes. Any keen observer of Egyptian society could have guessed that religious parties would dominate. What was much less expected was that almost 40 percent of those who voted for Islamists did not pick the well-established Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and largest opposition movement in the country. Instead, they backed a coalition of three recently created Salafi parties whose figures were unknown to most Egyptians before the revolution. The Salafis were also (with a few exceptions) initially opposed to the revolution and formally declared their support for Tahrir Square only days before Hosni Mubarak's resignation.² Despite all of this, the Salafi coalition received 28 percent of votes for the People's Assembly, the lower house of parliament, securing 127 of 508 seats. The same trend was later confirmed in the elections of the Shura Council, the upper house, where Salafis took 45 of 180 seats. How should we make sense of the Salafi breakthrough? And now that they represent the second strongest force in parliament, what lies ahead for their movement?

MAKING SENSE OF THE SALAFI BREAK-THROUGH

The Salafi coalition was made up of three unequal partners: a senior partner, Hizb al-Nour ("the party of light," whose candidates obtained 111 seats) and two junior partners, al-Bina wa al-Tanmiya ("construction and development," 13 seats) and Hizb al-Asala ("the party of authenticity," three seats). As a result, all election material bore the symbols of the Nour Party, and the coalition was sometimes presented as the "Nour Party coalition." Its formation was announced on October 22, 2011, after the

Construction and Development Party and the Asala Party left the Muslim Brotherhood's "Democratic Coalition," allegedly because the Brotherhood was not willing to include enough of their candidates on its lists.³ The Nour Party had also, at one point, been close to the "Democratic Coalition," although conflicting stories circulated on whether the party was actually thinking of joining, or if it only participated in some meetings as an observer.⁴

In the elections, the Salafis benefited from the natural appeal of Islamist parties among Muslim voters. There are several reasons for this attraction. First, the last few decades have witnessed a "quiet revolution" in Egyptian society marked by the increasing hegemony of conservative Islamic discourse.⁵ To many Egyptian Muslims today, it seems obvious that, as one interviewee put it, "we should of course vote for a party with an Islamic reference. We're Muslims, after all!" Interestingly, many of those interviewed did not seem aware of (or overly concerned by) the differences between the Muslim Brotherhood's conception of Islam, and that of the Salafis.⁶ Another reason for the Islamists' electoral success is that Islamist groups formed the main opposition and prime target of regime repression under Mubarak. Consequently, they are widely seen as having "deserved" power. Because of their proclaimed religious ethics, they are also perceived as less corrupt.

This, however, does not explain why voters would favor the Salafi coalition over the Muslim Brotherhood's lists. Here again there are several reasons. To begin with, proponents of Salafism as an ideology have existed in Egypt for almost a century. The first Salafi association, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhmadiyya ("the supporters of the Prophet's tradition"), came into being in 1926, two years before the Brotherhood. While this association remained largely confined to scholarly circles and never tried

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to foster a mass movement, it did publish and distribute the main Salafi works, making them available to the Egyptian public. Those works would start attracting growing interest in the 1970s, particularly among students. It was at this point that Salafism transformed into a broader social phenomenon. The three parties that took part in the Salafi coalition all stem from social-religious networks that have existed and developed since that period.

The Nour Party was founded by an informal religious organization called the “Salafi Da‘wa” (*al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya*), whose leadership is based in Alexandria. The origins of the Salafi Da‘wa date back to the late 1970s, when its founders – students at the faculty of medicine at Alexandria University – broke away from the Islamist student groups known as al-Gama‘at al-Islamiyya (“Islamic groups”). Among them was Yasir Burhami, currently the dominant figure in the organization. The Salafi Da‘wa’s stance against violence and refusal to engage in formal politics made it relatively acceptable to the Mubarak regime. To be sure, the group did at times endure repression; its leaders were kept under close surveillance and were forbidden from traveling outside Alexandria. However, the Salafi Da‘wa often benefited from the covert support of the regime apparatus, which tried to use Salafis to undermine the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence.⁷

In this context, the group’s networks expanded beyond Alexandria via students who came to receive the sheikhs’ teachings before going back to their home towns. Soon, the Salafi Da‘wa developed a basic form of organization comprising various sections and branches under an administrative council.⁸ It also provided an array of social services in neighborhoods, thereby mirroring the activities of the Brotherhood. This allowed the group to establish strong ties with ordinary Egyptians, although most of its activities remained underground.⁹ In the 2000s, the regime allowed several Salafi preachers, some of them connected to the Salafi Da‘wa, to launch Salafi television channels broadcasted on Egyptian national satellites. Salafi discourse was now made available to all, and it

gained an audience far beyond the original circles of the Salafi Da‘wa. Some of those preachers, including Muhammad Hassan and Muhammad Hussein Yaqub, soon became household names across the country.

The two other Salafi parties in the coalition also drew their strength from previously existing networks and organizations, although their relationship with the authorities had been much more fraught. The Asala Party was created by a group of Salafis based in Cairo and was led by a number of sheikhs with a strong local following, the most prominent of whom is Muhammad Abdel Maqsoud (known to his disciples as “faqih al-Qahira,” the jurist of Cairo). Unlike the Alexandria sheikhs, Abdel Maqsoud never hesitated to openly question the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime.¹⁰ He was imprisoned for his views on several occasions and also spent time under house arrest. He gained further prestige by becoming the first Salafi sheikh to endorse the revolution on January 28, 2011.¹¹ Given the strong foothold al-Asala enjoys in Cairo, its candidates ran mainly on the Salafi coalition’s lists in the capital.

The Construction and Development Party was created by al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya (“The Islamic Group”), a formerly radical Islamist group founded in the late 1970s, which waged war on the Mubarak regime for more than 15 years before its leaders – most of whom were in jail – officially renounced violence in 1997. Al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya’s ideology combined Salafi and jihadist ideas. When the latter were abandoned, the group’s discourse became quite close to that of the Salafi Da‘wa.¹² At the same time, al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya remains a tightly-knit group of several tens of thousands of activists, bound by common experiences of violent confrontation with the state. Unlike al-Jihad, the other main Egyptian radical Islamist group, which had pursued a strategy focused on decapitating the state (which it tried in 1981 by assassinating President Anwar al-Sadat), al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya had always been keen to develop a real social base through day-to-day social and religious activities. The group has historically enjoyed a strong foothold in Middle Egypt, the area in which most Con-

struction and Development Party candidates ran.

What came as a surprise to many observers throughout 2011 was how efficient the Nour Party was in getting organized, producing a political platform, campaigning, and dealing with the media. Emad Abdel Ghaffour is recognized as the first person in the Salafi Da‘wa to have suggested creating a political party. Though he was one of the group’s original founders in the late 1970s, Abdel Ghaffour’s profile differed from that of other Da‘wa figures because of the influences to which he had been exposed. He had left Egypt around the turn of the millennium to settle in Turkey, and had only been back in the country for a few months when the revolution started.

After lengthy discussions, Abdel Ghaffour eventually convinced the leadership of the Salafi Da‘wa to endorse his project.¹³ This did not, as some have argued, represent a complete ideological shift for the Da‘wa. After all, the movement’s leaders had never declared the practice of politics in itself as religiously forbidden;¹⁴ they had maintained a more ambiguous stance by simply avoiding any involvement in domestic political matters under Mubarak. On June 15, 2011, when the Nour Party was officially established, Abdel Ghaffour became its first president.

For a group with no previous experience in formal politics, establishing a political program was the first real challenge. Abdel Ghaffour decided to form a group of academic experts, many of whom were not Salafis. Most of the Nour Party’s political platform was eventually written by these academics, with the Nour Party’s leadership only making sure that no religious red lines were crossed.¹⁵ The professional outlook of the platform helped reinforce the Nour Party’s credibility, as did the party’s claims that it had established a partnership with “Japanese experts” to reform the Egyptian education system (an argument that was often quoted by Nour Party voters interviewed by the author).¹⁶

Though most of the party’s founding members came from the Salafi Da‘wa, Emad Abdel Ghaffour was keen to use managerial methods to develop and

expand the party’s structure. An interesting illustration of this was the selection of the party’s spokesmen, which was conducted through an open competition. Numerous candidates were interviewed, several of whom were finally chosen.¹⁷ While all of them are relatively young – a significant difference from the Muslim Brotherhood – the youngest of all is 27-year-old Nadir Bakkar.¹⁸ The choice of Bakkar, a bright and elegant young man with a degree in management and strong rhetorical skills, indicates the kind of image that the party seeks to project. In the Egyptian media scene, Bakkar soon became a sensation.

The two other parties in the Salafi coalition have not been as successful in terms of organization. The Asala Party got into a violent conflict with another Salafi group, the Hizb al-Fadila (“the party of virtue”), from which the Asala Party had originally split. The Construction and Development Party, meanwhile, was handicapped by internal disputes among the leadership of its parent organization, al-Gama‘a al-Islamiyya. These weaknesses did not, however, greatly affect the prospects of the Salafi coalition, as most of its campaigning was carried out by the Nour Party.

The coalition managed to present parliamentary candidates in all districts nationwide. In districts where the Da‘wa or one of the affiliated parties had a strong presence, the candidates came from those entities. Elsewhere, the coalition presented formerly independent personalities, who conformed with “Islamic moral standards.” This allowed the Salafi coalition to co-opt local figures of an Islamic bent who enjoyed a strong following but were unable to run on the Muslim Brotherhood’s lists because they were much less open to outsiders.

Those who followed the Nour Party’s campaign were surprised at the considerable resources the party seemed to have at its disposal. Its well designed posters appeared everywhere (a worker at a printing press in Alexandria said that half a million copies of one such poster had been produced).¹⁹ On the day of the vote, there were young members of the Nour Party in front of most polling stations, helping voters find their designated booth – some-

thing which no other party, save the Brotherhood, had the capacity or the resources to do.²⁰ Such activities have fueled accusations of foreign – read Saudi (or Gulf) – funding for the Salafis, though verifying such claims has proved difficult. In response, Nour Party leaders have constantly complained about a lack of funds, arguing that the money for their campaign had come mostly from their candidates' personal wealth and from the donations of their members.²¹

The campaign rhetoric used by the Salafis provides another explanation for their success. Branding Muslim Brotherhood contenders as “candidates of the system,” Salafis often presented themselves as the only real “anti-system” candidates and genuinely “new” political actors.²² This was also a clever way of not only justifying, but also taking advantage of their pre-revolution stance. As one Nour official put it, “before the revolution, we, as opposed to the Brotherhood, refused to participate in an illegitimate system. We preferred to keep a distance. Now, some tell us: you were against politics – but this is not true. We had our own way of practicing politics; our stance was fundamentally a political stance!”²³

In the Cairo suburb of Shubra al-Khayma, for instance, Salafi supporters were keen to emphasize that the local popular Muslim Brotherhood candidate had been in politics for decades and had “done nothing for the people of the district when he was in the People’s Assembly.”²⁴ Although the Brotherhood rightly responded that, if their candidate had done little, it was only due to the obstruction of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party, the Salafis’ argument seems to have had some effect on voters.²⁵ In lower-class neighborhoods, the Salafis were also quick to denounce the Brotherhood as composed of bourgeois elites disconnected from the street. As a local Nour party leader in a poor Tanta suburb argued, “we are from the people, we were on their side constantly during the Mubarak days, we have developed intimate knowledge of their problems... while the Brotherhood were wasting their time [with] useless institutional politics.”²⁶

SALAFI POLITICS

As reflected in the quotations above, the electoral campaign created a genuine rift between the Salafis and the Brotherhood. It was as if each group took the election to be a zero-sum game. Every vote gained by the Salafis would have to be taken from the Brothers, and vice versa. This sometimes led to the use of controversial tactics. Various accounts report that Brotherhood sympathizers went to Salafi neighborhoods explaining that the election symbol of the Salafi coalition was the scale (in fact the Brotherhood’s), while Salafi supporters went to neighborhoods known as Brotherhood strongholds telling locals that the Brotherhood’s symbol was the lantern (in fact that of the Salafis).²⁷ During the campaign period, these tensions were patently clear; in most of the interviews conducted by the author in December 2011, Brothers were very critical of Salafis, and vice versa.

In some ways, this intra-Islamist clash came as a surprise. Although the relationship between the Brotherhood and the Salafis had generally been tense before the revolution, the few months that followed Mubarak’s fall witnessed a genuine rapprochement between the two groups. Salafi leaders made positive statements about the Brotherhood, calling them – in the words of Muhammad Hassan – “those who most deserve and are the most competent to enter parliament,”²⁸ while the Brotherhood made a serious attempt to turn the Salafis into a reservoir of support for the movement.²⁹ In March 2011, the two groups co-led the campaign for the “yes” vote to approve proposed constitutional amendments. The fact that their camp received 77 percent of the vote was interpreted as a victory for both.

A turning point in the relationship, however, seems to have been the demonstration of July 29, 2011. This was the first time after the revolution that Islamists decided to protest en masse in Tahrir Square. A deal had been struck with non-Islamist forces, with the latter agreeing to participate on the condition that slogans be limited to calls for a quick transition to civilian rule and the trial of former regime officials. While Brotherhood members stuck to the

agreement, many Salafis came with posters demanding the implementation of sharia and chanted “Islamiyya, Islamiyya” (“Islamic, Islamic”). The demonstration, dubbed by liberals as “Kandahar Friday,” was a public relations disaster for the Islamists. The Brothers, intent as always on preserving their image of respectability, had no choice but to firmly criticize the events.³⁰ From then on, the rift between the Brothers and the Salafis would only grow.

While competition with the Brotherhood may have pushed the Salafis in a more populist direction, the requirements of an electoral campaign forced Salafi parties – especially the Nour Party – to put forward a genuine political program, laying out a political, economic, and social vision for the country. Although the formal content of the program released by the party remained vague on a number of key issues, Salafis have – in their daily dealings with the media – been forced to clarify their positions and take stances on all kinds of questions. This is a novelty for a group whose pre-revolution discourse was focused primarily on questions of creed and on a limited number of social issues. On the rare occasions that political issues were addressed, they were discussed only in the most abstract terms.

One key debate that has divided the Egyptian political scene since the revolution is that of the nature of the coming state. Salafis have, in their statements, staunchly opposed the concept of a “civil state” (*dawla madaniyya*), a term which they consider to be a rhetorical trick invented by their liberal foes to make the idea of a “secular state” (*dawla ‘ilmaniyya*) more acceptable.³¹ Despite sometimes paying lip service to the formula, Salafis are also critical of the now widely accepted notion of a “civil state with an Islamic reference” (*dawla madaniyya bi marja‘iyya islamiyya*), advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood, among others. For them, there exists a distinctive Islamic model of statehood which, they insist, is perfectly compatible with the modern state (*al-dawla al-‘asriyya*).³²

This indicates a significant shift in rhetoric. While the Muslim Brotherhood no longer officially demands an “Islamic state,” some among the Salaf-

is seem to be making this demand all their own.³³ Though this may illustrate a divergence in the political strategies of the two groups, it should not be seen as very significant in ideological terms. Throughout the twentieth century, the “Islamic state” has remained a relatively general concept used by most Islamist movements with sometimes radically different agendas. It is more useful to analyze the concrete policies advocated by the Nour Party.

Regarding the political system, the Nour Party now explicitly defends democratic³⁴ mechanisms (i.e. elections at all levels, separation of powers, freedom of speech, etc.). They are keen, however, to stress that they distinguish between the “procedures of democracy,” which they accept, and the “philosophy of democracy,” which they reject.³⁵ For them, ultimate sovereignty cannot be held by the people, but only by God, meaning that there can be no discussion as to whether sharia, understood as an all-encompassing corpus of law, should be enforced. This explains why Nour Party figures have advocated changing Article 2 of the constitution from “the principles (*mabadi’*) of the sharia are the main source to law” to “the rulings (*ahkam*) of the sharia are the main source of law.” This means for instance that they still advocate the implementation of Islamic punishments (*hudud*).

When it comes to the status of religious minorities, the Nour Party’s platform is not explicit, simply stating that the “sharia guarantees religious freedom for Copts” and that “they have the same rights and duties as Muslims.”³⁶ In interviews, Salafi figures have advocated a much stricter framework than that put forward by the Muslim Brotherhood. While the latter recognizes the concept of citizenship and is ready to proclaim the political and legal equality of all citizens,³⁷ Salafis tend to favor the traditional Islamic system of *dhimma* (protection), which existed during the period of the Caliphate. According to this system, Christians and Jews living under an Islamic state are not asked to serve in the military and receive protection from the authorities, but are required to pay a special tax, the *jizya*.

Another illustration of differing stances on the Coptic issue came with the celebration of Christmas in January 2012. While the Brothers hung posters greeting their “Christian brothers” in different Cairo neighborhoods and sent a high-ranking delegation to the Coptic cathedral to congratulate Pope Shenouda before the Christmas mass, the Salafis refused to do any of the above, arguing that it is religiously forbidden for Muslims to congratulate non-Muslims on their religious holidays. Most Salafis were, however, keen to stress that this restriction applies only to religious occasions; congratulating Christians on personal occasions, such as weddings, is perfectly acceptable.

On other social questions, the Nour Party’s platform again sticks to relatively general statements. On the status of women, for instance, the platform proclaims “the equality in human dignity between men and women.” In interviews and statements, Salafis have made it clear that they hold more conservative views than the Brotherhood. They are generally not favorable to women’s participation in political life, and argue for a strict segregation of sexes. They have also advocated banning alcohol, and some have expressed their willingness to impose a stricter dress code for women. At the same time, Salafis have been keen to stress that this is just one small part of their program. To liberal attacks claiming that “all that matters for Salafis is banning beers and bikinis,” Construction and Development Party leader Tariq al-Zumur responded that the liberals, not the Salafis, are the ones obsessed with such superficial issues. “We are going to run a country, not a cabaret,” he said.³⁸

At the economic level, the Nour Party advocates more “left-leaning” policies than the Muslim Brotherhood. In particular, they seem more prone to stressing the redistributive role of the state, in contrast with the more pro-market Brothers. This position is consistent with the rhetoric used on the ground to attract the support of the lower classes. On international politics, finally, the Nour Party has adopted the same nationalist rhetoric common to most Egyptian parties, Islamist and non-Islamist, in the wake of the Arab Spring. In a context where almost all political actors have been very critical of

the United States and Israel, the Nour Party’s positions generally fall within the mainstream.

RELIGIOUS VS. POLITICAL SALAFISM

Despite its relative vagueness on certain issues, the Nour Party’s platform represents in many ways a departure from the traditional positions of the Salafi Da‘wa. To begin with, many of the organization’s leading sheikhs, including Said Abdel Azim, have written entire volumes denouncing the impiety of the democratic system³⁹ to which the Nour Party now explicitly adheres.

To enter the realm of institutional politics, members of the party have had to make important concessions. For instance, despite their stance on women’s political participation, electoral laws forced them to present one female candidate on each of their lists. To avoid publishing their pictures, they were represented in campaign materials by a flower or the party logo, and in some cases, their names were replaced with those of their husbands. To be sure, those women always ran at the bottom of the lists, with no chance of being elected. It may not seem like much, but this still represented a breakthrough for the Salafi movement. The Nour Party also had to include Christians as founding members of the party, a move that the sheikhs of Alexandria had originally considered reprehensible.

In spite of this, it seems most of the sheikhs were convinced that, as long as the concessions remained limited, the benefits of political participation outweighed the evils. However, tensions have started to arise between the Nour Party and the Salafi sheikhs, with public spats becoming increasingly common since autumn 2011.⁴⁰ In December, for instance, Emad Abdel Ghaffour was asked on a talk show why the Nour Party had fielded no Christian candidates. He responded that he regretted this fact, and hoped Christians would run on the party’s lists in the future. This earned him explicit criticism on Sheikh Yasir Burhami’s website, which reaffirmed that only Muslims should occupy “positions linked to the objectives (*maqasid*) of the Muslim state.”⁴¹

Not long after, the Nour Party declared that it was considering a parliamentary alliance with non-Islamist parties, including Coptic businessman Naguib Sawiris's Free Egyptians. This again prompted severe reactions from Burhami, who insisted that "any alliance with groups that oppose God's Law is absolutely forbidden."⁴² In late February 2012, another dispute occurred when one of the party's spokesmen, Muhammad Nour, accepted an invitation to attend celebrations for the anniversary of the Iranian revolution at the Iranian embassy in Cairo. Sheikhs saw this as controversial because of the strong religious hostility Salafis harbor toward Shiites.

What this reflects is the increasing autonomization of the Nour Party, which is developing its own political logic, distinct from the religious logic of the sheikhs. In this way, political Salafism may be quietly separating from religious Salafism. This transformation is met with resentment by the movement's traditional leaders, with some even describing an outright struggle for power and influence between two factions within the Nour Party: one pro-sheikhs and the other pro-political autonomy.⁴³ Internal observers argue that the struggle is getting particularly heated, as the first general congress of the party should be held soon (although no date has yet been announced). This congress is seen as especially important, because a new party president will be elected, and Emad Abdel Ghaffour has already announced that he will not run.⁴⁴ The personality and background of the new president will have a decisive impact on the party's future.

THE RISE OF REVOLUTIONARY SALAFISM

In the wake of the revolution, the dominant Salafi groups, as in the case of the Brotherhood, have demonstrated their willingness to play the game of institutional politics. They have taken a relatively non-confrontational stance with respect to the ruling Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). This has led some of their liberal foes to denounce an alleged "deal" between the Islamists and the army.⁴⁵ Avoiding confrontation with SCAF allowed

those parties to focus their efforts on parliament, turning it into a stronghold of Islamist influence. But the parliament is not the only center of power or legitimacy in the country. Tahrir Square continues to represent an alternative source of political legitimacy, with an agenda that is increasingly hostile to military rule. In the months following the revolution, Tahrir mostly featured demonstrations of leftists and liberals. Since the summer of 2011, Salafis have been present in those demonstrations in growing numbers. These Salafis are generally not Nour Party supporters; the party, and the Salafi Da'wa, have in many cases forbidden their members from participating. These "revolutionary" Salafis belong to smaller, more loosely organized movements. Others are proponents of Sheikh Hazim Salah Abu Ismail, an early supporter of the January 25 revolution, and a leading Tahrir figure, known for his uncompromising stance against the military council.

The son of a prominent 1970s Muslim Brotherhood figure and a former Brother who embraced Salafi ideas, the charismatic Abu Ismail rose to political stardom in the wake of the revolution. An independent who declared his candidacy for president as early as mid-2011, he managed to rally an impressively large crowd of young Salafis. At the same time, his revolutionary rhetoric earned him some respect within the broader movement of Tahrir youth. For instance, during the events of late November 2011, when Muhammad Mahmud Street turned into a battlefield and Tahrir Square remained occupied for a number of weeks, some protesters suggested that power be handed over to a civil council made up of Muhammad al-Baradei, Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh, and Hazim Salah Abu Ismail.⁴⁶

Through the figure of Abu Ismail, Salafism has thus managed to impose itself as a legitimate revolutionary actor. However, the relationship between the more established Salafism of the Nour Party and its allies, and the revolutionary Salafism of Abu Ismail and the other independent Salafi groups, remains ambiguous. While their political strategies differ radically, strong personal links exist between Abu Ismail and most Salafi leaders. These relationships were particularly important in the run-up to the presidential elections, when many among the

grassroots of the Salafi Da‘wa and Nour Party called for an open endorsement of Abu Ismail’s bid. However, there was much resistance from above. The leaders worried that they would have no control over Abu Ismail and that his election could bring them into an open confrontation with the military council – something they had been trying to avoid.

In early April 2012, Abu Ismail, who was seen as a serious presidential contender with over 20 percent support in some polls, was disqualified by the electoral commission. Officials argued that his mother was granted American citizenship when she was living in the United States, constituting a breach of Egyptian electoral law. This was a major shock for his supporters, some of whom organized sit-ins and demonstrations to protest the decision. Unsurprisingly, however, the Nour Party and the Salafi Da‘wa seemed quite relieved not to have to take a stance on Abu Ismail’s candidacy.

On April 28, after meeting with the three remaining Islamist candidates – the independent Muhammad Salim al-Awwa, the Muslim Brotherhood’s official candidate Muhammad Mursi, and the ex-Brotherhood figure Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh – the Nour Party and the Salafi Da‘wa decided to endorse the bid of Abul Futuh.⁴⁷ Notably, this decision was taken through a vote, something the two groups’ spokesmen were keen to emphasize as proof of their commitment to internal democracy. This result seemed surprising to many, as Abul Futuh is known as a liberal Islamist who enjoys the backing of many in the non-Islamist camp.

This created a stir in the Salafi sphere, with the smaller Asala Party and the Religious Council for Rights and Reform (*al-hay'a al-shar'iyya li-l-huquq wa-l-islah*), an association of Salafi-leaning ulama, announced their support for Morsi. Despite this, the Nour Party and the Salafi Da‘wa chose to maintain their position. They were soon joined by al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and its party, the Construction and Development Party. Despite dissenting voices, the biggest and more established Salafi groups were thus siding with Abul Futuh.

There was, however, an obvious reason for this choice. Salafis do not want all the powers to be concentrated in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood, which already holds the biggest share of seats in parliament. Backing Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Mursi was therefore not an option. Between the two remaining candidates, Abul Futuh was seen as being more likely to win. However, the decision to support Abul Futuh must also be seen as an outcome of the evolution of the Nour Party toward a more pragmatic and accommodationist stance. Commenting on the party’s decision, Nour Party spokesman Yusri Hammad said: “the party didn’t request from Abul Futuh that he commit to implementing the rulings of the sharia, and he didn’t even offer that. We decided to support him because of his national project which permits the consensus of all national forces to rebuild Egypt and get it out of the dark tunnel.”⁴⁸ What is interesting is that this stance was also adopted by the Salafi Da‘wa – an indication that, in the conflict between religious and political Salafism, the balance may be leaning toward the latter.

In spite of this, Abu Ismail’s disqualification from the presidential race did not put an end to the phenomenon he has come to represent. His most active supporters are now gathered in a movement called “Hazimun”⁴⁹ (proponents of Hazim, but also “the determined,” a pun on the meaning of “hazim” in Arabic) and have already pledged to continue their struggle. Some are even working toward the establishment of a political party, Hizb al-Umma al-Masriyya (“The party of the Egyptian nation”), which pledges to follow in Abu Ismail’s footsteps.⁵⁰ Revolutionary Salafism will live on.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISE OF POLITICAL SALAFISM IN EGYPT

The rise of political Salafism has reshaped the Egyptian political scene. Though the Muslim Brotherhood still occupies the dominant position, it has lost its hegemony over Islamist politics. The relationship between Salafis and the Brotherhood has evolved since the revolution, from discrete co-operation to fierce competition. The final outcome

of this competition remains uncertain. It could end up pushing the Salafis to a more intransigent stance intended to distinguish them from the “responsible” and “pragmatic” Brotherhood. Alternatively, it could convince the Salafis to fully embrace a more pragmatic politics themselves. This question is also closely related to that of the relationship between the Nour Party and the Salafi Da’wa, and the response will depend on the extent to which the party manages to assert its political independence. The rise of revolutionary Salafism represents an additional challenge, as the Nour Party now faces the pressure of the “Salafi street,” which Abu Ismail has helped bring to life. For the moment, however, it is significant that the Nour Party and the other more established Salafi groups have seemed more inclined to follow a gradual and pragmatic path rather than to bend to the pressure of their own idealists, as the backing of Abul Futuh indicates. What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which the Salafi leadership will be able to impose this shift on the movement’s constituency. The defeat of Abul Futuh in the first round of presidential elections, arguably because a significant proportion of Salafis’ were reluctant to back a “liberal” candidate, illustrates the difficulties ahead for the leadership, should the latter decide to continue on the same path.

About a year after their emergence, Salafi parties – especially the Nour Party – have become leading actors in Egypt’s political arena. Through this process, they have proven a certain ability to adapt to the rules of the political game. They have begun developing a political discourse and strategy that is to some extent distinct from the initial religious or theological considerations of the sheikhs. More importantly, this political discourse and strategy remains largely in the making. These shifts are not taking shape in a vacuum, or merely as a response to local Egyptian politics; political Salafis are also wary of the regional and global environment. Western and regional policymakers must therefore be aware that their statements and actions may influence the discourse and strategy of political Salaf-

is and may eventually affect internal decisions on which direction they will take. To maximize their influence, the United States and European countries should consider establishing a regular, substantive dialogue with the Nour Party. What is certain is that reproducing the pre-Arab Spring policy of ignoring Islamists – including Egypt’s Salafis – can only be counter-productive.

NOTES

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2. Husam Tammam and Patrick Haenni, “Egypt: Islam in the insurrection,” *Religioscope*, February 22, 2011, <http://religion.info/english/articles/article_519.shtml>.
3. “*La’nat al-insihabat tutarid al-tahaluf al-dimuqrati* (Curse of withdrawals plagues the Democratic Alliance),” *Al-Shuruq*, October 16, 2011.
4. Interviews with Muslim Brothers and Salafis, autumn 2011.
5. See for instance Patrick Haenni, *L’Islam de Marché: L’Autre Révolution Conservatrice* (Market Islam: the Other Conservative Revolution) (Paris: Seuil, 2005).
6. Author’s interviews in Cairo, Alexandria, Mansura, autumn 2011.
7. Author’s interviews with Islamic activists, Alexandria and Cairo, autumn 2010.
8. Author’s interview with Ali Abdel Al, Cairo, autumn 2010.
9. It was however sometimes able to use for its activities the resources and channels of two licensed Islamic associations, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya and al-Gam‘iyya al-Shar‘iyya.
10. Author’s interview with prominent student of Muhammad Abdel Maqsoud, June 2011.
11. Ibid.
12. Author’s interview with Nagih Ibrahim (one of the movement’s founders), Alexandria, May 2011.
13. Author’s interview with Emad Abdel Ghaffour, Cairo, December 2011; confirmed by other sources close to the Nour Party.
14. This position was held by a distinct group known in Salafi circles as the “Madkhalis,” in reference to Saudi Sheikh Rabi‘ al-Madkhali.
15. Author’s interview with an academic who contributed to drafting the program, December 2011.
16. This claim appears on the party’s booklets. Several voters quoted this as a reason for voting for the party.
17. Author’s interview with Emad Abdel Ghaffour, Cairo, December 2011.
18. Author’s interview with Nadir Bakkar, Cairo, January 2012.
19. Author’s interview in Alexandria, June 2011.
20. Author’s personal observations in Alexandria, Cairo, Mansura, and Tanta, among other places.
21. Interviews with Muhammad Nour, Emad Abdel Ghaffour, and other Nour Party leaders and spokesmen, Cairo, winter 2012.
22. Author’s personal observations in Cairo and Alexandria, November 2011.
23. Author’s interview with a Nour Party local leader in Tanta, December 2011.
24. Author’s interviews in Shubra al-Khayma, December 2011.
25. Ibid.
26. Interview with a Nour Party local leader in Tanta, December 2011.
27. See also for instance “*Tasa’ud al-muwajaha bayna al-ikhwan wa al-salafiyin ma ‘bud’ al-samt al-intikhabi* (Increasing confrontation between the Brotherhood and the Salafis with the start of “electoral silence”),” *Al-Masry al-Yawm*, January 1, 2012.
28. See Muhammad Hassan on Al-Jazeera Mubasher, March 22, 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61Q07a-FGpU&feature=related>>.
29. Author’s interview with Muslim Brotherhood leader, June 2011.
30. “*Al-Erian: ‘Ala jami‘ al-masriyyin an yattahidu li-i‘la al-masalih al-wataniyya wa-l-qawmiyya* (All Egyptians must unite to promote national interests),” July 29, 2011, <http://www.hurryh.com/Provinces/Our_news_Details.aspx?News_ID=952&ID=8>.
31. Author’s interview with a Nour Party leader in Alexandria, December 2011.
32. Author’s interviews. The term “modern state” is explicitly mentioned in the Nour Party’s platform.
33. The term “Islamic state” has been explicitly mentioned by party leaders in interviews. It does not however appear as such in the party’s platform.
34. The term “democracy” even explicitly appears in The Nour Party’s political program.
35. Author’s interviews with Nour Party leaders, December 2011–January 2012.
36. See the Nour Party’s platform, section “culture and identity” (*al-thaqafa wa-l-huwiyya*).
37. One major exception to this principle insisted on by the Muslim Brotherhood is that the president must be a Muslim.
38. Interview with Tariq al-Zumur, “90 daqqa”, Al-Mihwar TV, January 21, 2012.
39. See Said Abdel Azim, *Al-Dimuqratiyya fi-l-mizan* (Democracy in the Balance), Dar al-Furqan.

NOTES

40. On this, see also Ahmad Zaghlul, *Al-islamiyyun wa-l-thawra* (Islamists and the Revolution), Cairo: Awraq, 2012.
41. “*Hawla ta’assuf ra’is hizb al-Nur ‘ala ‘adam tarashshuh nasrani fi qawa’im al-hizb* (On the apology of the president of the Nour Party for the lack of Christians on the party’s lists),” Sawt al-Salaf, January 1, 2012, <<http://www.salafvoice.com/article.php?a=5914>>.
42. *Al-Fath* (official mouthpiece of the Salafi Da’wa), January 4, 2012.
43. Author’s interview with Ahmad Zaghlul, Cairo, December 2011.
44. Author’s interview with Emad Abdel Ghaffour, Cairo, December 2011.
45. Author’s interviews, Cairo, December 2011.
46. Author’s personal observations, Cairo, November 25, 2011.
47. “*Al-da’wa al-salaftiya wa Hizb al-Nur yu’tinan da’m Abu al-Futuh ra’isan li-l-jumhuriyya* (The Salafi Da’wa and Nour Party endorse Abul Futuh’s bid for the Egyptian presidency),” *Al-Masriyyun*, April 28, 2012.
48. “*Al-Nur wa-l-jama’a al-Islamiyya: qana’atuna bi-l-mashru’ al-watani li-Abu al-Futuh wara’ ta’yidina lahu* (Al-Nour and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya: we are supporting Abul Futuh because of our belief in his national project),” *Al-Masriyyun*, May 15, 2012
49. “Hazemon” Facebook page, <<https://www.facebook.com/Hazemon>>.
50. “Al Ommah Party” Facebook page, <<https://www.facebook.com/AlOmmahParty>>.

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