Egypt's New Parliament Convenes: Making Sense of the Salafi Members-Elect

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Brief Analysis

For now, the handful of Nour candidates who won seats are seemingly content to continue endorsing the Sisi government, but political opposition and violence outside parliament may prove much more significant to how Egypt's Salafis divide in the future.

On January 10, Egypt's parliament will convene for the first time since President Mohamed Morsi's July 2013 ouster. One cohort to follow in the new legislature are the members-elect from the Salafist Nour Party. Despite holding only 12 out of 596 seats, they are the sole Islamist voice represented, so their presence carries important symbolic significance. For one thing, they have effectively inherited the official political space once occupied by the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's oldest Islamist group. The Brotherhood was banned following Morsi's ouster, and many of its members are currently imprisoned. Moreover, Nour adheres to the Salafi ideology -- significant not only because it doctrinally forbids participation in modern institutions (including parliament), but also because it is the very same ideology in whose name the Islamic State (IS) and its satellites operate.

Since parliament is unlikely to effect any major changes in Egypt's foreign or domestic agenda, the most visible consequence of Nour's presence may be greater polarization of the country's ultraconservative Salafi bloc. Signs of such problems have already been on display in the form two recent attacks on Nour candidates. In addition, deeper fault lines will likely be drawn within the country's Salafi communities as the local IS threat escalates and the government imposes ever-tighter controls on political unrest, especially by Islamist groups.

INTERNAL DIVISIONS

Morsi's ouster and the Brotherhood's abolishment represented an existential crossroads for Islamist factions, who thereafter divided along lines of political loyalty rather than ideology. Those who had previously condemned political involvement on ideological grounds continued to do so, and even took the opportunity to point out the fatal consequences of engaging in politics.

Yet other factions actively contested last year's election and, in doing so, revealed fissures within the Salafi movement. In early 2015, Nour appeared to be the only Salafi party openly and consistently speaking out in support of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi -- a survival tactic likely designed to weather government suppression of political opposition. Watan and Asala, two smaller Salafi parties who initially campaigned in the race, continued to oppose Sisi, as did the Salafist Front. In previous years, these factions had staged various demonstrations calling for his ouster, the last of which was a November 2014 gathering that drew a low turnout.

In spring 2015, as IS satellites in Libya and Sinai became more imminent threats, Sisi began to focus more energy on suppressing the Salafi ideology that inspired such violent groups. Although the rise of IS certainly loomed over these efforts, he was also arguably spurred by suspicion of the Brotherhood's potential resurgence, which he considered a greater political threat. Growing regional and domestic unrest in turn fostered a popular and political climate antagonistic to any Islamic foray into the political sphere -- a sentiment reflected in the government's policies over the past several months, which included shutting down thousands of mosques in March and banning preachers from campaigning or issuing political statements.

A series of attacks in Egypt over the summer further polarized society, sparking a new popular movement to dissolve religious parties and harsher government measures aimed at curbing the influence of Salafism in politics (e.g., a July ban on Salafi literature in mosques and an August counterterrorism law that gave broad powers to the police and judiciary while expediting trial processes for those convicted of terrorism). Moreover, new regulations for the long-delayed elections prohibited any religious themes in political campaigns.

Facing pressure to win both public opinion and votes, the Nour Party eventually complied with the ban on religious slogans. And as the campaign wore on and other Salafi parties fell away, Nour was arguably left on the ballot as a symbolic gesture by the Sisi government for aligning with his policies.

POSTURES AND PRESSURES OF NOUR CANDIDATES

While it is premature to make any assessment of how Nour candidates will act in parliament, a number of observations based on their campaign videos are worth mentioning. Consistent with the lack of religious themes in the party's campaign messaging, they did not declare their desire to implement Islamic law at all (with one exception: Ahmad Arjawi). Rather, these candidates -- who include doctors, lawyers, and businessmen, and about a quarter of whom mentioned that they had studied at al-Azhar -- focused on improving public services such as drinking water systems, healthcare, education, cell phone reception, and sewage systems. This approach may have resulted from two goals: appealing to a wide voter base and adhering to electoral regulations so as to avoid any government crackdown or backlash. Many candidates also emphasized their administrative experience in local charities and other organizations.

In citing why they chose to run on the Nour ticket, the candidates -- many of whom joined the party at its inception and had been active at the district level -- pointed out that Nour is well organized and efficient, noting in particular the party's record at providing social services. Here again, they did not mention its Salafi credentials.

Meanwhile, Nour's opponents -- in particular the Salafi Front, but also Asala and Watan -- attacked the legitimacy of the elections, boycotted them, and used Nour's poor performance to demonstrate the consequences of collusion with Sisi's anti-Islamist government. In addition, the campaign spurred an unprecedented reaction from more violent

groups; Mostafa Abdel Rahman, a Nour candidate in the northern Sinai town of al-Arish, was assassinated on October 24, and another candidate was attacked and injured in eastern Zagazig on November 16. Significantly, IS did not claim either of these incidents despite its increase in Sinai attacks over the same period, including a November 24 car bomb in al-Arish. The group may have feared backlash over the killing of fellow Salafis. Whatever the case, militants continue to target government offices and officials in the Sinai, and this trend will likely amplify intra-Salafi tensions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

In light of these limitations and challenges in the formal political sphere, U.S. policymakers may be better off paying attention to the ways in which Egyptian Salafi networks and scholars continue to wield substantive influence outside parliament -- particularly their attempts to align societal norms with their understanding of what is Islamic. In contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose 2013 defeat marked a near deathblow to its local legitimacy, the Salafis are structured in networks rather than hierarchical organizations, and parliamentary politics remain antithetical to their principles. Therefore, their voice will only become louder outside of formal political channels because of their composition and doctrines. If history is any predictor, the Nour Party and the Salafi Call, its parent organization, will continue to endorse Sisi's policies inside and outside parliament. Yet continued attacks in the Sinai and Cairo may invite a more aggressive security strategy by Sisi's government, which could in turn alter how the country's nonviolent Salafis define their survival strategy.

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