Why Are Salafi Islamists Contesting Egypt's Election?

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Articles & Testimony

Despite a poor showing in the first round, Salafi parties may simply be trying to convince the government and public that they are a part of Egyptian society rather than a threat to it.

On Oct. 17, Egypt began its first election cycle since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and only one religious party, the Salafi al-Nour Party, is officially participating. While Nour performed poorly in the first round of voting -- winning only 10 out of 209 seats -- its participation is significant as this will be the first time in the country's history that the Muslim Brotherhood is not the leading religious opposition since its founding in 1928.

And yet, despite this historic event, there is virtually no serious commentary by the country's leading Salafis about the elections themselves, even as the country heads for the second round of voting Nov. 21, when, it would seem, Nour could use all the support it can get. Why this silence?

Salafi groups continue to understand politics principally outside the parliamentary process. More precisely, it is not political power per se that interests them, but rather that the governance of a country accommodates their distinct interpretation of Islam. Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, at their core, adhere to a political ideology whose aim is to assert the influence of Islam in politics and society by any means, often citing a wider canon of Islamic and secondary literature and engaging with modern institutions. By contrast, Salafis insist on the redefinition of Islam according to how they imagine it to have been practiced and understood by the Prophet Muhammad's earliest Sunni followers. Anything after those three generations -- roughly 7th to 9th centuries -- they consider to be un-Islamic. This includes not only modern institutions and concepts but also relatively established Islamic ones such as the four Sunni schools of law.

In the latter part of the 20th century, non-violent Salafis began to criticize groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir for mobilizing the youth into political agitation. Perhaps fearing reprisal from local governments against religious groups, non-violent, or quietist, Salafis amplified their opposition to political agitation after the

return of battle-hardened Salafi-jihadis from Afghanistan in the 1980s and again following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 -- both of which drew new suspicion by world governments on Salafism as a catalyst for violence.

The jihadi argument views involvement in politics as a violation of God's monotheism. Recent manifestations of this include the assassination of a Nour Party candidate by jihadists in Egypt's turbulent Sinai Peninsula. Leading quietist Salafis, for their part, have rejected this line of argument and have criticized the actions of Salafi-jihadis for what they regard as a reckless excommunication of other Muslims.

Non-violent Salafis often do comment on political matters even as they refrain from formally entering the political sphere. These politically-inclined quietists often claim that political agitation, political parties and the parliamentary system espoused by both the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists are not of their methodology (*manhaj*). They argue, instead, that the task of Salafis should be to re-educate society about the proper "methodological" approach to all matters (including political ones) that affect Muslims.

In Egypt, the dominant strain of Salafism prior to the ouster of Mubarak was quietist. The two historically dominant Salafi communities in Egypt were the Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, founded in Cairo in 1926, and the Salafi School, founded in 1977 by a group of students with ties to the Gamaa al-Islamiyya who had spent time in Saudi Arabia. In 1982, facing mounting pressure from the government, the group renamed itself the Salafi Call. Much like quietists elsewhere in the region -- and for similar ideological reasons -- Egypt's quietist Salafis remained distinct from and critical of the Muslim Brotherhood.

At the beginning of the 2011 uprisings, the Salafis rode the wave of the Muslim Brotherhood's successes. Following the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood -- a group that, for decades, established popular credibility through its wide range of social services -- several members of the Salafi Call made the controversial proposal to their leadership about founding a political party, which they justified at their founding conference as using politics as a mechanism to educate society. The result was the Nour Party, which, along with smaller Salafi political parties like Asala and al-Fadila, won nearly a quarter of the parliamentary seats in the Morsi government.

The most significant turning point for Salafism in Egypt during the last five years was undoubtedly the ouster of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 and the abolishment of the Muslim Brotherhood shortly thereafter by Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. The Salafi parties, of which there was yet another, al-Watan (formed in January 2013), divided along the fault lines of politics rather than ideological principles. Specifically, does one stand with or against Sissi. This question quickly became both crucial and complicated as (a) Sissi assumed increasingly strong anti-protest and anti-Islamist postures, and (b) satellites of the Islamic State appeared in Sinai and Libya, threatening Egypt both on and within its borders.

Within these settings, Nour was the only Salafi party to explicitly endorse the policies of Sissi -- a survival strategy that meant downplaying or compromising on ideology and promoting a pan-Egyptian platform of opposing terrorism and promoting stability. The mantle of ideology, however, was carried by Nour's parent organization, the Salafi Call, which was also the only Salafi body explicitly endorsing Nour's candidacy and which continued to publish prolifically on both educational and political matters. As for the other groups, perhaps the loudest and most cohesive was the Salafi Front, which stood firmly with the Brotherhood. After staging a low-turnout demonstration in November 2014, which the government effortlessly quashed, the group has continued to criticize the Sissi government from its website and social media platforms, most recently boycotting the elections.

The year before the current election cycle was markedly different from the euphoric climate following the Brotherhood's 2012 victory. Leading up to the elections, which were postponed several times, the major Salafi parties adhered to the same political divisions, with Nour taking an increasingly pro-Sissi stance and Asala and Watan (an offshoot of Nour), the two other contenders, criticizing Sissi and hoping to ride the sentiment of popular

unrest. At the same time Sissi issued scores of laws seeking to curb Salafi influence in the country, which included shutting down thousands of mosques, banning Salafi literature and, most recently, passing the wide-reaching and deliberately vague "counter-terrorism" law in August. Despite disillusionment with the political process, the public ultimately seemed to veer more towards Sissi's security-oriented approach, particularly with a string of terrorist attacks over the summer.

This brings us to the current situation. On the surface, both the context and the campaigning of the Nour Party is odd, with the elections regulations explicitly prohibiting religious sloganeering and the party adopting a non-religious campaign slogan that emphasizes security and stability rather than its typical theological themes. It is fairly easy to understand why Nour would downplay religious rhetoric while groups commit violence on the basis of its ideology. What is more difficult is to understand is why Nour competes in the elections at all, despite the hostile popular and political climate, and why, after its losses during the first round, it looks to re-energize its campaign by initiating alliances with secularists rather than sit out altogether.

To understand this we could learn from the contributions of game theory to the political science of historical institutionalism. Work by scholars such as Avner Greif, David Laitin and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita has attempted to explain actions and statements by political leaders and the survival of political institutions by examining the relationship between a number of circumstantial factors in the decision-making of these groups. This approach helps us to make more formal sense of the decisions by Salafi political parties and how those decisions over time change the Salafi rules of political engagement.

For the politically-inclined Salafis, exogenous parameters -- such as the potential for Saudi backing, chances of survival under the local government and risk of being stigmatized as IS affiliates -- are all "quasi-parameters." Each of these limits can be altered by the implications of Salafi political engagement, yet each may not cause the behavior associated with Salafi political engagement to change. If we take Greif and Laitin's framework further, we could state that these politically inclined Salafis would be increasingly inclined to participate in the parliamentary process when that process will increase the range of parameters in which the situation becomes "self-enforcing" -- i.e. when the institution continues to validate itself and, in turn, more individuals and more situations would adhere to it.

Things will truly get interesting the moment that these deliberations lead to long-term institutional change, shifting the nature of Salafi political engagement from merely defending the political engagement of politically-inclined Salafis to supporting the formation of political parties on ideological grounds. At what point does Salafi participation in the political sphere transform Egypt's Salafi communities into more traditional Islamist groups?

So far, it is unlikely that Salafi parties will become a mainstay of the Egyptian political scene. Therefore, Nour's actions may raise another question -- why does it persist in competing in the elections on an explicitly non-religious platform and through potentially non-religious alliances?

Here, we can learn from Ivan Ermakoff's theory of collective abdication, which he introduced to explain the motives behind Germany's Center Party in supporting Hitler's bill that would effectively dissolve the constitution and therefore their own power. As the Nour Party competes to win seats in a government that will likely continue to make every effort to excise religion from politics, their participation may ultimately be a form of collective abdication made to "enhance a future capacity to act" that might not otherwise exist if they refuse to participate in the system. As Ermakoff explains, it is not abdication for the purpose of preserving oneself but rather for "the capacity to preserve oneself."

This may be precisely the mindset driving the persistence of a Salafi political party -- one whose very ideology opposes parliamentary participation and for whom deepening participation in the elections draws critics from both its ideological core and potentially the broader Egyptian public suspicious of any religious encroachment into

politics.

Given the hostile political climate, perhaps it is the very participation of Salafis in the elections rather than the elections' outcome that may, in fact, serve their goal of convincing the public and the government that they are a part of Egyptian society rather than a threat to it.

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