

# How Do Egypt's Salafists Comment on Politics?

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Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

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**Faced with government bans on political mosque sermons and overtly religious political campaigning, Salafi leaders will likely disseminate their views through a network of social media, television stations, and periodicals.**

**O**n October 17, Egyptians will vote in the first round of the parliamentary election cycle since Mohamed Morsi's 2013 ouster. Of the scores of political parties on the ballot, however, only one -- the Nour Party -- has an explicitly religious affiliation. Even so, election regulations prohibit religious sloganeering by political parties, according to the September 28 issue of *al-Ahram*. This restriction follows an August ban by the country's Ministry of Religious Affairs on mosque preachers commenting on political matters from the pulpit.

While all eyes will be on the Nour Party, Salafi influence in Egypt runs far wider and deeper than the parliamentary sphere. Therefore, the future course of Salafi engagement with politics, as contrasted with that of the Muslim Brotherhood -- which for decades has sought political influence -- will be minimally affected by Nour's performance at the ballot box.

Whereas Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamists have voiced explicit social and political ambitions since the early twentieth century, Salafists have moved in comparatively amorphous scholarly circles and their rhetoric has focused largely on theology and law. In turn, long-established Salafi political language and forums -- both physical and textual -- often fall outside the parliamentary arena. This historical background, and the relatively limited experience of present-day Salafi parliamentarians, suggests Salafists may continue to retain their loyal, albeit limited, following outside politics, regardless of what happens tomorrow.

## Crafting Political Messages and Media

**A**s a group committed to recreating a version of Islam allegedly practiced during the seventh to ninth centuries, Salafists frequently cite sects and concepts from that period. When they want to critique a current trend, for example, they may well refer to a theological adversary of the nascent Sunni community of the eighth century. This approach allows Salafists to be discreet and to avoid drawing suspicions of religious instigation.

In an August 21 issue of the weekly *al-Naba al-Safi* (The Pure Wellspring), published by the leadership of the Salafi Call, from which the Nour Party emerged, group spokesperson Abdel Moneim al-Shahat penned an article called "Salafism and the Methods of Reform." In the piece, he labeled the Grand Mufti of al-Azhar as an "Ashari" -- or a member of an early theological group that relied on rational interpretation rather than literal reading of scripture -- and attacked his promotion of "moderation" and his dismissal of Salafism as "extreme Wahhabi ideas."

In the same issue, contributor Khaled al-Rahim wrote a piece on the different connotations of the Arabic word *hizbiyya* (partisanship). Noting that the term is used widely in the Quran -- including as the title of its thirty-third chapter -- he remarked on both its positive and negative contexts: namely, in *hizb Allah*, the party of God, versus *hizb al-shaytan*, the party of Satan. After citing various opinions from Saudi Salafi scholars on acceptable circumstances for participation in political parties, Rahim concluded that the word *hizb* may be used in a nonpolitical sense (i.e., as a "group") to describe anyone promoting the Islamic cause, and that one is only permitted to join a political party, to defend the faith, in cases where other parties exist that are hostile to Islam.

Likewise, in an August 22 discussion on the Salafi television channel al-Thawra (the Revolution) including Muhammad al-Saghir, Muhammad Abdul Maqsud, and Wagdy Ghoneim, and aimed in part at soliciting funds from viewers, panelists promoted the channel's nonpolitical aspects. For his part, Maqsud used wordplay to show the need to restore law and order given the current national unrest. "It is a channel about law [sharia] and not legitimacy [*shariyya*]," he said.

Other Salafists still manage to opine indirectly on political matters by either commenting on regional rather than domestic events or by integrating their positions into lectures on unrelated subjects. Muhammad Yusri Ibrahim, general secretary of the Islamic Committee for Rights and Reform -- a group that includes politically inclined Salafists such as Maqsud and Saghir -- tweeted on August 25: "May God break the back of any tyrant helping the criminal Nusayri sectarian regime in Syria."

Likewise, Gamal al-Marakibi, a shura council member for Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah -- the country's oldest Salafi organization -- lectured on the legal question of whether a son should listen to his parents if they demand that he trim his beard. "The issue," Marakibi said, "must be looked at in a more holistic way." He explained further that "the question is why your parents want you to trim your beard...when it comes to whether to obey God or obey your parent, obeying God comes first." Nevertheless, rather than explicitly encourage children to rebel against their parents, Marakibi emphasized that parents and children alike must follow the example set by the Prophet Muhammad.

## Conclusions

**A**s these recent examples suggest, the government's bans on political preaching in mosques and incorporating religion into parties' political platforms and campaigns may do little to curb such commentary from Salafi leaders. Moreover, an interesting inverse trend exists in messaging patterns: whereas the Salafi political parties seem to downplay ideology and promote a big-tent platform representing all Egyptians -- understandable given their need to garner votes -- politically inclined Salafists, including members of the Salafist Call, emphasize creed and other aspects of their ideology in part to cloak their political rhetoric. Given the vast array of media channels available to Salafi leaders -- including social media, television stations, and periodicals -- they will have little

problem disseminating their ideas, regardless of the Egyptian government's apparent attempts to curb them.

*Jacob Olidort is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the U.S. government.* ❖

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