

Egypt's Elections (Part 1): Al-Nour Goes on the Defensive

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Brief Analysis

Recognizing the recent threats to its ideology, the Salafist Nour Party seems bent on maximizing its prospects in the upcoming elections by downplaying its doctrinal rigidity, holding onto its constituents, and expanding its popular support base.

Read Part 2 of this article (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-elections-part-2-salafis-use-education-to-campaign>), which discusses how Salafist parties and their critics have been using educational issues for political campaigning.

With the first round of parliamentary elections tentatively set for October 17, the Nour Party -- Egypt's largest Salafi faction and the only religious party on the ballot -- is positioning itself as both a voice of moderation and the best representative of popular interests. This approach is a response to mounting government and public scrutiny following recent large-scale domestic terrorist attacks.

A string of explosions has rocked Cairo in recent months, including a June 29 car bomb attack that killed chief prosecutor Hisham Barakat, a July 11 car bombing outside the Italian embassy, and an August 20 car bombing near the state security building in the Shubra neighborhood. The attacks have occurred against a backdrop of government-sponsored and popular measures targeting the influence of Salafi ideology in society, particularly the Nour Party's prominence.

The latest and most famous of these measures was President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's August 16 Anti-Terrorism Law, which sparked debate across the country for the perceived *carte blanche* it might give the government in quelling opposition due to its vague definition of "terrorist activity." This legislation came nearly a month after Sisi banned the circulation of several Salafi texts from Egypt's mosques.

Meanwhile, popular and religious groups have launched concurrent attacks on the Nour Party. In early August, prominent lawyer Samir Sabry and other anti-Islamist activists such as Hamdi al-Fakharani of Tamarod formed the Alexandria-based "No to Religious Parties" campaign, whose stated goal is the dissolution of such parties. That same month, the group's media spokesperson, Doaa Khalifa, declared that "the Nour Party is the political extension of the Salafi call, and the Salafi call is what bred ISIS." And earlier this month, the group lobbied the Ministry of Religious Endowments to prevent Nour-affiliated preachers in Alexandria from commenting on political matters in their sermons. Similarly, the Coptic church has sought to marginalize al-Nour, with Pope Tawadros II proclaiming on August 1 that Copts were barred from joining the party.

NOUR'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

In response to these attacks, al-Nour officials have questioned the legality and motives of their opponents and defended their party as a representative of all Egyptians. Ahmad Rishwan, secretary of al-Nour's higher council, called the "No to Religious Parties" campaign "political bankruptcy," explaining that "the dissolution of political parties will not occur through signatures but rather through the courts" -- referring to a series of unsuccessful attempts to pass legislation over the years banning religious parties. Rishwan also wrote a letter to the heads of other parties explaining that "political parties should be concerned with the welfare of the country and should not be focused on dissolving al-Nour."

At the same time, the party has attempted to portray itself as inclusive and moderate. On August 20, al-Nour general secretary Muhammad Ibrahim Mansour indicated that the party would be promoting the type of candidate "who is popular, and whose background gives him a strong competitive advantage in the electoral process, and likewise someone who has the vision and ability to be responsible for the country during its current stage." Such statements have followed various populist gestures and attempts to hold onto party constituents. For example, al-Nour launched a media campaign called "Egypt Is Stronger Than Terrorism" shortly after Barakat's assassination. And on August 15, it held a lecture series titled "Toward the Summit," aimed at educating Alexandria residents about the electoral process. According to al-Nour leader Younes Makhyoun, the broader purpose of the lectures was to show that "the welfare of the country comes before the welfare of any individual or party."

CONCLUSION

Although Egypt's religious parties have faced obstacles since 2013, the recent moves against al-Nour constitute a new development -- one that reflects heightened concern about Salafi jihadist-inspired instability as well as the party's potentially growing popularity and political influence. Recognizing these threats to its ideology, al-Nour seems bent on maximizing its prospects in the upcoming elections by downplaying its doctrinal rigidity, holding onto its constituents, and perhaps expanding its popular support base. As yet there are no clear indicators that the party's strategy is succeeding. But domestic security will clearly be the top issue for voters next month, so al-Nour candidates will be challenged more than ever to convince the public that they can guarantee it.

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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