

Thought the Muslim Brotherhood Was Bad? Meet Egypt's Other Islamist Party

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Articles & Testimony

With only a few months of preparation and a rumored cache of Saudi funding, Egypt's even more extreme Salafist Nour Party is giving the Muslim Brotherhood a run for its money.

The big story from Egypt's parliamentary elections, the first round of which concluded on Tuesday, will likely be the Muslim Brotherhood's impressive victory. But the Brotherhood's anticipated rise from outlawed organization to parliamentary power won't be surprising: the Brotherhood's strong mobilizing capabilities are well known, and Hosni Mubarak often warned the West that its choice was between his autocracy or the Brotherhood's theocracy.

The real surprise is the emergence of the Salafist Nour party, a deeply theocratic organization that bases its ideology on a literal reading of the Qur'an and Sunna and, most astoundingly, didn't exist until a few months ago. Although Salafist political activity was, unlike the Brotherhood, completely banned under the Mubarak regime, the Nour Party is giving the Brotherhood a run for its money in some districts. Not only is the Islamist Alliance, in which the Nour Party is the major player, running 693 candidates -- but those candidates' banners and images have been ubiquitous, even in Egypt's least religious neighborhoods. It is now expected to place second when the final round of elections is completed in January, perhaps winning as much as 30 percent of the vote.

The Nour Party's strong campaign was particularly noticeable here in Fayoum, a rural governorate 81 miles southwest of Cairo that is home to 2.5 million people. Based on my experiences covering various Cairo polling places on Monday, I fully expected a strong showing in Fayoum for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Islamist ideology is very much at home in this traditional countryside region. And, indeed, the Brotherhood was quite visible. But the Nour Party was, without question, much more visible. From the moment we entered the governorate, Nour banners -- and often only Nour banners -- were everywhere: atop light poles, along traffic islands, and even on mosques. (One aspect of the Nour's campaign particularly impressed me: To get around the ban on using the Islamic crescent as a party

symbol, Nour chose to be represented on ballots by another Islamic symbol: the *fanous*, a decorative lamp that Muslims display during Ramadan.)

My first stop was at a polling station along a major road, a schoolhouse that was one of the few structures in an otherwise pastoral setting. Although there was little foot traffic, approximately two dozen enthusiastic Nour party supporters -- again, only Nour party supporters -- were milling about, apparently waiting to help voters. "I voted for the Nour party yesterday," Ahmed Kamel, sporting the bushy-beard-sans-mustache look that is typical of Salafists, told me. "They are honest and I trust them a lot. They depend on the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him."

At my second stop, a very busy polling station towards the center of Fayoum city, the Nour Party and Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice -- and no other parties -- manned nearby voter assistance kiosks. But here, the Nour Party's presence was notably more advanced: whereas the Brotherhood was using an old desktop with a boxy monitor to tell people which voting box was theirs, the Nour activists were working off of two sleek, new-looking laptops and handing out impressively concise copies of their platform.

Yet the most impressive scene came at my third stop, in front of the Nour Party's Fayoum headquarters, where I found a number of activists clad in yellow, Nour-emblazoned, reflective vests. They had been collecting voters from centralized locations and bringing them to the polling places all day. "We announce where [voters] should meet," Mohamed Abdel Rahman Mahmoud, a 32-year-old electrician, told me. "We have a microphone on our cars, and we move around to tell them." The Nour Party's voter-roundup operation was hardly unique to Fayoum: a colleague of mine also spotted yellow-vested Salafists in the city of Luxor, and it is likely that they used this technique in similarly traditional settings where they have wide support.

When I asked these bushy-bearded politicians how they had emerged from obscurity to omnipresence in a matter of months, they insisted that the Nour Party had organically grown from the bottom-up. "As Salafists, we are part of the Muslim community and we connect with Muslims as brothers, and there is a private connection as Salafists," Mohamed Abdel Tawaq, the Nour Party's 31-year-old Fayoum coordinator, told me. "We met each other through mosques and universities. We live in a Muslim society."

But the mass organization that they'd pulled off so quickly clearly requires money. Where is it coming from? "We pay *zakat* to an organization that belongs to the party," said Abdel Tawaq. Rumor has it, I replied, that most of their funds come from Saudi Arabia, which -- I didn't say this part aloud -- has a history of exporting its own Islamic radicalism elsewhere. "You see all the [Nour Party] branches around Egypt, and you think we have so much money," said Ali Sharaf, a Nour party coordinator who was sitting nearby. "But we're really struggling to pay the rent here. Our money comes from dues." He said that dues were only 10 Egyptian pounds -- roughly \$1.75 -- each month, and that they had registered thousands of new members. (Given the ubiquity of the Nour Party's banners and the scale of their operation, this is scarcely believable.)

I also asked the Salafists why hadn't they just joined the Muslim Brotherhood. "Because the Muslim Brotherhood is a group and tied to certain rules," said Ali Sharaf, a Nour party coordinator who was sitting nearby. "But I'm a Muslim and Islam is open to anything."

Yet I'd already learned that the Salafists were not as open-minded as they claimed. At one of my polling place visits, a van full of women that had been brought to vote for Nour called me over to extol the Nour Party's virtues. "They are good people and serve the community," said Nour al-Hoda Desouki, excitedly holding a Nour party sample ballot. "We are a conservative people but we'll talk to you." But her good deed couldn't go unpunished. A Nour representative swiftly approached my translator and told us to stop talking to women.

Still, I humored the Salafists. If they were truly "open to anything," would they support allowing Egyptian hotels to

continue serving alcohol to tourists? "In my opinion, no," said Mehdi, the Nour activist handing out party programs by the polling station. "Because it's forbidden."

"But the people who drink aren't Muslims," my translator, himself a committed Muslim, interjected.

"They have to respect the country," Mehdi replied. "Like in Germany, people respect the country and have to speak German. You have to respect the country you're in, even if you disagree."

Well, what would be your policy towards Christians? Would you force them to pay the *jizya* -- the special tax that Muslim rulers historically imposed on non-Muslim minorities to pay for Islamic wars? "They already pay it through their taxes," Sherif, another local Nour coordinator, said. "Each society has its own revenue sources -- in Islam, it's *zakat* for Muslims and *jizya* for non-Muslims. Even they have to serve in the community, whether they're Christians or Jews. They pay *jizya* because we offer security."

Finally, I turned to foreign policy. What is your view of Camp David, I asked. "I heard about Camp David when I was a kid and I heard from people and our scholars that it is unjust for us," Sherif said. "But I never read it." (This Islamist apparently subscribed to the Herman Cain school of international relations.) "I don't want war with Israel," he continued. "So Israel must leave the part that it took from me." Which part? "Israel should withdraw from all of Palestine -- not just the West Bank or Gaza." I gave him a confused look. "I never denied that some Jews lived there before." On that note, I said goodbye.

As we headed back to the cab, our driver -- who had sat in for that last part -- nodded approvingly. "They're really good people," he said. Though he's not an Islamist himself, he had voted for Nour earlier in the week. Why? "They're honest."

Eric Trager, The Washington Institute's Ira Weiner fellow, is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. ❖

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