

The Salafist *Al-Nour* Party and the Muslim Brotherhood: The End of the Affair?

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The salafist *Al-Nour* Party, the political arm of *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya*, one of the largest salafist groups in Egypt, placed second in the January 2012 parliamentary elections in Egypt, receiving 25% of the vote. The result was particularly impressive given the fact that, unlike the venerable Muslim Brotherhood, the salafists had never before engaged in politics. For its part, the Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (*Hizb al-Hurriya wal-'Adala*), attained the largest percentage of votes (47%), and its candidate for president, Mohamed Morsi, narrowly won the June 2012 runoff election with 51.7% of the vote. To overcome its lack of experience, block the Brotherhood's monopolization of government institutions and translate its popularity into real influence, *Al-Nour* entered into an alliance with the Brotherhood.

Historically, the salafist-Brotherhood relationship has often been acrimonious. In post-Mubarak Egypt, however, the two wings of Egyptian political Islam have maintained a measure of unity. More than once, *Al-Nour* members have defended Morsi against the criticisms leveled against him by the opposition camp. Morsi, for his part, appointed *Al-Nour* members as advisers and involved party members in formulating the new constitution.

But on February 17, 2013, the alliance between the Brotherhood and *Al-Nour* sustained a significant blow: Morsi fired Dr. Khalid 'Alim al-Din, his salafist adviser on environmental affairs and a member of *Al-Nour*, because he had allegedly exploited his position to promote personal interests and had been involved in corruption. Al-Din's dismissal was followed by the resignation of

Bassem Al-Zarka, another salafist adviser to Morsi who was also a member of *Al-Nour*. Party members denounced Morsi's move. Sheikh Yasser al-Burhami, deputy-head of *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya*, claimed that Morsi had grossly breached the pre-election understanding that *Al-Nour* would be his principal partner in government.

According to one *Al-Nour* leader, the immediate reason for al-Din's dismissal and the ensuing crisis derived from a report *Al-Nour* presented to Morsi in mid-February 2013. The report had severely criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for appropriating state institutions since its rise to power. It had also accused Morsi and his cronies of appointing some 13,000 Muslim Brotherhood members to key posts throughout Egypt, especially in the Ministries of Education and *Wakf* (Islamic charitable institutions). Burhami declared that Morsi's nepotist policies were no different than Mubarak's, and he threatened to re-ignite a second revolution: "The people reject this. They suffered mightily [from this] during the previous regime. It is unacceptable, after the revolution, for the ruling party to take control of [government] positions."¹

The report came on the heels of the party's efforts to ameliorate Egypt's severe social crisis, beginning with a series of meetings between *Al-Nour* and opposition leaders, primarily from the National Salvation Front (*Jabhat Al-Inkadh Al-Watani*) – an umbrella organization comprising secular, liberal and leftist groups. The outcome was a demand that the Muslim Brotherhood dissolve the government, form a new one and fire the Prosecutor General, all in order to calm the atmosphere and stabilize the political system. The Brotherhood viewed the demand gravely, and deemed *Al-Nour* an opportunistic and unreliable ally.

In response, Sheikh Wagdi Ghanim, a Brotherhood-affiliated cleric, issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) forbidding people from voting for *Al-Nour* because it had allied itself with a secular faction. Sheikh Al-Burhami countered that Ghanim's *fatwa* was null and void, and intended to defame *Al-Nour*.

Along with these two reports, one may identify two additional reasons for the crisis in the *Al-Nour*-Brotherhood relationship. The first was the erosion of the status of President Morsi and the Brotherhood in Egyptian public opinion, in the wake of Morsi's authoritarian ways and a growing sense that the Brotherhood

¹ *Al-Masri Al-Yawm* (Arabic), February 28, 2012, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1531801>.

was more focused on gaining control of state institutions than on the country's pressing problems. These sentiments were reflected in the large-scale anti-government demonstrations that began in December 2012 and soon resulted in violent clashes. This deterioration in support aroused the concern of *Al-Nour*, which feared that because it was the principal partner in the Brotherhood-led regime, the wave of protests would turn against it as well. The meetings that *Al-Nour* held with opposition forces in an attempt to devise a formula acceptable to all parties and calm the situation can be seen in this light. The second reason for the crisis stemmed from the upcoming four-stage parliamentary elections (originally scheduled to begin on April 22, 2013 but since postponed until October 2013), sharpening the rivalry between *Al-Nour* and the Brotherhood, as each began campaigning against the other.

As early as January 2013, *Al-Nour* had begun to chafe at its alliance with the Brotherhood. The party's head, Dr. Yunes Makhyoun, noted that

The alliance with the [Muslim] Brotherhood is very thorny...and is liable to do more harm than good ... because *Al-Nour* and the Freedom and Justice [Party] are two large parties. Each party has its popular base [of power] and each has its program. Each strives to attain a larger number of seats in parliament so that it can form the new government.

He also revealed that, in the coming elections, *Al-Nour* intended to put up a candidate for the presidency of Egypt, stressing that "We hope to play a role in leading the country during the next stage."²

The relationship between *Al-Nour* and the Brotherhood further deteriorated in late February and early March 2013, when all of the members of *Al-Nour* and *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya* resigned from the Shari'a Association for Rights and Reform (*Al-Hayah Al-Shari'a lil-Hukuk wal-Islah*), an umbrella organization of Islamist groups.³ The resignations constituted a protest against Muslim Brotherhood attempts to take control of the association from within.

² *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (Arabic), January 12, 2013, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=712763>.

³ At its establishment in 2011, the Shari'a Association for Rights and Reform included members of the Muslim Brotherhood and of *Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya*. Its purpose was to coordinate policy in opposition to secular and liberal forces in Egypt.

Some salafist members of *Al-Nour* also blamed the Brotherhood for a rift inside *Al-Nour*, which became apparent on December 26, 2012 with the departure of `Imad Al-Ghafour, party leader and adviser to President Morsi, and other members. The group joined with salafist Sheikh Hazam Abu Isma'il, whose 2011 candidacy for president had been rejected by the electoral commission, to form a new Islamist party named *Al-Watan* ("The Homeland"), which aspired to encompass an extensive spectrum of Islamist, salafist and Muslim Brotherhood factions and representatives.

The recent discourse of *Al-Nour* and *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya* regarding the Muslim Brotherhood has been marked by strident hostility. For example, Sheikh Burhami has openly declared that Morsi can no longer be considered the legitimate leader of the Egyptian people, because he intends to extend his tenure as president beyond the conclusion of his four-year term. Morsi's regime is not sacrosanct, he stated, and thus every Egyptian citizen retains the right to criticize and oppose him. Morsi's decision to renew Egypt's ties with Iran, especially in the field of tourism, and normalize relations between the two countries has enabled the salafists to position themselves as true loyalists and zealous defenders of Sunni Islam, which the Muslim Brotherhood has allegedly failed to do. According to Burhami, the Brotherhood's pro-Iranian policy was promoting Shi'ism in Egypt:

The *Al-Nour* Party jealously guards the interests of the homeland. Egypt enjoys Sunni unity. This protects it from the dangers of inter-ethnic strife like that in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere. Opening the gates to the spread of Shi'ism in Egypt threatens this unity and undermines the collective peace.⁴

In sum, it is possible to see the crisis of confidence between the salafist and Muslim Brotherhood movements as an expression of a deeply ingrained competition for political hegemony in Egypt and for the right to play the decisive role in shaping its religious life. The upcoming parliamentary elections are heightening and intensifying this rivalry. The salafists thought that a partnership with the Brotherhood would increase their political power. However, two-plus years after the Tahrir Square revolution, they concluded that the Brotherhood and Morsi had no intention of sharing the political pie with them, beyond throwing them a few crumbs. The Muslim Brotherhood's discrimination against

⁴ *Al-Shorouk* (Arabic), March 1, 2013, p.7.

its salafist partners, the erosion of the status of the Brotherhood and Morsi in the eyes of large segments of the Egyptian population, and the salafists' desire to translate their social capital into significant political power have in effect led the salafists to distance themselves from the Brotherhood, their "foster parent" and guide through the labyrinth of Egyptian politics.

Still, it appears that *Al-Nour* and the Muslim Brotherhood will not be quick to completely dissolve their alliance, lest the crisis between them play into the hands of their liberal secular rivals or of the salafist-jihadist movement that takes every opportunity to censure *Al-Nour* for participating in the political process, which it sees as anathema to Islam. Moreover, it is clear to all that a continuing crisis between the two movements is liable to undermine efforts to make Egypt an Islamic state whose constitution will be Islamic law (*shari'a*). It is for this reason that other Islamist forces, such as *Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya* and even some segments of the salafist-jihadist movement, have urged Morsi, the Brotherhood and *Al-Nour* to patch things up and sign a binding agreement to cooperate in implementing *shari'a*.

The political power of *Al-Nour*, and of the salafists in general, also seems to have diminished somewhat. *Al-Nour's* continuing rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood, its internal rift, the subsequent establishment of the new salafist *Al-Watan* Party, and its increasing castigation by the salafist-jihadist faction have all eroded its standing. Nevertheless, *Al-Nour* remains a political force to be reckoned with, especially as it opportunistically seeks to exploit public rage against the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi. Its efforts, one Egyptian commentator declared, signaled "the end of the catholic marriage between the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Al-Nour* Party," which holds "a harsh lesson not only for Salafists, but for all parties."⁵

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⁵ *Al-Yawm Al-Sabi'* (Arabic), February 20, 2012, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=952134>.

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