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Salafis in Egypt's New Politics: Ideological Adaptation or Compromise?

By Taufiq Radja Nurul Bahri and Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan

Synopsis

The Egyptian elections have thrown up an unexpected force in the Salafi Nour Party. Is it making an ideological shift or a pragmatic compromise?

Commentary

THE RECENT elections in Egypt following the Tahrir Square uprising have produced unexpected outcomes. While the formerly outlawed Muslim Brotherhood won the majority of seats in parliament, more startling was the emergence of the lesser known Salafi Nour Party, which won 25 per cent of the seats. The participation of the Salafis in the second phase of the elections was itself unexpected in light of its initial abstention from politics.

The ascendancy of two Islamist parties as dominant players in the new political system has raised the spectre of Egypt becoming a theocratic state similar to Iran. However both parties have distanced themselves from this idea and neither has promoted a revival of the caliphate in its agenda. This is a radical departure from the principles of the Salafis. While some may perceive this as an ideological adaptation to the changed political environment others see it as a pragmatic compromise for political ends.

Emergence of Salafis

The emergence of the Salafis in Egyptian politics is arguably the most dramatic development arising from the Tahrir Square uprising. Contrary to previously-held assumptions, the election results show that there was wide support for Salafism at all levels of society. A key factor for the popularity of the Salafis was their contribution to the society in social welfare and empowerment. The Nour Party was so effective on the ground that Salafis outnumbered the Muslim Brotherhood in the extent of their popular reach.

The Salafis had worked for years in the poorest sectors of Egyptian society to provide social services including free food and medicine for the needy and the people responded with their votes in the elections. They were not interested in ideologies or identities but wanted security, dignity and freedom. Salafis were seen to be heading in that direction and gained the people's trust.

Salafism in Egypt today adopts Saudi-style conservatism unlike earlier revivalist genres promoted by Egyptian reformers such as Rashid Rida and Hassan al Banna. A major factor for the rise of Salafis is their adoption of a

more progressive outlook on issues instead of sticking to strict principles. Having long held that participation in secular politics is forbidden, their mere involvement in the process reflects their change in attitude.

While Salafis used to hold that any type of protest against the government is a form of rebellion and a great sin, they are now not only involved in the Egyptian revolution but were even spearheading protests. "The Salafi movement has participated in the continuation of protests in Egypt, and Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jihad, and the Islamic Group, in addition to the Salafis, have acquired greater scope for working in the street that was not available under Mubarak's rule," reported an Egyptian journalist Waleed Abdul Rahman.

Progressive changes

Salafis have dismissed discussions in favour of a return of the caliphate and opted for a democratic civil state. Salafis have even gone to the extent of addressing sectarian and religious issues affirming that freedom of belief and practice will be given to all. According to Waleed, Imad Abdul-Ghafur, a representative of the founders of the Nour Party, stresses the need to guarantee the religious freedom of Egypt's Coptic Christians and rejects the model of a religious state. Unlike the Saudi Salafi position on women with its strict limitations on their social and professional participation, the Nour Party, on the other hand, acknowledges the importance of women's involvement in today's societal and even political spheres.

These progressive transitions, in addition to the social services they have provided to the Egyptian people, are key factors in determining their place in Egyptian politics. A recent survey by Ahram newspaper shows that Egyptians today are leaning towards Salafism more than Sufism which deals exclusively with spiritual activities. In a related development, the Nour Party is also undertaking an interpretation of their ideology with a contextualist approach to the exegesis of religious texts.

A different Salafism in future?

Although the Nour Party is still less known and lacking the political maturity of the Muslim Brotherhood, they make up for it in social services and empowerment. While some might still be wary of the rigidity of Salafism, the Salafis can show themselves in new light by taking a softer approach in addressing the issues that matter to the people.

On a positive note, with their involvement in Egyptian politics, the Salafis are required to engage with democratic institutions and laws, and will have to moderate their views rather than take extreme positions. Given time, the Salafis might show a different face in Egypt's new politics.

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