

# Egypt's Looming Competitive Theocracy

*By Eric Trager*

**I**N THE AFTERMATH OF HIS NOVEMBER 22, 2012 CONSTITUTIONAL DECLARATION seizing virtually unchecked executive power, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi had few political allies more stalwart than the Salafists. As non-Islamists poured into Tahrir Square to protest Morsi's edict, the long-bearded Salafists locked arms with Morsi's shorter-bearded Muslim Brotherhood colleagues, hastily drafting a new—and quite Islamist—constitution while also coordinating a series of counter-protests to overwhelm Morsi's detractors. Even amidst the bloody clashes on December 4, when the Muslim Brotherhood sent its cadres to attack those who had gathered outside the presidential palace to protest Morsi's decree, the Salafists remained in Morsi's corner. "If you are capable of using violence there will be others who are capable of responding with violence," declared prominent Salafist Shaykh Yasser Borhamy, who blamed the civil unrest on those "saying words that were insulting to the president" during an Al-Jazeera interview.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the Salafists didn't agree entirely with Morsi's actions. The most prominent Salafist party, al-Nour, openly criticized the second article of his constitutional declaration: that all presidential acts "are final and binding and cannot be appealed by any way or to any entity."<sup>2</sup> Nor were the Salafists entirely pleased with the final draft of the constitution, which held that the potentially broad "principles of *sharia*," rather than the stricter "*sharia* judgments," would be the primary source of Egyptian law.<sup>3</sup> But for Egypt's most hardline Islamists, the choice between a somewhat less hardline Islamist president and a relatively secular opposition was a no-brainer, since it enabled

them to collaborate with the politically stronger Brotherhood to achieve their shared goal of a *sharia*-based constitution.

Yet the currently cordial relationship between Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood isn't likely to last. Their mutual pursuit of an Islamic state belies their deep ideological and behavioral differences; ultimately, the two parties are bound to battle with each other for power, new recruits, and the mantle of Islamist authenticity. And given that these two groups now possess the greatest mobilizing potentials, the Brotherhood-Salafist divide is likely to become the defining cleavage of Egyptian politics, rendering Egypt a competitive theocracy.

## Fundamentalists Versus “Moderates”

IN THE UNIVERSE OF POLITICAL ISLAM, SALAFISTS ARE CONSIDERED THE ULTIMATE fundamentalists. Indeed, the very word “*salaf*,” which means “predecessor,” implies the first generation of Islam, which the Salafists aim to emulate. “Salafists have one way of doing politics,” said Salafist youth activist Mohamed Bakr, who participated in the coalition that organized the January 2011 uprising. “It comes from the Qur’an and Sunna.” For Salafists, these texts are to be interpreted literally. Perhaps that best example of an outward manifestation of this literalism is in Salafist males’ facial hair: it is typically groomed to look exactly like that of the Prophet Mohammed himself consisting of a long beard and a short mustache, which is occasionally dyed red with henna.

The centerpiece of Salafists’ textual literalism is their rejection of *bid’ah*, or innovation. Indeed, Salafist preachers frequently begin their sermons by proclaiming, “I bear witness that all updated things are evil, and every update is an innovation, and every innovation is misguidance, and every misguidance leads to hell.” Within Salafist legal discourse, anything that the Prophet Muhammad’s traditions (*hadith*) or the Qur’an does not sanction is considered *bid’ah*. Furthermore, the Salafist jurisprudential approach frequently uses *hadith* to interpret the Qur’an in determining what is and is not *bid’ah*. In some variations of Salafism, *bid’ah* is expanded to include everything that the Prophet Muhammad did not do thus representing the strictest possible emulation of the Prophet.

In refusing *bid’ah*, Salafists aim to realize *hakamiya*, a term which implies that rightful governance belongs to God. “Arab prophets came just to advocate for God,” explained Salafist television preacher Hesham Abul Nasr during a December 2011 interview. “What he orders me to do, I obey. And what he orders me to stop, I stop.” In other words, a literalist implementation of the *sharia* that eschews all innovations

provides the clearest path to living the life that God commanded in the Qur'an and that the Prophet Muhammad clarified through his traditions.

For Salafists, contemporary democratic procedures are thus anathema; they represent a form of *bid'ah*, since popular rule contradicts *hakamiya*. This, as well as repression from the previous regime, kept Egypt's Salafists away from politics until the January 2011 revolution. Following the revolution, however, a number of prominent Salafist organizations made the strategic decision to enter elections, explaining their participation as a necessary evil for establishing a true Islamic state in Egypt. Yet the tension between their rejection of *bid'ah* and participation in modern political institutions remains. In this vein, Abdel Moneim al-Shahat, an Alexandria-based spokesman for one of Egypt's largest Salafist organizations, argued in the run-up to Egypt's first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections that Western democracy was strictly "forbidden and for infidels;" however, he also argued in the same instance that "Egyptian democracy" was acceptable because it would empower Islamists, who would then implement a Salafist interpretation of the *sharia*.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the hardline Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood presents itself as more "moderate" in two respects. First, unlike the Salafists, it has historically embraced political participation, running in every Egyptian parliamentary election since 1984. The Brotherhood justifies this acceptance of formally democratic institutions by equating them with the Islamic concept of *shura*, or consultation among qualified individuals for the purpose of determining the law. "Democracy is *shura*," first deputy supreme guide Khairat al-Shater stated during a March 2011 interview: "The Holy Qur'an is the main source for Muslims and the order is *shura*."

Second, the Brotherhood rejects the Salafists' textual literalism. It embraces an interpretive approach to the *sharia* that traces its ideological lineage back to the Islamic "modernism" of Mohamed 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935), both of whom aimed to reconcile Islamic principles with modern science.<sup>5</sup> This theoretical approach sought to revive Islam's contemporary relevance and also to resist Europe's growing political, legal, and societal influence within Muslim lands. The Brotherhood was the resulting political manifestation of these ideas, projecting itself as the mechanism for implementing the "modernist" concept.<sup>6</sup> Such is evident in the writings of the Brotherhood's founder Hassan al-Banna. In particular, al-Banna's teachings reflect a desire to build an organization that would revive Islam as "an all-embracing concept," since the Qur'an and Sunna could be interpreted for "adjudicating on every one of [life's] concerns and prescribing for it a solid and rigorous order."<sup>7</sup>

The Brotherhood's interpretive jurisprudence emphasizes the *maqasid*, or broad intentions and general principles, of the *sharia*. In practice, this rather vague framework can be used for justifying a wide range of political action. Indeed, when asked what

implementing the *sharia* might mean for policy, top Brotherhood leaders frequently fall back on platitudes. “It means peace and security, equality and citizenship and freedom and giving rights for people despite their religion or his ethics or his color or his sex,” stated Farid Ismail, a former parliamentarian and leading member of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, during a July 2012 interview. “Sharia is general principles ... and all these principles secure morals and freedom.”

To be sure, the Brotherhood understands these concepts like “freedom” and “rights” quite differently from how they are commonly understood in the West. As then Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi claimed during an August 2010 interview, “freedom” entails being “governed by Islamic principles to be implemented in the constitution.” This, of course, is the opposite of the Western conception of freedom, which emphasizes, among other things, the freedom *from* religious domination.

The Brotherhood’s characteristic vagueness regarding how it would actually interpret the *sharia*’s broad intentions serves an important political purpose; above all, it enables the organization to refute accusations of ideological rigidity and portray itself as a representative of “moderate” Islam. “*Sharia* is a holy text,” Sobhi Saleh, one of the Brotherhood’s leading legal theorists, stated in a March 2011 interview. “But *fiqh* (a legal code) is man-made, and we can choose from among various *fiqh*.” The Brotherhood’s supposed openness to multiple interpretations of the *sharia*’s intentions thus widens its appeal among Egypt’s religiously conservative, but not uniformly Islamist, population.

Indeed, the Brotherhood consciously uses its purported ideological flexibility to contrast itself favorably with the Salafists. “We’re open to all political forces, and work with all different movements and streams, and this influences the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology,” stated Saber Abouel Fotouh, a Brotherhood parliamentarian and labor leader during a December 2012 interview. “It’s different from the [Salafist] Nour Party, which is closed.” Salafists, of course, take the opposite approach, using the Brotherhood’s flexibility to undercut its Islamist credentials. “The Muslim Brotherhood doesn’t wear beards or wear a *galabiya* [traditional tunic], except on special occasions,” stated Shaykh Mohamed El-Kordi, a Nour Party leader. “Ideologically, we just depend on the Qur’an, *hadith*, and knowledgeable people.”

The ideological divide between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists emerged most prominently in the context of the debate within the Constituent Assembly regarding the status of *sharia* in Egypt’s new constitution. The Brotherhood advocated preserving Article 2 of the 1971 Constitution, under which “the principles of the Islamic *sharia* are the main source of legislation.” Non-Islamists were willing to accept the clause, though sometimes grudgingly, because of its open-ended interpretation. Salafists, however, found this formulation too loose, and they instead pushed for standards of legislation that are based on much more restrictive “*sharia* judgments”

while demanding additional articles to ensure that certain gender inequalities under Islamic law, such as allowing young girls to marry, were protected.<sup>8</sup>

The final draft of the hastily written constitution largely indicates that it was the Salafists' vision, not the Brotherhood's, which prevailed. For example, while Article 2 remained as is, a new Article 219 narrowly defines the principles of *sharia* as including "general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence, and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the larger community."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a new Article 10 empowers the state to "preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family, its cohesion and stability, and to protect its moral values," thereby providing a constitutional basis for future legislation that could significantly undermine women's rights.

To some extent, the Muslim Brotherhood's concession to the Salafists on these matters reflects the weakness of the Brotherhood's still-ill-defined "moderate Islamism" relative to the Salafists' more ideologically consistent, and perhaps more compelling, fundamentalism. The Brotherhood's apparent preference for quickly ratifying a constitution over ensuring a "moderate" document, however, indicates something very important about the group's preferences: the Brotherhood is ultimately much less invested in the ideological pursuit of implementing "moderate Islam" than it is in the organizational prerogative of pursuing power.

## An Organization Versus an Ideology

DESPITE EMERGING AS THE FOREMOST POLITICAL PLAYER IN POST-MUBARAK EGYPT, the Muslim Brotherhood envisions itself not as a party, but as a *gama'a*, which is loosely translated as "society." The *gama'a*'s long-term goal is ideological: it aims to Islamize Egyptian society from the ground up in order to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. However, the Brotherhood's leaders view the *gama'a*'s internal unity and solidarity as essential to achieving this vision. Therefore, they focus primarily on building a strong organization while, according to former Muslim Brother Ibrahim El-Houdaiby, "postponing all intellectual questions."<sup>10</sup> It is worth emphasizing two key structural features through which the Brotherhood maintains this organizational strength.

First, the Brotherhood uses a rigid process of internal promotion to ensure its members' commitment to the *gama'a* and its cause. The process begins at recruitment, when specially designated Muslim Brothers scout out potential members at mosques and universities across Egypt. During the process of recruitment, prospective Muslim Brothers are introduced to the organization through social activities, such as sports and camping, which give the Brotherhood an opportunity to further assess each recruit's personality

and confirm his piety. If the recruit satisfies local Brotherhood leaders, he begins a rigorous five-to-eight-year process of internal promotion, during which he ascends through four different membership ranks, *muhib*, *muayyad*, *muntasib* and *muntazim* before finally achieving the status of *ach 'amal*, or “active brother.”

During each stage of internal promotion, the rising Muslim Brother’s curriculum intensifies, and he is tested, either orally or through a written exam, before advancing to the next stage. For example, a *muayyad* (second stage) is expected to memorize major sections of the Qur’an and study the writings of Brotherhood founder al-Banna, while a *muntasib* (third stage) studies *hadith* and Qur’anic exegesis. Rising Muslim Brothers also assume more responsibilities within the organization: *muayyads* are trained to preach in mosques and recruit other members, and *muntasibs* continue these activities while also donating six-to-eight percent of their income to the organization.<sup>11</sup> This process serves to weed out those who are either less committed to the organization, or who dissent with some of its principles or approaches. Muslim Brothers’ commitment to the organization is further established through their assumption of a *bay’a*, an oath, to “listen and obey,” which occurs sometime after the midpoint of this promotional process.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the Brotherhood pursues its Islamizing project by maintaining a well-developed nationwide hierarchical organization. At the top of this structure is the Guidance Office (*maktab al-irshad*), a twenty-member body largely comprised of individuals in their late fifties to early seventies. The Guidance Office executes decisions on which the 120-member Shura committee (*magles al-shura al-'amm*) votes, and orders are sent down the following chain of command: the Guidance Offices calls leaders in each regional sector (*qita'*), who transmit the order to leaders in each governorate (*muhafaza*), who pass it on to their deputies in each subsidiary area (*muntaqa*), who refer it to the chiefs in each subsidiary populace (*shu'aba*), who then call the heads of the Brotherhood’s local cells, known as *usras*, or “families.” The *usra* is typically comprised of five to eight Muslim Brothers, and they execute the Guidance Office’s orders at the local level throughout Egypt. Such directives can include everything from managing social services to mobilizing the masses for pro-Brotherhood demonstrations, to supporting Brotherhood candidates during elections.

The union of a committed membership and a clear chain-of-command provides the Muslim Brotherhood with a well-oiled political machine and thereby a tremendous advantage over the Salafists. Indeed, whereas the Brotherhood is one cohesive entity that can summon hundreds of thousands of veritable foot soldiers, not to mention the millions of ordinary Egyptians who benefit from its social services, to execute its agenda, the Salafist movement is entirely decentralized and spread out among a plethora of Salafist groups, schools, and shaykhs.

In a certain sense, Salafists are mirror images of Muslim Brothers in that they privilege ideological objectives above organizational ones. Indeed, many Salafists are “quietist,” in that they view Salafism as a personal religious commitment and reject attempts to politicize it: “I don’t have to join any organization to be more religious,” stated Bakr, a Salafist who participated in the youth coalition that organized the 2011 anti-Mubarak protests, when asked why he never considered joining the Muslim Brotherhood. He said: “There is no organization in Salafism because an organization needs a target. And there is no target in Salafism, the only point is *dawa* (outreach).” Even those Salafists who are deeply involved in Salafist organizations view their affiliation as secondary to their personal religious commitments. “Salafist streams are movements and different schools, not an organization,” said al-Gamaa al-Islamiya member Abdullah Abdel Rahman, son of the infamous “Blind Shaykh” Omar Abdel Rahman, who was convicted for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. “It’s a way of life. Anyone who follows the Holy Book and Sunna, they call him a Salafist. They don’t have a certain person to follow. ... They all have their own schools, but agree on one way.”

Salafism’s deeply personal, self-directed nature is perhaps most evident in the independent process through which one becomes a Salafist. In stark contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood’s five-to-eight-year, four-stage process of internal promotion, one becomes a Salafist simply by declaring himself a “*multazim*,” or “obligated” to follow a literalist interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna. Typically, a *multazim* attaches himself to a specific Salafist shaykh, with whom he studies how to live a deeply conservative lifestyle. But the *multazim* can choose his shaykh, unlike a Muslim Brother, who is assigned to an *usra* and handed a standardized curriculum.

Under the reign of Hosni Mubarak, the regime’s repression, much of which targeted Salafist terror groups, such as al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, deterred Salafists from entering politics. Instead, Salafist organizations transmitted their message and gained adherents through preaching and the provision of social services. “They were well organized from before,” said Abboud al-Zomor, a member of al-Gamaa al-Islamiya’s shura council who was implicated in President Anwar Sadat’s assassination and spent thirty years in prison. “They had their schools and their scholars. State Security knew about them and let them do this, because [State Security] was only against jihadists. They otherwise let these people organize because it’s not in politics: [Salafists were] just delivering speeches in mosques and teaching the Qur’an.”

As a result, when a number of Salafist groups decided to enter formal politics following Mubarak’s February 2011 ouster, their hardline ideology possessed substantial grassroots support, even if their newly formed parties had no political experience. Their lack of an organization approximating the Muslim Brotherhood’s nationwide mobilizing structure notwithstanding, the Salafists finished second in the 2011-2012

parliamentary elections, winning 24 percent of the parliamentary seats to the Brotherhood's 47-percent-seat plurality.

The Salafists' decision to run as a unified coalition greatly contributed to their political success. While the Nour Party, the political wing of the prominent al-Dawa al-Salafiyya organization based in Alexandria, anchored the Islamist bloc, it also drew on the regionally-centered strengths of the Cairo-based al-Asala party and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya's Building and Development Party (BDP), which, according to al-Zomor, operated social services in Upper Egypt in the cities of Sohag, Assiut, Minya, Qena, and Aswan. This enabled millions of Egyptian Salafists, who are otherwise divided among a wide variety of movements and follow an even wider variety of shaykhs, to converge on a single electoral list.

There is, however, no guarantee that Salafists will be able to maintain this unity in subsequent elections. Since last winter's elections, the Salafist political field has become substantially more crowded as new parties have emerged, including the Salafist Front's People's Party and former presidential candidate Hazem Abu Ismail's Egyptian Ummah Party.<sup>13</sup> Both of these parties have differed sharply with the now better-established Nour and BDP: whereas Nour and BDP both endorsed former Brotherhood leader Abdel Monem Abouel Fotouh during the first round of the presidential elections, the Salafist Front endorsed Morsi, while Abu Ismail's followers were divided between the two candidates.<sup>14</sup>

The relatively individualistic nature of Salafism may also undermine Salafist parties' ability to consistently mobilize their followers. Indeed, this was the case during the presidential elections when, despite the Nour Party's official endorsement of Abouel Fotouh, many lower-ranking Nour Party leaders supported Morsi. Furthermore, reports indicated that a critical mass of Nour Party members either supported Morsi or stayed home.<sup>15</sup> "When we supported Abouel Fotouh, some al-Dawa al-Salafiyya followers disagreed," said Nour Party leader Ashraf Thabet during a June 2012 interview, referring to the Nour Party's parent organization. "This is normal. ... Our followers follow decision of al-Dawa when it affects Salafists. But this was a political decision, it was up to them."

The Brotherhood, of course, would never take an "it was up to them" approach. In fact, when a number of its younger members announced their support for Abouel Fotouh's candidacy last year, the Brotherhood punished them by freezing their membership. So long as the Brotherhood can ensure that its cadres remain disciplined, it will maintain a substantial political advantage over its Salafist competitors.

# Who Will Win?

THE RAPID EMERGENCE OF THE SALAFISTS DURING THE 2011-2012 PARLIAMENTARY elections, and their second place finish to the Muslim Brotherhood, affirmed for many analysts that Islamists are destined to dominate post-Mubarak Egyptian politics. Egypt's new constitution, which an Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly drafted, bolsters Islamism's ascendancy. In addition to privileging Islamist legislative approaches, the new constitution empowers the state to "safeguard ethics, public morality, and public order, and foster a high level of education and of religious and patriotic values," thereby creating a substantial foothold through which Islamists can institute their authority. Add to this the religiously conservative nature of Egyptian society, the political salience of appeals to Islamic values, and the fact that non-Islamists lack the Islamists' mobilizing capabilities and ideological cohesion, and one can only reasonably predict an Islamist future for Egypt.

This is not to say that non-Islamists will disappear. Non-Islamist candidates, after all, won nearly 57 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election. Ahmed Shafik won 48.3 percent of the vote in the second round—despite the fact that he was Mubarak's former prime minister and therefore deeply unattractive to many non-Islamist Egyptians. The non-Islamists remain deeply fragmented, however, both ideologically and organizationally, and this will hamper their ability to build a truly coherent opposition movement in the near future. This, combined with the Muslim Brotherhood's co-optation of the military through constitutional clauses preserving the military's relative autonomy, has convinced the Islamists that they can run roughshod over their secularist opponents. The rammed-through constitution, as well as the Brotherhood's use of organized violence against the anti-Morsi protesters, is likely a sign of things to come.

At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists' current political alignment against the non-Islamists is not likely to last. At the heart of the battles between them is a contest for the mantle of Islamist authenticity. The Brotherhood will tout its supposed "moderation" as making the implementation of *sharia* more politically feasible, while the Salafists will argue that the Brotherhood is not implementing true Islam. The Brotherhood's rather vague *sharia* approach, however, will make it especially sensitive to the Salafists' critique, perhaps forcing it to adopt more extreme policies to cover its right flank. Indeed, the outcome of the constitutional process suggests that the Salafists may frequently win these ideological battles, because they are more invested in an intellectually consistent approach to the *sharia* than the Brotherhood.

Politics, however, is not only about ideology; organizational factors are often decisive.

In the short term, organizational factors will almost certainly benefit the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, after all, has a recruitment strategy that ensures that only the most committed individuals become members. It also has a nationwide hierarchical organization that can mobilize these veritable foot soldiers with unmatched efficiency. By contrast, the Salafists have no structure; indeed, most Salafist parties may end up competing for the same votes, thereby cancelling each other out. Of course, a unified Salafist coalition would solve this problem, and the Salafists may align with each other once again during the next election. The relatively individualistic nature of Salafism, however, makes this kind of cohesion unlikely over the long-term. Different parties follow different shaykhs, who are liable to attempt to make their own unique impact on Egyptian politics. This would benefit the inherently cohesive Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet the long-term isn't without risks for the Muslim Brotherhood. In an era of unprecedented political openness, the rigorous five-to-eight-year process that it takes to become a Muslim Brother may lose its appeal. By contrast, the ease with which one can become a Salafist *multazim*, as well as the fact that Salafists are free to choose their own shaykhs in practicing a "purer" Islam, may hold more appeal to Muslim youths choosing among Islamist trends.

Salafist parties seemingly recognize their advantage among Islamist youths. To enhance their youth outreach, Nour Party rules dictate that decisions cannot be taken unless one-fifth of the voting members are under the age of 35. Their spokesman Nader Bakkar is emblematic of this appeal: he is 28-years-old, iPad-toting, tie-wearing, and tweeting. He thus strikes a stark contrast with the Brotherhood's stodgy spokesman Mahmoud Ghozlan, a graying sexagenarian whose style is institutional. Still, young Muslim Brothers report that despite the organization's rigid structure, recruitment is steady. This isn't surprising: the Brotherhood is Egypt's new ruling party, and power is attractive.

No matter which Islamist trend attracts more recruits in the near-term, however, the real competition between them will focus on winning the allegiances of Egypt's next generation. That is to say, the contest among Egypt's theocrats is just getting started.

## NOTES

1. Salma Shukrallah, et al, "A Bloody Night at Egypt's Presidential Palace," *Ahram Online* (December, 6, 2012) <<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/59852.aspx>>.

