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On 7 February this year a session of the People’s Assembly, the first freely elected parliament in Egypt since at least 1952, was interrupted by a loud call to prayer from one of the MPs. Mamduh Isma’il, representing the small salafi party Hizb al-Asala (Authenticity Party) took it upon himself to act the muezzin for his colleagues.

Isma’il was severely reprimanded by the Assembly President, Sa’d al-Katatni, who told him: “There is a mosque if you want to call to prayer. This hall is not for prayer, it is for discussion.” Given the fact that al-Katatni belongs to the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brothers, the exchange is indicative of the gulf that for decades has separated the Brothers from the more conservative and apolitical salafi trend. Yet the episode also points to the challenge facing the salafis when they enter politics: they are entering a new arena where different rules pertain. What will be the effect on the salafis themselves?

Salafis into party politics

In Egypt’s first free elections since before the military coup of 1952, Islamists won the day, unsurprisingly led by the Muslim Brothers. The surprise was rather the strong performance of another Islamist agent new to Egyptian politics, the political wing of the Muslim Brothers, the exchange is indicative of the gulf that for decades has separated the Brothers from the more conservative and apolitical salafi trend. Yet the episode also points to the challenge facing the salafis when they enter politics: they are entering a new arena where different rules pertain. What will be the effect on the salafis themselves?

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The salafis are adamant that the commands of God cannot be negotiated about. Thus there has traditionally been two privileged salafi positions towards politics: either to withdraw from it or to enter it sword in hand to enforce God’s will whatever the view of the tyrant or the elected government.

Both trends have been amply present in Egypt. In particular two distinct salafi tendencies emerged from the broad student movement of the 1970s. Originally the whole of the student movement was heavily salafi in its religious outlook. Eventually a majority gravitated towards the Brothers and in the process also shed some of their original salafi culture. Yet a significant part of the movement did not agree, and considered the Muslim Brothers to have deviated from the pure Islam of the salaf, the earliest generation of Muslims. Part of the reason for this was the perceived moral laxity of the Brothers with regard to regulations of personal moral behaviour.

But for the group that came to gain most no-
toriety in the West, the Jama’a Islamiyya, their crucial critique of the MB was that the Brothers rejected armed struggle against the state. The JI in the late eighties and early nineties launched a small-scale guerrilla warfare against the authorities involving also terror attacks against foreigner and Egypt’s Christian minority. The rebellion was crushed and since 1997 the leadership called for an abandonment of armed struggle and the return to peaceful work for Islamic reform. After the revolution the JI formed the Party for Building and Development which now makes part of the salafi parliamentary alliance.

Another group of students, centred on Alexandria, rejected political work altogether, preferring to focus on the call for personal piety. This group formed the Da’wa Salafyya which is the backbone of the post-revolutionary Hizb al-Nur, the dominant salafi party.

The profane world of politics

As the Western world is slowly and reluctantly coming to terms with the fact of the Muslim Brothers in positions of power in several Arab countries, increased contact leads to the assessment that this is a rather moderate Islamo-national trend, politically pragmatic, committed to democracy and strongly focussed on issues related to development.

Rapidly the salafis have taken over as the new bad guys representing religious intolerance, a backward view of gender relations and violent attacks on minorities and Western interests. Yet this image is at best oversimplified. It is true that the salafis are staunchly conservative on social issues. But it is important to make a distinction between the small salafi-jihadi groups involved in armed struggle against the authorities as well as against Israel in the Sinai, and the broader movements that have entered party politics. A close look at how the discourse of the latter tends to develop when they enter politics yields interesting insights, however.

In fact, reading the programme of Hizb al-Nur, one is struck by the similarities with the dominant salafi party, Hizb al-Nur, and the way the party managed to avoid criticism of the low interest rate stipulated on the loan meant that in reality it was only a matter of compensating the IMF for transaction costs, and little interest was paid on the loan. Burhami’s argument was that the low interest rate stipulated on the loan meant that in reality it was only a matter of compensating the IMF for transaction costs, and no riba was involved. This is one of many instances indicating a major transformation of salafi discourse and practice underway as a consequence of the decision of the salafis to enter into politics.

The party’s moderation also shows up in other ways, as when during the demonstrations in protest against the film Innocence of Muslims, the MB focused on reaffirming the need to improve women’s status by improving education and combating violence against women.

Moving to the constitution the party calls for erecting “a contemporary state on modern bases”. The liberal tone of the programme may be somewhat deceptive. The party was glued rapidly together and the programme hardly expressed a consensus of its members, but rather what the non-elected leadership saw as politically expedient at the time. Development since has shown up a number of tensions and a continuous vacillation between modern-oriented pragmatism and a hard-line defence of conservative interpretations of Islamic socio-mores. In the constitutional assembly Hizb al-Nur has recently clashed with both the more secular tendencies and the Freedom and Justice Party over Article 2. This article as it stands in the proposal under preparation stipulates that the principles of the Islamic Shari’ah are the main source of legislation, a formulation carried over from the previous constitution. While many salafis would prefer a reference to the Shari’ah pure and simple rather than the more vague expression “principles of the Shari’ah”, the Hizb al-Nur has accepted the proposal but seems to grow increasingly nervous that this is too vague to block legislation contrary to God’s law. So it has suggested alternative amendments, either an addition stating explicitly that it is forbidden to legislate that which is forbidden by Islam, or that al-Azhar, the main institution of Islamic learning in Egypt be given supervisory control over legislation.

Yet in other ways the pressure on the party to accommodate to the political, social and economic reality of the country keeps producing its effects. In September 2012 the Alexandrian salafi shaykh Yaser al-Burhami, deputy leader of the Da’wa Salafyya, the movement behind the biggest salafi party, Hizb al-Nur, was chastised by many of his fellow salafis after he gave his approval of the efforts of the Egyptian government to negotiate a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Many were abhorred that Burhami would accept the Egyptian state paying interest, identified by most pious Muslims with the abominable riba condemned in the Koran. Burhami’s argument was that the low interest rate stipulated on the loan meant that in reality it was only a matter of compensating the IMF for transaction costs, so no riba was involved. This is one of many instances indicating a major transformation of salafi discourse and practice underway as a consequence of the decision of the salafis to enter into politics.

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Conclusion

As the new political set-up after the revolution took shape large segments of the salafi movement exhibited a newfound belief in the legitimacy of competition for elected political power. Salafism could best be seen as a movement for moral purity and individual piety in a rapidly changing society, much akin to the early Muslim Brothers and to the early beginnings of the Egyptian Islamic student movement of the 1970s. But in its pure apolitical form this movement is notoriously unstable because within its driving impulse is also the wish for social and material progress. Hence the step towards active engagement beyond the narrow circle of personal behaviour is not long.

The revolution confronted the salafis with a stark choice between keeping their full distance to the popular movement, losing relevance in the process, and engaging politics directly and openly. For those who chose the last option engagement inevitably meant following along the track traversed before them by the Muslim Brothers (the Ikhwan) leading towards a more pragmatic approach to what it means to implement the will of God.

Recommendations

- Avoid stigmatising the salafis in general as a negative force
- Establish contacts with the main salafi parties involved in democratic politics to start a dialogue
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In fact, reading the programme of Hizb al-Nur, one is struck by the similarities with the Muslim Brothers. There is a strong commitment to rule by the elected representatives of the people, and an explicit use of the word democracy to designate the desired political system. Linked to this is an explicit condemnation of theocratic rule, and of the idea that some people could claim to be speaking in the name of God. Yet the party concerns secularism as an attempt to cut the political system off from the deeply-held values of Egyptian society. On the position of women the party seems to echo the Brothers, performing a balancing act between preserving the family and the complementary role of men and women, while still emphasising the need to improve women’s status by improving education and combating violence against women.

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Policy Brief

New Bad Guys or on the Road to Moderation: Salafis in the Post-Revolutionary Politics of Egypt

By Bjørn Olav Utvik, University of Oslo

On 7. February this year a session of the People’s Assembly, the first freely elected parliament in Egypt since at least 1952, was interrupted by a loud call to prayer from one of the MPs. Mamduh Isma’il, representing the small salafi party Hizb al-Asala (Authenticity Party) took it upon himself to act the muezzin for his colleagues.

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In Egypt’s first free elections since before the military coup of 1952, Islamists won the day, unsurprisingly led by the Muslim Brothers. The surprise was rather the strong performance of another Islamist agent new to Egyptian politics, the conservative salafi movement. This was a quite novel adventure for the salafis. Typical of this conservative religious trend has been a strong focus on issues of personal pious behaviour. They have generally shunned political work.

Students from the seventies

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Both trends have been amply present in Egypt. In particular two distinct salafi tendencies emerged from the broad student movement of the 1970s. Originally the whole of the student movement was heavily salafi in its religious outlook. Eventually a majority gravitated towards the Brothers and in the process also shed some of their original salafi culture. Yet a significant part of the movement did not agree, and considered the Muslim Brothers to have deviated from the pure Islam of the salaf, the earliest generation of Muslims. Part of the reason for this was the perceived moral laxity of the Brothers with regard to regulations of personal moral behaviour. But for the group that came to gain most no-