

Political Role of Sufi Orders in Egypt after the January 25 Revolution

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Like other youth in the country, Sufi youth participated in the 25 January Egyptian revolution, and joined the demonstrations in Tahrir Square with their peers. However, they were not as visible as the youth of other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis. Their lack of visibility was due to two reasons.

1. First, a lack of Sufi experience in politics, particularly in organised protest. Thus, they were unable to give themselves a special flavour or unique image that would enable them to stand out from the massive crowds that packed the square for the first eighteen-day phase of the revolution that forced former president Hosni Mubarak to step down.
2. The second reason was the adaptation of the Sufis to Egyptian culture to a greater extent than others, and the similarity in their performances and rituals to that culture. The lack of differentiation of Sufis resulted in them blending into the crowd, making their distinct presence unheard and unfelt, unlike the members of other Islamic political groups and organisations who were keen to differentiate themselves in their slogans and styles of protest, not only due to their desire to express their political identity, but also as a show of force in relation to others.

Two factors determining the Sufi position towards the revolution

There were two major factors that concretely contributed to the determination of the Sufi position towards the revolution:

1. The Sufi Reform Front, which was established by some Sufi elders in response to the Mubarak regime's violation of the norms, traditions and rules that had been in force in the selection of the Sheikh Mashayikh (Chief Elder) of the Sufi orders. The Mubarak regime had favoured the sheikh of a new order, Abd al-Hadi Qasabi, who was a member of the ruling National Democratic Party – which was dissolved after the revolution – to be the chief elder. This was in the context of the regime's strategy of taking control over all state institutions to pave the way for Mubarak's son to inherit power. The custom had been that the oldest of the elected members of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders would be appointed the Sheikh Mashayikh. The regime, however, trampled on this tradition in its insatiable quest for the father-to-son succession. The Sufi Reform Front decided legally to challenge Qasabi's appointment, and filed complaints with the competent government authorities. The judiciary, however, delayed in issuing a ruling, and the authorities manoeuvred out of responding to the complaints clearly. When news spread about his failing health after his operation in a hospital in Heidelberg, Germany, in March 2010, Mubarak used the Sufi issue to demonstrate that he still held the reins of power and was continuing with his presidential duties. He issued a decree appointing Qasabi in May 2010. For the Sufi Reform Front, that decree was the last straw. Tension within the ranks of the various orders increased, and led to Sheikh 'Alaa Abu Azayim, leader of the Azmiya order, contesting a parliamentary seat in the Sayyida Zainab riding against Dr Fathi Sorour, president of the People's Assembly (which was dissolved after the revolution). Azayim made his intention clear. 'I know that my chances of winning are slim,' he said, 'but with this candidacy I want to send a message of protest to the authorities that pay no attention to our complaints against their blatant interference in the affairs of Sufis.'

2. The rising influence of the Salafi current, whose followers had been hiding behind the Mubarak regime's walls of oppression and tyranny. With the outbreak of the revolution, they left their hiding spots, and their ideas were publicised, sweeping through the public sphere unabated. It was in this context that old tensions and differences between the Salafis and Sufis reappeared, resulting in a great Sufi fear that the Salafis or the Muslim Brotherhood would attain power, especially after both began to form political parties. The Muslim Brotherhood formed the Freedom and Justice and al-Nahda (Renaissance) parties, and the Salafis formed al-Nur (The Light) and al-Fadheela (The Virtue) parties, all of them preparing to vie for victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Sufis and the organisations of “Political Islam”

In order to gain an accurate understanding of the Sufi role in the wake of the Egyptian revolution, it is necessary to map out the Islamic forces with a predilection for excessive political participation in this period, how each can negatively or positively affect the Sufis, and how entry into the political playing field can work to change the ideas, visions and practices of Islamic movements, including those of the Sufis.

The answer that appears at first glance is that the legal entry of the Muslim Brotherhood into the political arena has resulted in a remarkable renewal of the movement's political ideas. If we compare the perspectives of leading Brotherhood members before the movement's alliance with the liberal Wafd Party in the 1984 parliamentary elections to the views expressed after that and up to the revolution, we discover the magnitude of the continuous positive change in the political discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood. This discourse has taken relatively large strides from the announcement of the group's programme for the 1995 parliamentary elections by the Brotherhood's former leader, Mamoun al-Hudaibi, until the programme of the Freedom and Justice Party, which is considered the finest political document ever produced by the Brotherhood.

Politics based on the language of interests, one that knows compromises, aspires for the middle-ground and engages in the art of negotiation is no doubt superior to frozen or ossified political stances espoused by those who see positions as absolute and irrefutable before even entering the political arena, and upon whom reality imposes its harsh and inescapable fetters. What exists on the ground is relative, and this relativity undoubtedly withdraws the more it interacts with the words and deeds of political actors, bringing forth negative or positive results.

Such an approach also applies to the Salafi groups that rushed to form the Nur and Fadheela parties. Even though these groups are new to legal political practice, their entry into the corridors of politics will force them gradually to abandon some of their most repeated closed-minded statements. They will come to recognise that the reality of life has requirements that differ from what is written in books, spoken from pulpits or discussed within study circles. These groups may be a burden on democratic life in the beginning, especially insofar as their desire for democracy is limited to its procedural aspects, to be used as an instrument to reach power without a commitment to the value system that represents the essence of public political freedoms. They follow a pattern that we can call 'Kleenex democracy' –democracy that is used once then thrown away. Over time, however, they may acquire these values, especially given their lack of a modern political project or a comprehensive political theory, thus making them vulnerable to constant contradictions that confuse their discourse and causes it to lose coherence, weakening it in the face of more complete and coherent political discourses.

If we follow the political discourse of Islamic-based political groups and organisations, we discover that it is based in the civil or reformist movement, and not the other way around. As such, the belief that the Islamists will remain forever an obstacle to democracy seems mistaken, as evidenced by these groups' ability to develop modern political ideas as reflected in the Turkish and, to a lesser extent, in the Moroccan experiences.

But these groups and organisations are not all on the same level in terms of democratic values and procedures. The Muslim Brotherhood is closer to these values by virtue of its longer involvement in political life and its continued interaction with civil discourses. The Brotherhood is followed by al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah (the Islamic Group), which changed many of its ideas in the context of the process of revision that followed its initiative to stop its violence. After having completely rejected the idea of a political party, and arguing that there were only two parties – the party of God and the party of Satan, after considering the parliament an 'infidel institution' because it passed legislation that differed 'from what God has revealed', and after holding that democracy is 'an abomination of Satan's doing', al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah now stresses the importance of establishing a political party, and expresses aspirations to enter parliament. The term 'democracy' is now commonplace in the statements of the group's leaders.

The Salafis are found in Egyptian social life through their charitable associations and schools of Islamic jurisprudence, using two models. The first is exemplified by the 'Legitimate Association of workers for the Book and Sunnah' (the Book being the Qur'an, and the Sunnah being the compilation of sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). The second is the 'Ansar al-Sunnah'. Both organisations appeared in the 1920s, followed in the 1970s by the 'Alexandrian Salafis', and then in the 1980s by Jama'at al-Tabligh wa al-Da'wa (Society for the Spread of the Faith).

This charity-proselytising work has remained the core of Salafi activity. After the revolution, however, they also entered the political arena – without having the ideas and experience to qualify them for a process that was borne by a revolution with the slogan 'freedom, justice and dignity', and without developing a political vision that would assure the society that the idea and practice of democracy had been established in their minds. In no way does this imply that they be deprived of engagement in politics; it implies that they should be pushed to accept the terms of the political game as stipulated by the constitution and the law, as this is what inevitably will lead to the rationalisation of their social and political ideas. This is one of the great achievements of the 25 January revolution for the entire society, including the Sufi orders.

The road to the “Party of Liberation” and the “Coalition of Egyptian Sufis”

Even if Sufis differ from the Brotherhood and some Salafis in that Sufis have not engaged in long-term opposition to the Mubarak regime, the regime was never receptive to the idea of Sufis entering normal political life as competitors for parliamentary seats and government positions. Instead, the regime had insisted on using Sufis as important social assets for the benefit of the ruling National Democratic Party. The regime's position deprived Sufis of the opportunity to establish the kinds of political organisations that could represent them. Furthermore, given that the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders includes representatives of the ministries of the interior, information and culture, local development and awqaf (religious endowments), as well as a representative of al-Azhar Mosque, the Sufis had also surrendered to the involvement of the executive branch in their organisational structure.

In terms of their fear that other Islamic forces would dominate the political arena and the public sphere after the January revolution, Sufis sought to form a political party called the Liberation Party of Egypt, which was started by the Azmiya order, and includes representatives of other Sufi orders. Dr Ibrahim Zahran, a leader of the party, indicated that the party was born out of the conflict between Sufis and other Islamic parties, when he said: 'There is no doubt that the coming Islamic flood frightens them, as does any clear political movement that represents a departure from the conduct of Egyptian Sufis who have tended to comply with the will of political leaders for a very long time.' The leader of the Azmiya order, Alaa Abu Azayim, confirmed this. 'The efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups to engage in formal political life threaten religious tolerance, forcing Sufis to take a similar path,' he said. 'If the Salafis or the Brotherhood takes power, they may eliminate the Sufi leadership, and for this reason there should be a party for Sufis.'

Thus Sufis did not independently develop the idea of establishing a Sufi political party. Their initiative is a reaction to the actions of the Brotherhood and the Salafis who established political parties. The atmosphere surrounding this competition is charged with accusations and condemnations flung by both sides. While Sufis accuse the Salafis and their favourite scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah, of blasphemy, and accuse them of seeking to consolidate the Wahhabi ideology in Egypt, Salafis accuse Sufis of being Shi'as and of practising folkloric rites that are alien to Islam. The conflict is not limited to words. For example, some Sufis blamed some Salafis for an attack on certain tombs of saints. Sufis then formed popular committees to defend these shrines, and organised protest vigils at the Al-Hussain Mosque.

As with other Egyptian reformist movements, the Sufis aligned themselves with the 'Constitution First' call, and opposed the conservative political forces, parties, groups and organisations that took their ideology from Islam and which demanded 'elections first'.

Egyptian Sufis want a party similar to Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP). They view this young Turkish party as an inspiration, especially given the Turkish party's Sufi roots. It was for this reason that Abu Azayim travelled to Turkey to examine its political experience closely, armed with the hope of creating an organisational and political body that could reflect the numerical strength and voting power of Sufis that largely benefited the ruling party's candidates before the revolution. The Sufi party's programme focuses on general principles such as freedom, justice and equality. Its vision is summarised as 'the establishment of a community that derives its strength and dignity from the Islamic religion.'

Although politicians and political parties have long ignored the voting power of Egyptian Sufis, these parties have begun to change their way of mobilising. The potential candidates for the Egyptian presidency now pay special visits to Sufi elders seeking their endorsement. The Nasserite Party announced an 'election agreement' with a number of Sufi orders. They then expanded the deal to include the remaining political parties of the Nasserite current, such as the Karamah Party, National Reconciliation Party, Egypt Arab Socialist Party, Egypt 2000 Party, the General Nasserite Congress, Independent Nasserites and the Popular Nasserite Organisation (that is still in the process of being established).

Sufi engagement with the Egyptian political revolution has not been limited to the establishment of a political party. Mustafa Zayed, secretary of the Rifa'i order, founded the Coalition of Egyptian Sufis with a similar structure to that of the revolution's youth coalitions. Around 10 000 murid (initiates or disciples) have joined this coalition, embodying the nucleus for a Sufi youth revolution against the deteriorating conditions within the Sufi orders, and against the ways in which the orders are being targeted by other Islamic organisations. In outlining the reasons for the Coalition's establishment, thirty-year-old Zayed said: 'For many years, the elders of the orders have not been able to defend the Sufi mission nor repel attacks on the shrines.' The other reason for the establishment of the

coalition in the opinion of its founder is the need to reform the Sufi orders from within. To the elders, he said, 'Raise only the Sufi banner and drop the others; throw your differences to the ground.' He followed this statement with a letter in which he said: 'If you do not distance Sufism from your internal differences, we will organise a public demonstration in the courtyard of al-Hussain Mosque in which we will announce our demands, the most important of which is the demand for an amendment to the Law Regulating Sufi Orders Number 118 of 1976, to bring about an end to hereditary leadership of the Sufi orders, and replace it with a system in which the best and most knowledgeable in Sufism be chosen to lead.'

The 25 January Revolution threw a large stone in the stagnant lake of Egyptian Sufi orders, resulting in waves and an uproar that will not allow Egyptian Sufism to return to what it was before the revolution. Sufis' desire to be free and for political and social self-realisation are now greater than at any time in the past.

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