Report

The Salafi Nour Party In Egypt

*Kristen McTighe ***

26 March 2014

An Egyptian Salafi holds a copy of the new constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt [AP]

Abstract

This report examines the Salafi Nour party and their position in post-June 30th Egypt. Once allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nour party was the sole Islamist supporter of the military coup. While it was an initially powerful position, their decision forced the party to make great concessions and came at the expense of its grassroots support. Ultimately, its decision to support the army was the combination of its desire to secure its limited political agenda and the influence and possible pressure from the party's Gulf backers, namely Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

On July 3, 2013, when General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi announced that the Egyptian army was stepping in to remove the country's first freely elected Islamist president Mohammed Morsi after massive popular protests, there was an unlikely figure sitting among a panel of the general's largely liberal supporters: Younis Makhyoun, the chairman of the ultra-conservative Salafi Nour party.

From a school of thought that had shunned politics for decades; the Nour party entered the political arena after the 2011 revolution and saw unexpected success in elections. While the party initially allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, it was not long after securing an Islamist-leaning constitution that the party began distancing itself from the

2

floundering group. By the July 3rd ouster of Morsi, the party had shrewedly positioned itself as the only Islamist representative in the military-backed government.

While the Nour party may have initially gained much power from their decision to side with the military, it has now forced the party to make considerable concessions, caused fractures within its ranks, and come at the expense of much of its grassroots support. While it seems unimaginable that an ultraconservative Salafi party could actively support a secular regime amid a bloody crackdown on their fellow pious Muslims, ultimately their decision was made in an attempt to secure specific political gains and was the result of influence from their Arab gulf backers who welcomed the coup, namely Saudi Arabia.

Distancing from the Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution by the Salafi Call, one of Egypt's largest Salafi groups, the Nour party was quick to find success in post-Mubarak elections. (1) Initially supporting Morsi in the 2012 presidential elections and continuing their support following a controversial constitutional decree in November, the party begin distancing themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood immediately after the passage of the 2012 constitution. (2)

A growing rift between Nour and the Brotherhood that helped push the Salafi party to oppose their former allies first came out into the open in early January 2013 when Younes Makhyoun, Nour chairman told media that the party had ideological disagreements with Brotherhood . In late January, a senior member of Nour and an advisor to Morsi criticized the Brotherhood for monopolizing power and excluding others. At the same time, Makhyoun revealed that he had met with the National Salvation Front (NSF). (3)   The NSF and Nour then announced a set of unified demands to end the political stalemate that was gripping Egypt. (4)

While Nour joined the growing chorus of Morsi's critics, the former president and the Brotherhood took several steps to accommodate their Salafi allies who were once held at a distance. The move to align themselves with more extremist groups was seen as an attempt to consolidate support ahead of mass protests and came at the risk of alienating their soft liberal allies. (5)

One of the most glaring examples of the former president's attempt to appease his Salafi allies, Morsi gave a speech in a "Syria Solidarity" conference on June 16th, dubbed the struggle between the rebels and autocrat Syrian Bashar Al-Assad a sectarian struggle, cut ties with the Syrian regime, and sat by as prominent Sunni sheikhs used sectarian

3

speech against Shias. Just days later, four Shiite Muslims were publicly lynched by a mob of suspected Sunnis in a village outside Cairo. The incident further fuelled anti-Morsi sentiment among opposition. The move failed to appease Nour, even though its party emblem was emblazoned on anti-Shiite posters that spread across Egypt, and the group blamed the violence on the Morsi government for "opening the doors" to sectarian strife. (6)

June 30th Position

When anti-Morsi protests began to gain momentum in June, Nour was the sole Salafi party that chose to participate in neither pro- nor anti-government protests. (7) The party made clear, however, that they sympathized with their legitimate grievances of anti-Morsi protesters and understood their desire to take to the streets.

As protests intensified and the army gave a 48 hour ultimatum to Morsi, Nour gave up their neutral position and took a more active role backing his removal. On July 3rd, when General Sisi announced the army was stepping in to remove Morsi from power, suspending the constitution and imposing a roadmap, Nour was the only Islamist party backing the army.

Nour's initial position wielded much power. The army needed Nour's participation in the interim government in order to portray themselves as an inclusive government answering to the will of the people and not the perpetrators of a violent military coup. Nour immediately used this to their advantage. When the interim government sought to appoint a prime minister and liberal leader Mohamed El Baradei was the favourite, Nour's lone objection blocked his appointment. (8) While it initially appeared that Nour had supported the military as a means of gaining a powerful position in the new government and make political gain, this explanation did not hold up when its power-wielding position quickly slip away and they continued supporting the military regime.

Major Political Concessions

Not long after the overthrow of Morsi was Nour forced to make considerable concessions, some that even threatened its very existence.

When a drafting committee to amend the suspended 2012 constitution was set up, Nour was adamant that certain aspects of the previous constitution would not be negotiable - most notably article 219 which stipulated that the laws of Egypt will be based on Sharia law as prescribed by Sunni Islam. (9) But unlike their success at stopping El Baradei's

4

appointment to Prime Minister, the party failed to get its way. The article was removed and the party compromised on adding a clause that stated that the use of Sharia principals will be in accordance with those included in the Supreme Constitutional Court. (10)

The removal of article 219 was a big political concession for Nour, but not the most dangerous. The acceptance of an article that places a ban on political parties founded on a religious basis was. Makhyoun initially condemned the ban, calling it a reminiscent of Mubarak's "fascist dictatorial regime" (11), but when it became evident they would not be able to stop its passage, the group shifted their rhetoric and began asserting that they were not based on religious grounds.

That an ultraconservative Salafi party could vote in favour of a constitution than may effectively ban their party was telling. Like other liberal parties, the party was taking the gamble that their support for the military-backed government would keep them in favour with the new government and translate to a favourable interpretation of the controversial clauses.

Reasons for Siding with the Military

The decision by the Nour party to oppose a fellow Muslim ruler and side with the army, the only Salafi party to do so, has been subject to much debate. While the party's troubled relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood indeed played a role, this alone does not account for their support for military rule. Other political factions who had been in opposition to the Brotherhood chose to also oppose military rule.

One explanation often offered is that instead of aiming for pure political power, the Nour party sought to secure control of Egypt's mosques and Islamic educational institutions. (12) Control of these institutions would mean that the party's underlying focus was spreading the Salafi call, not powerful positions in government. Historically, the Salafi school of thought opposed involvement in politics on the grounds that it is unholy to oppose a Muslim leader and political engagement could compromise their religious purity. However, this explanation loses some weight with the fact that the current military-backed regime has stepped up its efforts to centralize mosque preaching and Friday sermons under the leadership of Ahmed El-Tayyeb, al-Azhar's pro-Sisi and fervently anti-Salafi sheikh. (13) While the party could have supported the army with hopes to they would secure this control, their failure to voice much objections when they did not secure the institutions suggests it was not their top priority.

5

Another explanation is that the group chose to support the military in order to achieve their limited political goals of bringing Egypt's legal framework into line with Sharia law. (14) Nour's initially strong objection to the removal of 219, which lead to the party's constitutional committee representative to walk out in protest (15), gives weight to this theory, even though Nour came out in support of the draft constitution and continued supporting the government even after the article was removed.

The fact that Nour ultimately did not secure article 219 or gain control of Islamic institutions does not discredit this theory that initially its support for the army was for these aims, only that their gamble did not pay off. By the time the party had lost their efforts to keep article 219, the country had witnessed some of the deadliest violence in modern Egyptian history. Their former Islamist allies who opposed the army were being violently oppressed in a crackdown that was beginning to spread beyond Islamists to anyone who chose to oppose the interim government. Therefore, if Nour were wanted to change paths and oppose the army-backed regime, the possibility that they too would face such violence was starkly clear, making it difficult to do so.

Still, other supporters of the army's intervention, like Mohamed El Baradei, chose to withdrawal from the interim government when violence escalated despite the threat of repression. Nour on the other hand, was unwavering in their support, suggesting that there were other motives for supporting the army that went beyond these limited political goals.

Saudi Arabia, Outside Influence and Pressure

With other theories alone not holding up, the question as to whether or not there are external players influencing and pressuring Nour to support the military rulers arises. The rapid and unexpected ascent of Nour in Egyptian politics following the 2011 revolution has raised many questions surrounding its funding. The fact that a party that hailed from a school of thought that for decades had shunned politics, but was able to form a political party with sufficient resources to contest and campaign for almost all the seats in parliament, particularly when its constituency is believed to hail mainly from the rural poor, has led many to believe Nour is receiving foreign funding from governments with a similar ideology, namely Saudi Arabia.

The links between Egyptian Salafism itself and Saudi Arabia are clear. The ruling Sa'ud family in Saudi Arabia has always been keen on exporting Wahabism, the apolitical Saudi version of Salafism, in contrast to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's version of Islamism, which Saudi rulers have often seen as militant in nature and a threat to their

rule. (16)   In terms of financial support, Salafi charities have received huge sum of funding from their networks in the Gulf for decades, particularly from Saudi Arabia to provide subsidized housing and hospitals, educational centres, healthcare, medical centres, and distribution of welfare packages. (17)   Information on this is nearly impossible to trace, but during an investigation into foreign funding received by non-governmental organizations in Egypt in 2011, the Ministry of Justice reported that the largest financial donations in 2010-11 were donated to Salafi charities, from donors in Kuwait and Qatar. (18) Over the past 30 years, Saudi Arabia has spent more than $70 billion exporting Wahabi ideology worldwide through mosques, schools and books. (19)

While this money pertains to charity support to Salafi groups in general, it raises the question of how much money if any is being sent to Nour, a party who managed to come up with financial resources to needed for its political activities that helped it gain huge electoral success, more than any other Salafi group. Although Nour Party officials have denied claims that they are receiving Saudi funds, they have not publicly disclosed its sources of funding. (20) Saudi Prince Talal Bin 'Abdul-Aziz al-Sa'ud also denied that his government was funding the party, but he did not exclude financial support coming from Saudi Salafis. (21)   However, analysts and observers note that no one in Saudi can donate large amounts of money without the permission of Saudi authorities or without being told what they should do. Therefore, these Saudi funds, even if they are not coming directly from the government, are gaining a stamp of approval from the Saudi regime that welcomed the military coup in Egypt. (22)

While exactly what funds the Nour party has or has not received remains uncertain, having taken a position has fallen directly in line with that of the Saudis, nearly all evidence points to Saudi support and pressure.

Imminent Demise of the Nour Party

While the party's large conservative grassroots support has given the party clout with the military-backed regime, by turning against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood to play politics with seculars for their own political gains the party risks alienating its own supporters.   Many who turned against the Brotherhood accused the former ruling Islamists of doing similar during Morsi's presidency and seeking to advance their own personal agenda more than working for the good of the country.

While no official data is available, many signs that the group is losing its support base are becoming apparent and their decision to support the military-backed regime has caused fractures within the party.   One of the Nour party's leading figures, Sheikh

7

Ahmed Aboul Enein, resigned in protest of Nour's decision to back the army's intervention and many of the group's youth also have reportedly questioned their allegiance to the party. As a result, some young Salafis who remain faithful in the democratic process have begun to leave the party and started to found their own groups and a divergence between the rank and file and the Nour party's political leadership has begun to show. (23)

Conclusion

Despite initially gaining great powers, the Nour party's gamble to support the military has forced considerable political concessions, caused cracks within the party, and more seriously, has damaged their grassroots support, something likely to lead to their demise.

While it seems unimaginable that an ultraconservative Salafi party could actively support a secular regime amid a bloody crackdown on their fellow pious Muslims, ultimately their initial decision to go against their former Brotherhood allies was made in an attempt to secure specific political gains and their continued support was the result of influence from their Arab gulf backers, namely Saudi Arabia. (24) (25)

***Kristen McTighe** is an independent journalist based in Cairo who specializes in Egypt. She holds a Master's in International Communications from the American University of Paris.

Endnotes:

(1) Brown, Jonathan (2011) 'Salafis and Sufis in Egypt', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 December, http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/12/20/salafis-and-sufis-in-egypt/8fj4 (accessed 9 February 2014).

(2) Brown, Jonathan (2013) 'The Rise and Fall of the Salafi al-Nour Party in Egypt', Jadaliyya, 14 November, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15113/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-salafi-al-nour-party-in-e (accessed 9 February 2014)

(3) Ahram Online (2013) 'Salafist Nour Party head confirms rift with Brotherhood', Ahram Online, 12 January, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/62250.aspx (accessed 18 March 2014).

(4) Al-Masry Al-Youm (2013) 'Salafi leader criticizes Brotherhood for excluding other groups', Egypt Independent, 24 January, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/salafi-leader-criticizes-brotherhood-excluding-other-groups (accessed 9 February 2014).

(5) Saleh, Fady (2013) 'NSF and Al-Nour announce unified vision', Daily News Egypt, 30 January http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/30/nsf-and-al-nour-announce-unified-vision/ (accessed 10 Febraury 2014).

(6) Egypt's Morsi And His Party Criticized After Killings http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323998604578565510237185012

8

(7)   Ahram Online (2013) 'Egypt's Salafist Nour Party to refrain from taking part in 28, 30 June rallies', Ahram Online, 25 June , http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/74931/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Salafist-Nour-Party-to-refrain-from-taking-.aspx   (accessed 10 February 2014).

(8)   Kingsley, Patrick (2013) 'Egypt's Salafist al-Nour party wields new influence on post-Morsi coalition', 7 July, The Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/07/egypt-salafist-al-nour-party (accessed 12 February 2014).

(9)   Ashraf, Fady and Rose, Aaron T. (2013), 'Al-Nour party changes position on Article 219', 16 Septemeber, Daily News Egypt, http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/09/16/al-nour-party-changes-position-on-article-219/#sthash.JcAI9vv2.dpuf   (accessed 12 February 2014).

(10) Ahram Online (2013) 'Salafist Nour Party: Will vote 'yes' in the Egyptian constitution referendum", 5 December, Ahram Online, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/88359/Egypt/0/Salafist-Nour-Party-Will-vote-yes-in-the-Egyptian-.aspx   (accessed 12 February 2014).

(11) Ahram Online (2013) 'Salafist Nour Party condemns Egypt constitution ban on religious parties', 31 October, Ahram Online, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/85293/Egypt/Politics-/Salafist-Nour-Party-condemns-Egypt-constitution-ba.aspx   (accessed 14 February 2014).

(12)   Ahram Online (2013) 'Salafist Nour Party head confirms rift with Brotherhood', Ahram Online, 12 January, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/62250.aspx   (accessed 18 March 2014).

(13) Iibd.

(14) Ashraf, Fady and Rose, Aaron T. (2013), 'Al-Nour party changes position on Article 219', 16 Septemeber, Daily News Egypt, http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/09/16/al-nour-party-changes-position-on-article-219/#sthash.JcAI9vv2.dpuf   (accessed 12 February 2014).

(15) Ahram Online (2013) 'Salafist Nour Party head confirms rift with Brotherhood', Ahram Online, 12 January, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/62250.aspx   (accessed 18 March 2014).

(16)   Mada Masr (2013), 'Rebuffed Nour Party rep walks out on constitution drafting session', 16 September, Mada Masr, http://www.madamasr.com/content/rebuffed-nour-party-rep-walks-out-constitution-drafting-session   (accessed 18 March 2014).

(17) Mada Masr (2013), 'Despite doubts, Nour Party comes out in support of constitution', 5 December, Mada Masr, http://www.madamasr.com/content/despite-doubts-nour-party-comes-out-support-constitution , (accessed 18 March 2014).

(18) Iibd.

(19) Iibd.

(20)   McTighe, Kristen (2014), 'Across the Divide, Egyptian Urged to Vote Yes', 13 January 2014, Deutsche Welle, http://www.dw.de/across-the-divide-egyptians-urged-to-vote-yes/a-17358063 , (accessed 18 March 2014).

(21) Daragahi, Borzou (2013) 'Salafi party bides its time as Islamists and liberals battle', Financial Times, 26 June, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6e542970-de68-11e2-9b47-00144feab7de.html#axzz2uF88y0W0   (accessed 10 February 2014).

(22) Lacroix, Stephane (2014), 'Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood predicament', 20 March, The Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/?tid=hpModule_ba0d4c2a-86a2-11e2-9d71-f0feafdd1394 (accessed 20 March 2014).

(23) Hill, Jess (2012), 'The Battle for Egyptian Islam', 7 February, The Globe and Mail, http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/the-battle-for-egyptian-islam/34/ , (accessed 16 March 2014).

(24) Youm 7 (2011), 'Nour: We have not received funding from Saudi Arabia and we are seriously preparing for the elections', 14 September, Youm 7, http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=492676&SecID=296&IssueID=93#.Uy5CnFfBcwI (accessed 18 March 2014).

(25) Al Jazeera English (2013), 'Saudi king backs Egypt's military', 17 August, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/201381615196784361.html. (accessed 18 March 2014).