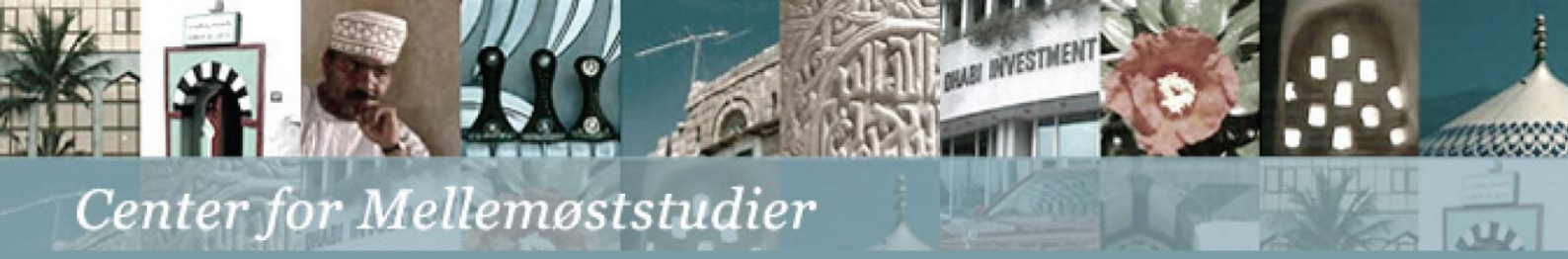

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Islamist Politics after the Spring: What do Salafist parties want?

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In the recent elections in Arab countries, Islamist parties performed very well. While this was expected from the political representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, the success of Salafist parties came as a surprise. This essay briefly analyses the ideology of Egypt's most important Salafist party, Al-Nour, and gives a tentative suggestion on the future role of Islamist parties in Arab politics.

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The Arab spring was not triggered by Islamist movements. On the contrary, when popular unrest began in late 2010, most of the representatives of political Islam stood by and only joined the protest movement reluctantly. In particular the leadership of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and religious leaders of the country's Salafist movement had difficulties sharing the mood of the demonstrations in Tahrir square. Yet in the recent elections in Tunisia and Egypt, political parties with Islamist ideologies have been able to seize the momentum and gain the relative majority of the votes. For most observers, the successes of the Tunisian Ennahda party and the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the newly founded political branch of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, did not come as a surprise. For decades, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood represented the major political opposition to the Mubarak regime and it can look back on a history of engagement in electoral politics through alliance-making and the mustering of independent candidates in Egypt's so far very limited exercises in parliamentarian politics. Thus, the FJP's 40 percent in the first round of Egypt's current elections was to be expected, whereas the close to 25 percent for the "Alliance for Egypt", a coalition of three Salafist parties, was the real surprise. Who are the Salafis and what kind of ideology do their parties represent?

The Alliance for Egypt constitutes a coalition of three parties: Al-Nour, Al-Asala and the Building and Development Party, the latter being the newly founded official political representative of the Jamaa al-Islamiyya which in the 1980s and 1990s fought against the Egyptian regime with militant means. In this alliance, Al-Nour musters 85 percent of the joint candidates relegating the two other parties to marginal roles. Officially registered in June 2011, Al-Nour emerged from an in principle nation-wide missionary movement which has its major stronghold in Alexandria. Previously it was not known for its engagement in oppositional activities but it rather represented a "quietist" religious movement tolerated by the Mubarak regime that perceived it as a counterbalance to politically more verbal Islamist groups. In this sense, Al-Nour has evolved from the previously non-political stream of Salafism which also rejected the justification of violent means of Jihadist groups with Salafist ideologies such as al-Qaida or the Egyptian Jamaat al-Islamiyya.

Generally speaking, the ideologies of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups go back to the Islamic reform movement of the nineteenth century. Islamic reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) or Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) reinterpreted Islamic traditions in the context of colonial domination, indigenous moves of modernization and the struggle for national independence. For them, the political liberation and the societal modernization of the Muslim world were closely associated with religious reform. The Islamic reform movement strongly criticized the religious establishment, the ulema, with their monopoly over the interpretation of Islamic traditions. They advocated a return to the "Golden Age of Islam", according to the exam-

ple set by the Prophet and his Companions (salaf), and demanded a fresh interpretation of the original religious sources, the Koran and the Sunna (traditions of the prophet). Moreover, they employed the concept of the sharia (Islamic law) as a means of conscious reform for Muslim societies, thus initiating the subsequent "juridification" of Islamic norms and values which have characterized the sharia as a broad discursive field for centuries. In the course of the state-building processes of the twentieth century, the sharia then increasingly attained the character of a body of law that should be implemented by the coercive power of the modern state.

In their propagation of strict monotheism, their reliance on the Koran and the Sunna, their attempt to purify Islam in conformity with the example of the Prophet and their call for the implementation of the sharia, Salafist ideologies reflect this reformist tradition, however, in a very narrow, pietistic and fundamentalist way that has been influenced by the doctrines of Wahhabism, the official interpretation of Sunni Islamic traditions by the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia. Contrary to the Muslim Brotherhood which began to engage politically in changing Egyptian society soon after its foundation in 1928, Salafist groups have tended to focus on the purification of Islam through missionary activities, spreading their strict monotheism based on both their own reading of the original sources and the condemnation of popular ritual practices. The religious reformation of the individual Muslim according to the example of the Prophet, rather than the transformation of society by political means has characterized mainstream Salafist ideologies. The general politicization of society in the course of the Arab spring seems to have changed this rather quietist approach of the Salafist movement. Yet, what kind of politics advocates the major political representative of this movement in Egypt, the Al-Nour party?

A brief glance at the party's website shows that also Salafist parties have taken up the global discourse on democratic liberties and human rights (www.alnourparty.org). Under the heading "Realization of public liberties" (tahqiq al-huriyyat al-ama) the party explains Egypt's "January Revolution" with the long-lasting absence of fundamental freedoms in the country. The party wants to guarantee these fundamental rights within the framework of the sharia, including the freedom of speech and press, the rule of law and the freedom of association. However, Al-Nour also takes the political economy of the Arab spring into consideration. Consequently, questions about reforms in the realms of agriculture, industries and the financial system are mentioned among its most important aims. For instance, the party identifies the problem of unemployment as one of the major issues of reform. Relating it to questions of social justice, Al-Nour seems to advocate policies of an interventionist state, supporting small and medium sized enterprises, improving education and vocational training, as well as organizing a more fair distribution of wealth via classical Islamic institutions such as religious taxes (zakat) and foundations (waqf). In comparison to the FJP the policy suggestions of the party seem to put more em-

phasis on the role of the state in reforming society. This is also apparent in the view that the fight against drug abuse should start with state-initiated campaigns against smoking and the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Here, ideas of state-controlled health care and normative Islamic positions converge. This combination of state-interventionism and Islamic norms sparked a discussion about the question whether Al-Nour's policies are going to affect negatively on Egypt's tourism industry. While the FJP and the Muslim Brotherhood publicly denied any intentions to impose Islamic norms on tourists, the representatives of Salafist parties seem more to be inclined to advocate a general prohibition of alcoholic drinks and the imposition of certain dress codes. At least, Salafist statements on this issue are of a more ambiguous character.

Although having their roots in the same Islamist tradition, the FJP and the Salafists appear to move in slightly different trajectories. Without abandoning the Islamist framework, the FJP has come closer to accept some principles of societal pluralism whereas the Salafist parties have occupied more rigid positions previously represented by the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet also the Salafist movement apparently has been affected by the ongoing transformation of Egyptian society. The active participation in electoral politics, the promotion of popular liberties or the principal acceptance of Egypt's international obligations, in some statements even including the Camp David accords with Israel, are bold cases in point that show the fundamental revision of Salafist positions in Al-Nour's political statements. The various Islamist parties in Egypt do not represent a homogeneous bloc, but a field of political contestation. In the course of the twentieth century, Islamist ideologies have developed in diverging directions meanwhile comprising a broad variety of attitudes from Jihadist radicals to democratically minded conservatives. The Arab spring – so far – has strongly confirmed this development. Therefore, it seems very plausible that the FJP is not interested in controlling parliamentarian politics with the help of the Salafists, as Sahar Sulaiman recently argued in the national-liberal paper al-Waft (December 12, 2011). Rather, the FJP is likely to confront them in parliament in leading a majority-coalition together with non-religious alliance partners. There is no doubt that the Salafist movement, too, has taken advantage of the new political opportunity structure provided by the Arab spring. However, this structural change might lead to an increasing fragmentation of the Islamist wing rather than to a dominance of Arab politics by Islamist blocs.