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Interview with Abul Ila Al Madi, Founding Member of Egypt's Wasat (Center) Party

[N.B. The Wasat Party is a group whose founders split from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1996 and has since then sought licensing as a political party. A final court ruling on the party is expected in February 2006.]

What is the Wasat Party's position on the Egyptian constitution's ban on political parties based on religion?

I support the ban. The problem lies in the definition of religious parties. The definition I have in mind is any party consisting of members of only one religion, or that subscribes to the idea of theocratic or clerical rule. The foundation of any party should be citizenship. We present ourselves as a civil party with an Islamic reference point. The party includes Egyptian Christians and favors equality between men and women. It welcomes women who wear the hijab and those who do not. Most importantly, we are firmly rooted in the idea of citizenship in practice.

The aim of the Wasat Party is to address a problem affecting the region for more than 50 years: what is the best means of integrating religion, especially sharia and Islamic principles, into public life? Here we are discussing a modern understanding of sharia, for in Islam there are general guidelines for such matters. In some cases, there are specific instructions about such as matters of marriage and divorce. But regarding general matters of governance—for example the Islamic principle of shura does not specify whether a system should have a unicameral or bicameral legislature or even whether the system should be presidential or parliamentary. Any of these comport fully with the principle of shura, which calls for the participation of the people in decision making. How best to implement the principle depends on human expertise and the experiences of Islamic culture. Islamic civilization is like any other, and shares the idea of peaceful settlement with other cultures, movements, and ideologies without foolish hostility and aggression.

Our friends in the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco and Turkey are linked to the concept behind the Wasat, which launched in January 1996. It began as an effort, which lasted from 1986 to 1996, by some experienced members of the Islamist movement to develop the movement from within. We faced many obstacles but decided to go out on our own because changing large organizations from within is difficult.

What are the differences between your program and that of the Muslim Brotherhood regarding political and economic matters?

The Brotherhood has two trends, one of which is reformist and open-minded (similar to us) and another that is more rigid and unfortunately represents the controlling majority. We distinguish between missionary (da'wa) and political activities, because mixing the two is extremely dangerous, threatening both the nation and religious groups themselves. We are calling for the separation of the two missions—which is what makes us a civil party—while the Muslim Brotherhood combines the two. The second difference is the Brotherhood's ambiguous vision of an Islamic state. There is also their fear of democracy. Even if they call for democracy they do not really believe in it, as is clear from their practices within the group.

And there is another problem related to the Brotherhood's long operation as an illegal organization, during which they never tried seriously to become legal. Although they say they want to be a party but the state will not permit it, the real question is whether the Brotherhood will be transformed into a party, or whether there will just be a party alongside the Brotherhood. Most in the Brotherhood leadership favor the latter. In addition there are members known to the public who have no decision making powers, and others not known to the public who do, another symptom of the mingling of political and religious missions.

Will Muslim Brothers stand as Wasat Party candidates in future elections if your party is licensed?

The biggest problem is that those who are involved in politics—not more than one million Egyptians total—tend to be split between the National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. This means there are over 70 million who are politically unaffiliated or inactive. We need not struggle over those who are already affiliated; we are targeting those without a group, and anyone who shares our convictions will be welcomed. We object to the Brotherhood's recruitment system, which focuses on quantity rather than quality of recruits. The number fitting our criteria in the Brotherhood is not large, and if any of them would like to join the Wasat Party we will accept them.

In our first attempt to form the Wasat Party, most of the founders were from the Brotherhood. In the second attempt, there was a balance in our membership between those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and those who were not. By the third attempt, not more than seven percent of the founding members came from the Brotherhood—a new cross section of political life.

What is the Party's viewpoint on the current political and economic situation in Egypt ?

We see the crisis in Egypt being solved by taking three principal steps:

First, comprehensive democratic transformation is essential. We need a regime elected through a free and transparent process, meaning that the president must be elected from a level playing field of all candidates for the office.

Second, we need a qualified and capable president and government. We have long suffered a lack of competent authority, and this is a real problem. Ability to lead must come before ideology, and Egypt has many who are capable. The problem is that the people in charge are wholly unqualified.

Third, to confront the widespread corruption that plagues many of our country's institutions we must call on all public servants to commit to accountability and fiscal oversight. This should apply to all, from the president of the republic to the humblest bureaucrat, all of whom should be limited to two terms in office.

Will internal and external pressures drive further reforms in Egypt ? Also, is there an internal debate inside Egyptian movements and parties with respect to relations with the West?

Certainly external pressure is not the principal factor, but it is important. The key is internal pressure, and among the principal levers for this pressure is the Kifaya movement. There is a growing sector of the population that desires reform, although it has not yet had any tangible effect, despite the anger pervading the streets of Egypt. How can we translate that anger into a force for change? In this matter we need time.

What is your opinion of recent U.S. calls for reform in the Arab world?

Despite my skepticism about the intentions behind such statements, we cannot deny they deserve a good deal of the credit for the progress made so far. Unfortunately, U.S. actions send a different message. The first promotes political opposition, while the other shows support for the ruling power. I have never understood this dichotomy, and I have said as much to U.S. officials. How is it that they can object to repression of the opposition, but support amendments to the constitution and laws that provide for distorted presidential and parliamentary elections? Clearly there is still U.S. encouragement of undemocratic practices, which is difficult to reconcile with U.S. statements.

Interview conducted by Amr Hamzawy , Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Translated from Arabic by Jeffrey Pool.