

EGYPT'S SALAFISTS AT A CROSSROADS

Part 3 of a series on political Islam in Egypt

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Salafism has been one of the most dynamic movements in Egypt since 2011. Dealt a difficult hand when Hosni Mubarak was ousted from the presidency, Egyptian Salafists have skillfully navigated the transition. Their entry into the political marketplace marked a historic shift toward a new political Salafism and sheds light on whether an Islamist movement can integrate into pluralistic modern politics. The ouster of Mohamed Morsi by a popularly backed military coup in 2013, however, dealt a debilitating blow to the Islamist project—and left deep cleavages within the Salafist movement.

Key Moments

- Following the 2011 uprising, Salafists fell into three camps:
 1. Unorganized Salafists supported fellow Islamists against secularist competitors and allied with the Muslim Brotherhood.
 2. A formal, organized camp took the opposite approach, creating its own Salafist party to compete with the Brotherhood.
 3. Disaffected Islamist youths saw themselves as radical revolutionaries, shunning formal organizations and choosing actions ranging from violent jihadism to protest politics.
- After the 2013 coup, less-organized Salafists threw their weight behind the Brotherhood-led struggle, despite political subordination to the major Islamist group.
- Formal Salafist organizations accepted being co-opted by the state after the coup to secure their existence and bid for gradual political advances. Doing so, however, undermined their ideological character and credibility.

Challenges Ahead

- Egyptian Salafists have made little effort since 2011 to create a doctrinal framework to explain and guide their changing approach to political participation.
- Salafists remain unable to coalesce around a pluralistic ideology or to devise a minimalist program. They should become intellectually engaged in devising approaches to and positions on sectarianism, gender, censorship, minorities, secularism, and other controversial issues.
- Any Salafist shortcomings in delivering on their political mandate to preserve Islamic law and address socioeconomic concerns may undermine grassroots trust and squander social capital accumulated over decades among lower-income communities across Egypt.
- Whether Salafists succeed in preserving their key position within the Egyptian public religious sphere will depend on their pragmatic political maneuverability and positioning as functionaries within a domestic and regional balance of power rife with ideological and sectarian divisions. The Salafist Call in particular has been adept at this maneuvering.
- The long-term challenge facing Egyptian Salafists is ideological. Whether the Salafists will remain an Islamist movement depends on their ability to furnish a unique and workable political model distinct from authoritarian regimes and political modernity in general as well as from other failed Islamist models. This was difficult between 2011 and 2013; it may be close to impossible in 2015.

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