

Egypt's Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour

STÉPHANE LACROIX

The Salafi movement in Egypt illustrates that the dynamics of sectarianism are fluid and sometimes contradictory. Over the last five years, the Salafi party, Hizb al-Nour, has taken a pragmatic, flexible approach to politics, but maintained its intransigent religious stances. While the party has made several political concessions and decisions that go against the Salafi doctrine, it considered them necessary to protect the “interest of the Da’wa” and hold its position of influence among society—justifications that the Salafi Da’wa, the religious organization behind Hizb al-Nour, has largely accepted despite some internal conflict. Arguably, in contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Nour does not behave like an Islamist party, at least in its current form; for Salafis, politics is just a means to an end.

Hizb al-Nour's Political Aims and Internal Divisions

- Hizb al-Nour was founded in 2011 by Salafis who decided that, in the postrevolution era, they needed a party of their own to have a say in the transition.
- The president and founder of Hizb al-Nour, Imad Abd al-Ghaffour, envisioned a party separate from the Salafi Da’wa, believing that being a politician is different than being a sheikh.
- However, Yasir Burhami and other Da’wa sheikhs contested this view over the next year, asserting that the party should principally act as the organization’s lobbying arm.
- In essence, these Da’wa leaders resented Abd al-Ghaffour’s independence, especially after Hizb al-Nour had proven its relevance during the parliamentary elections. Through reminding his audience of the religious lines Salafis should not cross, Burhami succeeded in gaining control of the party in December 2012. However, Abd al-Ghaffour’s forced resignation has not dramatically changed Hizb al-Nour’s approach to politics.

Hizb al-Nour's Pragmatism and Why It Is Not an Islamist Party

- Hizb al-Nour has consistently taken a pragmatic approach to politics, but the reasons for that pragmatism have changed over time, depending on the nature of the party’s leadership.
- From 2011 to 2012, the pragmatism of Hizb al-Nour was somewhat comparable to that of other mainstream Islamist parties—in that, as it adapted to the political game and aimed to become a viable political force, the party moderated its positions by revising (or putting aside) some of its doctrinal tenets.
- Since 2013, Hizb al-Nour, led by sheikhs, has adopted a purely instrumental approach to politics. The party aims to defend the interest of the Da’wa (in other words, protect and possibly reinforce the religious movement that it represents) and uses arguments of necessity to justify its concessions.
- The party’s recent stances, especially during the military takeover in July 2013 and in its aftermath, can best be explained by analyzing Hizb al-Nour not as an Islamist party, but as the lobbying arm of a religious organization.
- The paradox of the party’s extreme political pragmatism and its rigidity and sectarianism at the doctrinal level seems sustainable and likely to remain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stéphane Lacroix is an associate professor of political science at Sciences Po and a researcher at the Centre de Recherches Internationales.

CONTACT

Tara Medeiros
Deputy Director of Communications
+1 202 294 3996
tmediros@ceip.org

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