



# BULLETIN

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## Islamic Fundamentalists for the Military Regime in Egypt? The Paradox of the Al-Nour Party<sup>1</sup>

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*Al-Nour is the last fully tolerated Islamist party in Egypt. Its political flexibility and opportunism, as expressed through its support for the military coup of 2013, has seriously dented its popularity. Surprisingly, this illiberal and ambivalent-about-democracy-and-human-rights outfit's potential electoral defeat in the parliamentary elections or its outright delegitimation should not be treated as Egypt's gain as the government attempts to administratively reduce the number of political actors. The EU should resist this tendency and push for changes to the parliamentary elections law to ensure the continuous unperturbed existence of as many Egyptian political organisations as possible.*

**Al-Nour's History.** Al-Nour (the Light) is an Egyptian political party formed in May 2011, three months after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down. It is the political representative of the Islamist social-religious Salafi Call, which aims, while supported by donors mostly from Saudi Arabia, to convert Egyptians to a rigorous, fundamentalist form of Islam associated with the times of the Prophet and his companions. Al-Nour is the largest and most visible and recognized political organisation of the Egyptian Salafis (proponents of traditional Islam), whose socio-political outlets constitute one of the three main pillars (alongside the Muslim Brotherhood and the jihadist or former jihadist Islamic Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad) of the Egyptian Islamist milieu. In its socio-economic programme, Al-Nour combines conservative and social-democratic elements (of the former, a determined rooting out of corruption and nepotism, campaigns against drugs use, and on the latter, investments in less-developed parts of Egypt, healthcare, research and development, improvement of the education sector, greater emphasis on environmental protection). In the parliamentary elections of 2011–2012, Al-Nour, with two other Salafi parties as the Islamist Bloc, won 27.8% of the votes and was the second-strongest party in the Egyptian parliament after the MB's Freedom and Justice Party. Despite sitting out the early demonstrations against the rule of President Mohammad Morsi, an MB member, Al-Nour in July 2013 supported the military coup.

**Al-Nour's Flexibility and Pragmatism.** Al-Nour has many paradoxes which, on one hand, helped propel it to electoral success but, on the other, could in the future seriously dent its popularity or even force its dissolution. Before 2011, the Egyptian Salafis, in contrast to MB, shunned politics. They treated participation in elections and the active recognition of their results as the acceptance of secular law over sharia. Religiously motivated, the Salafis condemned democracy as an alternative philosophical-religious value system, incompatible with traditional Islam. Instead, they concentrated on charity work and proselytising. This approach enabled them to lead a relatively peaceful existence during the dictatorship of former President Hosni Mubarak whose security services were far more interested in the politically oriented Islamist rivals of the Salafi Call—the MB. Nonetheless, after 2011 the Salafis, officially motivated by their desire to convert Egypt and its citizens to “true Islam,” and determined to stem the growth of secular and liberal groupings, began to form political parties suspected of accepting donations from Saudi

<sup>1</sup> The bulletin is the result of a two-month research visit (May–June 2014) to Cairo within the framework of the SPriNT project, jointly led by PISM, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs and the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. SPriNT is financed by the European Commission.

Arabia. The aim, despite these parties' formal recognition of a democratic political order in which Salafi parties participate, from 2011 onwards was to fight for political limits to democracy in Egypt where it was in conflict with sharia. Despite the Islamist Bloc members' lack of political experience, it scored spectacular electoral success, which Al-Nour utilised to lobby for recognition of sharia as the main source of legislation in Egypt, and to form surprising political alliances with secular parties in order to stem the political dominance of the Qatari-backed MB.

Although Al-Nour accepts the dogma of obedience to the state's current ruler (as long as he is formally a Muslim), the party, wishing to further weaken MB, supported the military coup in 2013 and consequently condemned Egyptian Islamists who demanded the return of MB's Morsi to the presidency. In the summer of 2013, however, many rank-and-file Al-Nour members participated in MB-organised demonstrations, which ended with two camps of Morsi supporters in Cairo being stormed by the armed forces.<sup>2</sup> The party, free of anti-Islamist repression, then returned to its core goal while attempting to mould to its favour articles on sources of legislation in the newly prepared Egyptian constitution. This proved unsuccessful, and in addition Al-Nour was unable to combat an article banning the functioning of "religious parties," a category that effectively includes them. However, the party still campaigned for a "yes" vote in the January 2014 constitutional referendum, which annoyed and surprised its voters and sympathisers. As a result, the party stands accused of insufficiently mobilising its supporters for that vote and during the subsequent presidential elections in which the party backed the leader of the military coup, retired Field Marshall Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

**Al-Nour's Prospects.** Al-Nour is currently the largest legal Islamist party in Egypt and its support for the coup and Sisi's presidency allows it to continue functioning unperturbed. However, its influence on the constitution-writing process was negligible and its political somersaults from 2013 make it hard to accurately gauge its real popularity—some opinion polls point to the fact that even up to 86% of Egyptians are displeased with the party—or its electoral chances in the upcoming parliamentary elections. These elections will be held under a new law in which three-quarters of the parliamentarians will be chosen via a majoritarian voting system, one-fifth via proportional representation and the remainder nominated directly by the president. In the last election, which saw Al-Nour spectacularly succeed, two-thirds of the seats were filled by victorious candidates in multi-member districts. The changes and Al-Nour's internal wrangling on its attitude towards the military coup and the MB could have profound consequences for the party. If it becomes insubordinate to President Sisi, the authorities could simply declare it a "religious party," thus deeming it illegal.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** Al-Nour's future in Sisi's Egypt remains unknown. The party's pragmatism could yield substantial electoral returns during the parliamentary elections, especially if the MB and its allies decide to boycott them. One should not, however, reject the possibility that the excessive flexibility, especially in 2013, will have a political price for the party. This argument becomes even more poignant as many of the party's members do not agree with its support for the military coup and its abandonment of the other Islamist organisations, which are now going through a period of severe state repression.

Paradoxically, the decomposition or downfall of this illiberal political organisation, either electorally or via delegalisation of this once-depoliticised faction of Egyptian society, should not be seen as a success of liberal democracy in Egypt. Al-Nour's disappearance would equal the elimination of the last fully tolerated representative of political Islam in a Muslim-dominated and conservative Egypt. It would also strengthen the anti-democratic tendencies in this country's political system. In order to ensure that Islamists who remain mostly anti-coup are represented in the next parliament, the EU and its Member States should lobby for a liberal reading of the new constitution. This should diminish the threat of delegalisation of other Islamist but also secular, centre-left political actors in Egypt. Additionally, the Egyptian authorities should also be reminded of the benefits of proportional representation, which would strengthen political parties and guarantee bigger political pluralism in the future. Such representation, even if Al-Nour was to drastically lose support, would guarantee a substantial number of seats for its candidates. Representatives of the EU and the Member States could, while campaigning for the above, use the example of a similar request by members of liberal parties, which issued a memorandum on the subject to President Sisi. This, in turn, could be interpreted as more widespread support for political pluralism and a more diverse government representative of public opinion in Egypt.

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<sup>2</sup> K. Rękawek, P. Sasnal, "Crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Presidential Election in Egypt," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 70 (665), 21 May 2014.