
SALAFISM AND THE POLITICAL

A CASE STUDY OF THE EGYPTIAN ‘HIZB AL-NOUR’

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the relationship between Salafism, the political and politics. The first section presents a theoretical overview of the relationship between the political and Salafism from the perspective of the political philosophy of Claude Lefort. Its aim is to reflect critically on the fundamental characteristics of a democratic notion of the political, and to assess the degree to which the Salafi doctrine reflects these assumptions. The analysis indicates that Salafism neither recognizes the political as an independent sphere of its own, nor acknowledges its radically indeterminate nature. Moreover, the uncompromising and – to a certain degree - totalitarian nature of the Salafi doctrine completely denies the legitimacy of social antagonism and crushes the room for pluralism. Thereby – in theory - the Salafi doctrine stands at odds with the fundamental characteristics of a democratic notion of the political, as formulated by Lefort.

To see whether these theoretical conclusions also reflect the actual political practices of Salafis, the second part offers a case study of the *Hizb al-Nour*, an Egyptian Salafi political party that rose to prominence in its country's post-revolutionary politics. The empirical analysis indicates that the party's entrance into politics did give rise to a modest secular discourse carried out by Salafi 'politicians' who believed they should (at least partially) abandon their rigid identity paradigm, accept political pluralism and consider politics as an independent domain of its own. After 2013, however, once the party had fallen under the control of the 'sheikhs', this discourse was reversed. Instead of performing 'politics for the sake of politics', they regarded politics only as a means to spread, purify and defend their Islamic doctrine.

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Introduction

1.1 Research question

Over the past two decades, political Islam has become a topic of increased attention among academic scholars, public policy makers, political spectators and commentators. In the broadest sense, political Islam – or Islamism - refers to the attempts of Muslim individuals, groups or movements to reconstruct the political, economic, social and cultural basis of their society along Islamic lines (Esposito & Shahin, 2013:18). Among the various Islamist groups that fall under the umbrella of political Islam, one movement stands out in particular: Salafism. In short, Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam, whose term derives from the so-called *al-salaf al-salih*, or ‘pious predecessors’: the first three generations of Muslims who are believed to have represented the purest and most authentic form of Islam. In essence, Salafis can be referred to as those Muslims who want to revive the utopian image of their ‘pious predecessors’, by emulating their beliefs and practices in as many spheres of life as possible (Wagemakers, 2016a:30). Although there is great diversity within the ranks of Salafism, in the end, all Salafis share a common purpose: to restore Islamic governance and God’s sovereignty on earth, albeit through different tactics.

The relationship between Salafism and politics has been the object of extensive research. Some of these works (e.g., Meijer, 2009; Lauzière, 2015; De Koning, Wagemakers & Becker, 2014) offer a general introduction into Salafism as a whole, focusing on the movement’s history and doctrine, and its relationship with politics. Given the diversity within Salafism, however, other scholars (e.g., Wagemakers, 2016a; Rabil, 2014; Thurston, 2016) have limited their analysis to the Salafi movement in one particular area or country. Especially since the attacks of September 11, 2001, a large portion of these studies has focused on the political ideology, objectives and developmental history of Jihadi-Salafi groups (e.g., Maher, 2016; Bunzel, 2015; McCants, 2016; Kepel & Milelli, 2008). Also, since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, after which several Salafi groups began to take part in their country’s post-revolutionary politics, several descriptive studies have been conducted on the emergence of these movements and their specific political goals (e.g., Cavatorta & Merone, 2017; Hamid, 2014; ICG; 2019).

Even though these studies have been useful for understanding the phenomenon of Salafism in its various manifestations, this thesis aims to fill a gap left mostly unaddressed. It wants to move beyond a merely descriptive study of Salafism and its political dimension, by examining Salafism from the perspective of political philosophy and asking the question: What is precisely ‘political’ about political Islam, and more specifically, about Salafism? Is Salafism an inherently political doctrine? And if so, what is the precise nature of this political dimension? In other words, the central research question of this master thesis will be:

“What is the relationship between Salafism, the political and politics?”

1.2 Methodology

To answer this research question, the thesis is divided into two parts: a theoretical and an empirical section. The first two chapters present a theoretical overview of the relationship between the political and Salafism from the perspective of political philosophy. Their aim is to reflect critically on the fundamental characteristics of the political, and to assess the degree to which the Salafi doctrine matches these assumptions. To describe what I regard as the political, I primarily rely on the works of the French philosopher Claude Lefort (1924-2010). Lefort is seen as one of the most influential French political thinkers of the 20th century. He set himself the task of outlining the fundamental assumptions of any modern democratic political society. Until today, his ideas on the nature of the political and democracy

continue to be relevant and can be applied to all sorts of contemporary phenomena, including populism and identity politics. In this thesis, however, his ideas will be applied to Salafism. At the end of these two theoretical chapters, I will be able to draw a conclusion as to whether Salafism is compatible with a democratic notion of the political, as outlined by Claude Lefort.

Having established an overview of the theoretical relationship between Salafism and the political, the second part of this thesis consists of a case study, to examine whether these theoretical findings actually reflect the behaviour and decision-making of a real Salafi political party. The party under examination will be the Egyptian Salafi party, called *Hizb al-Nour*. Like several other Salafi movements, Hizb al-Nour made its entrance onto the political stage right after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, and began to compete for elected power in its country's post-revolutionary political system. And not without success. During the first parliamentary elections after the ouster of Mubarak, Hizb al-Nour gained a massive electoral victory. It captured 121 seats out of the 508 seats in total, by which it became the country's second largest political party (BBC, 2012). The second section of this thesis analyses the political decision-making of this Salafi political party between 2011 and 2015, to see whether its political behaviour actually reflected any of the conclusions drawn in the theoretical chapter.

1.3 Data selection

The theoretical chapters, which serve to outline the political philosophy of Claude Lefort and then apply it to the Salafi doctrine, are based primarily on a book titled "Wat is Politiek?". This book consists of a Dutch translation of a collection of the most important essays of Lefort. Even more important was Meijer's chapter titled 'the political, politics, and political citizenship in modern Islam' (2018). It served as the major source of inspiration for this thesis' theoretical framework. For my general introduction into Salafism in which I discuss the movement's basic theological principles, I rely primarily on academic papers.

For the empirical section, a variety of data sources will be used, including academic papers and journalistic recounts of Hizb al-Nour's engagement with politics. The empirical section heavily relies on the works of Stéphane Lacroix (2012a, 2012b, 2016), who has written detailed journalistic recounts of the Hizb al-Nour's internal policy discussions, based on personal interviews and encounters with members of this party. These works are supplemented with other secondary sources, primarily in the form of newspaper articles. Unfortunately, due to my limited knowledge of the Arabic language, I was unable to read and interpret the available primary sources myself. By triangulating the different sources, however, I believe a reliable reproduction of the Hizb al-Nour's decision-making in politics can be created.

1.4 Relevance

As stated previously, by approaching the research question from a political-philosophical perspective, this study aims to fill a literary gap left (mainly) unaddressed by other scholars of Salafism. However, a study into the relationship between Salafism and the political is also of societal relevance. Particularly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, Salafism has come under extreme scrutiny and has been viewed with suspicion. Debates on Salafism in the West often focus on the question whether Salafism is compatible with any modern democratic political order. Often this relationship is problematized. According to the Dutch internal intelligence agency (AIVD), for example, Salafism can "give rise to antidemocratic and undemocratic activities of various kinds" (AIVD, 2015:12). The agency warns, for instance, against the spread of religious intolerance and antidemocratic views by people "within the Salafist spectrum" (AIVD, 2018:16). These views, the AIVD concludes, can "put pressure on the social cohesion and undermine the democratic legal order" in the long run (AIVD, 2018:16).

The question why I choose to base my theoretical analysis primarily on the works of Lefort - rather than on the works of any other political philosopher - can be answered in light of these current discussions. Because Lefort generated an explicitly *democratic* notion of the political, his ideas are suited – par excellence – to generate potentially new and interesting insights into the exact nature of the relationship between Salafism and democracy. After all, in order to assess whether Salafism indeed generates a threat to the democratic political order, it is important - first of all – to identify the fundamental characteristics and assumptions of such a democratic political order. Only by being cognizant of these factors, one will be able to identify the conditions under which these fundamental assumptions are challenged, and to assess whether Salafism indeed is or is not compatible with a democratic notion of the political.

Moreover, the case study of the Egyptian Hizb al-Nour can generate interesting insights into the motivations behind the party's decision to embrace democratic politics, and shed light on the broader democratization process – and its prospects - in Egypt.

Chapter 1: The Political

As stated, this thesis aims to uncover the relationship between Salafism, the political and politics. To get a grasp of this relationship, it is important – first of all – to get an idea of what is meant by the political. What is its nature and what are its foundational characteristics? When is something political? From the perspective of the political philosophy of Claude Lefort, the next section tries to shed light on this issue. In doing so, I will also touch upon the ideas of some other political theorists, including Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe. In the second chapter of this thesis, this discussion will serve as a theoretical framework for the analysis of Salafism.

1.1 The political vs. politics

At the heart of Lefort's political philosophy lies the notion of social conflict or political antagonism: a concept he inherited from the works of German philosopher Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt, collective identities always exist in a 'we' versus 'them' relationship. That is, groups of people establish their own identity in relation to that of others. Schmitt's central insight is his statement that as soon as this 'we' versus 'them' relationship transforms into a 'friend' versus 'enemy' dichotomy – which occurs as soon as one group feels threatened in its existence by the other - the political is born. This dichotomy between 'friend' and 'enemy' is the fundamental dichotomy of the political, and it is precisely this specific distinction where all political actions and motives can be reduced to (Schmitt, 1932:26).

Building on Schmitt's insights and those of 15th/16th century Italian statesman and philosopher Machiavelli, Lefort argues that every society is characterized by an inherent, universal and everlasting social conflict between classes of people (Lefort, 2016:41; Kruk, 2016). Or as Schmitt would call it: an antagonistic relationship between 'friend' and 'enemy' (Schmitt, 1932:29). This social tension is unavoidable as it resides in two universal, but incompatible human desires: 1) a desire to dominate over others; and 2) a desire not to be dominated by others; or as Machiavelli stated in his seminal work 'Il Principe' from 1512: "the people are everywhere anxious not to be dominated or oppressed by *the Greats* [i.e. the noblemen] and *the Greats* are out to dominate and oppress the people" (Machiavelli, 2004:41).

Lefort argues that it is from this unavoidable social conflict between those who want to dominate and those who do not want to be dominated, that a third and independent domain – the political power – can arise. Social conflict precedes and is constitutive for political power, as the latter arises from society. By lifting itself – symbolically - as an independent body above society's conflicting segments and by subsuming society as a whole under its authority, political power forges a collective unity and a shared identity among society's antagonistic segments (Kruk, 2016). Put differently, political power is that symbolic body outside (or above) society, through which society understands itself as a unity. The purpose of political power is to make social conflicts – which will never cease to exist and are in fact desirable – controllable and manageable (Lefort, 2016).

In the previous paragraph, I simply used the term 'political power', to refer to this symbolic and independent domain that arises from society and which subsumes and unites society under its authority. Before I go any further, however, I believe it is now important to be more precise about what Lefort actually refers to when he talks about political power. First of all, Lefort is not referring to 'politics'. Politics can best be understood as a sort of market-place, in which people pursue their interests. More specifically, a domain in which people pursue their interests regarding issues of public policy or public governance (Leftwich, 2004:7). Politics, thus, is specifically about 'governing' and the interplay of conflicting interests. It refers to the day-to-day proceedings, forms of government and other practices most people will likely think of when they discuss politics. Daily practices and governmental institutions we read about in our newspapers, such as building party coalitions, majority rule, general elections,

parliamentary politics, ministerial responsibility - i.e. issues political scientists deal with – is what I refer to as politics.

As a political philosopher, however, Lefort is less interested in these practicalities of political power. Instead, his works deal with ‘the political’: the symbolic representation of political power. Lefort argues that, if one wants to understand how a society – despite its inherent conflictive nature - has constituted itself as a *political* society, i.e. as a society with a shared purpose, identity and sense of belonging, one should focus on ‘the political’. That is, on the symbolic manner in which political power is represented. ‘The political’, according to Lefort, is first and foremost a symbolic core from which one can read how a particular society has constituted itself (Van Middelaar, 2011:192). It refers to an independent and symbolic domain which encapsulates society’s abstract and central goals and principles. These fundamental principles, in turn, steer society’s daily political practices. ‘Politics’, thus, is the domain where society translates its symbolic principles – as embedded in ‘the political’ - into practice.

To clarify what he means by ‘the political’, Lefort examines three different types of political societies: premodern societies, modern democratic societies and modern totalitarian societies.

1.1.1 Premodern societies

For Lefort, the French revolution marks the transition from traditional premodern societies to modern societies. In France’s *Ancien Régime*, which Lefort describes as an example of a premodern society, it was believed that those who held power, i.e. the Monarchs, had inherited their political power from God. In the words of Lefort: “power, law and knowledge” were incorporated in the Monarch (Lefort, 2016:43). Monarchs were symbolically represented as mediators between the divine and human world, and political power was embodied by and inseparable from the Monarch. Political power resided inside the King’s body, so to speak (Lefort, 2016:94-95).

The conceptualization of a political society – whereby a third and independent domain lifts itself above society’s antagonistic elements to forge some kind of collective unity among its subjects – evokes the image of a body. As head of this imaginative and organic body (i.e. head or leader of society), the King controls and governs the rest of his body (i.e. rest of society). Society, in turn, establishes its own identity and sense of belonging in relation to its King. That is, it understands its unity on the basis of the idea that it belongs to this organic body headed by the King, whose authority is grounded in a transcendental order. Survival of premodern political societies, therefore, used to be contingent on the survival of the Monarchy. If the Monarchy were to be overthrown, the political society would disintegrate (Lefort, 2016:47-48).

1.1.2 Modern democratic societies

The French revolution marked the transition from premodern societies to modern societies. By overthrowing the *ancien régime*, a so-called ‘disincorporation’ of political power took place (Lefort, 2016:96). Whereas in premodern societies political power used to be inseparably connected to a physical body (whether it was from a King, Queen or any other political figure), in modern democratic societies this is no longer the case. Instead, “*power appears as an empty place and those who exercise it as mere mortals who occupy it only temporarily or who could install themselves in it only by force or cunning*” (Lefort, 1986:303-304).

In modern democratic societies political power appears as an empty place, which means it is no longer attached to a specific body (Lefort, 2016:95). No specific person, group or institution is destined to permanently occupy the seat of power and to lay hold on political power as if it is his property. Rather than being attached to and embodied by a political figure, political power in modern democratic societies temporarily lies in the hands of political representatives (Lefort, 2016:104). Those who temporarily

occupy the seat of power do so in the name of the people, and even though political power still presents itself as an independent domain above society (as it did in premodern societies), it does not attach itself to the ruler. Political power and the ruler remain separate entities. In the words of Lefort: “*the legitimacy of power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it*” (Lefort, 1986:279).

As in premodern societies, ‘the political’ is that symbolic domain outside society, containing the central and abstract principles through which society understands itself as a unity. Contrary to premodern societies, however, modern societies no longer understand their unity or sense of belonging on the basis of the idea that they belong to an imaginative and organic body headed by a King whose authority and legitimacy is grounded in a transcendental order. This static and fixed image no longer applies. Instead, in modern democratic societies, the abstract principles and fundamental assumptions that shape society’s sense of unity and identity need to be reformulated. They have become indeterminate and subject to debate (Lefort, 2016:49). Lefort argues that: “*Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent*” (Lefort, 1986:303-304).

So, the question of who we are as a society, as a nation or political entity and consequently, which political representatives should we elect to govern us temporarily (i.e. the question of how to translate these abstract principles into concrete policies), becomes subject to a never-ending debate. In democratic societies, there is not one single solution to the issue of constituting of political society. There is no ‘true’ vision of how the political society should look like. Boundaries of who does and who does not belong to the nation are no longer fixed, while norms, values and abstract principles have become open for discussion. Moreover, once these new abstract principles and self-identity have been established, they can always be challenged again. This is what Lefort calls the ‘radical indeterminacy’ of the political (Lefort, 2016:51). The political in modern democratic societies is a permanently unstable and uncontrollable domain, maintained – and simultaneously challenged – by a continuous debate between different perspectives and ideas about how political society should be constructed and look like. Lefort argues: “*Modern democratic society seems to me, in fact, like a society in which power, law and knowledge are exposed to a radical indeterminacy, a society that has become the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure, so that what is instituted never becomes established, the known remains undermined by the unknown, [...] such that the quest for identity cannot be separated from the experience of division*” (Lefort, 1986:305).

Chantal Mouffe adds to Lefort’s argument that in the absence of this absolute truth about how ‘the political’ should be constituted political ‘enemies’ turn into political opponents whose legitimacy should be acknowledged, because no voice is more legitimate than the other. The political, she argues, “*requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated*” (Mouffe, 1993:4). She describes this opposition as ‘agonistic pluralism’. Of course, any idea can and should be challenged and debated. However, no idea, vision or perspective is deemed illegitimate beforehand. The political, thus, requires excluding the possibility of someone being excluded. “*A healthy democratic process*”, according to Mouffe, “*calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests. If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities*” (Mouffe, 1993:6). Thus, political society can discover and maintain its unity and shared identity only by accepting the confrontation with its internal diversity of interests and opinions (Lefort, 2016:103). Society’s political unity takes form and crystallizes in its search for identity, which – paradoxically – lies in its own divisiveness. Political society is held together only if it is capable of dealing with its inherent social antagonism, which requires

social groups to negotiate with each other and to compromise. Therefore, one of the defining characteristics of a well-functioning democratic society is the legitimacy of social divisiveness and conflict (Lefort, 2016:71). It also follows that pluralism and the acceptance that there is no absolute truth are considered vital elements of any democratic notion of the political, too.

Both Lefort and Mouffe argue that an overemphasis on harmony and consensus, and attempts to suppress social antagonism and conflict, constitute the main threats to the survival of 'the political'. After all, it is precisely from this social conflict that the political arises in the first place. To illustrate where an excessive focus on social harmony and lack of conflict may lead, Lefort examines a third type of political society, which he describes as the totalitarian society.

1.1.3 Threats to the political: the suppression of conflict

Democratic societies face a heavy challenge, which is to maintain a political society (i.e. to maintain a shared set of abstract principles that binds society together and which makes society's antagonistic nature manageable and controllable), while – at the same time – maintaining these principles 'radically indeterminate'. One can imagine that – particularly in times of instability (e.g. an economic crisis) – calls for a more stable and fixed image of society start to emerge. Calls for a fixed understanding of society's abstract principles, its identity and who fits in and who does not; attempts to end the radical indeterminacy that so characteristically defines democratic societies. It is in these calls for the suppression of conflict and division, Lefort argues, that the ever-present danger of totalitarianism lurks. Lefort sees totalitarian societies as the Janus-face of democratic societies; they are two opposite sides of the same coin.

Totalitarian societies reject all forms of heterogeneity and deny the importance of social antagonism (Lefort, 2016). Totalitarianism characterizes itself by an attempt to ban all signs of social divisiveness and attempts to terminate the radical 'indeterminacy' of the political. Instead, it establishes and propagates the image of One People; the idea of one fixed identity (Lefort, 2016:41). Whereas in democratic societies, political power appears as a symbolically empty place (i.e. political power is no one's definitive property and becomes occupied only temporarily), in totalitarian societies this place (or seat) becomes permanently occupied again. That is, political power becomes someone's – or some idea's – definitive property. This time, the place of political power gets occupied not by a King or Monarch (whose legitimacy lies in a transcendental order), but by an idea emanating from society itself. For example, the idea that one race, religion or class of people is superior to another; the idea that One People represents and embodies society's true purposes, values and abstract principles. In totalitarian societies, those who occupy political power (i.e. the ruling party) slowly adopt this single and fixed image of society. Thereby, political power drops back into society, and the symbolic division between society and the political ceases to exist (Lefort, 2016:70-71).

In the eyes of Lefort, totalitarian societies represent the ultimate form of a 'depoliticised' society. After all, these societies have completely destroyed their political domain by imposing one single vision of society and crushing the room for conflict, social antagonism and pluralism.

1.1.4 Threats to the political: absorption of the political

Threats to the political are not just constituted by an overemphasis on consensus and harmony. A second threat to the political resides in people's tendency to reduce political questions to issues of a completely different nature. That is, issues that are essentially political are conceived as if their nature is religious, ethical, social, philosophical, economical, or of any other sort. Thereby, they fail to acknowledge the political as an autonomous and independent domain with a distinct character and unique dynamic. The tendency to convert essentially political problems into issues of another nature is what Sheldon Wolin (2004:316) calls the 'absorption' of the political. Issues that used to belong to the political domain are

drawn into the domain of ethics, philosophy, religion, etc. The danger of such practices is that it may ultimately result into something Luuk van Middelaar describes as ‘politicide’, or death of the political.

Van Middelaar (2011) traces the development of French intellectual history between the 1930s and 1980s. During these decades and in various ways, three separate generations of French philosophers developed lines of reasoning which denied the political any legitimate and autonomous space of its own, resulting in what Van Middelaar calls ‘politicide’. Philosophers Alain Renaut and Luc Ferry, for instance, whose neo-Kantian chains of thought on the importance of human rights dominated French intellectual debates between 1975 and 1989, completely reduce political questions to issues of morality. Answers to political issues were to be found in human rights, morality and idealism, they advocated. To them, political philosophy was nothing but a normative attempt to discover how politics ought to be, rather than how it actually is, as they converted political issues (that require political solutions, rather than moral answers) into ethical and moral issues (Van Middelaar, 2011:121-158).

A second example of ‘politicide’ can be found in the Marxist ideology. Marxists reduce all manifestations of social antagonism (which Mouffe and Lefort would regard as political contradictions that require a political solution) to a struggle between classes (i.e. proletariat vs. bourgeoisie). Since Marxism reduces every political conflict between ‘those who want to dominate’ and ‘those who do not want to be dominated’ to this single explanation, the solution to any (essentially) political conflict lies in a classless society, according to the Marxists. As a result, other possible explanations and potential solutions to these political issues remain unseen.

Religion constitutes a third example of a domain with a very strong tendency to absorb and subordinate to itself other domains. Throughout history and in many countries, religious parties and groups have argued that the solution to any social contradiction lies in the observance of religious doctrine. If only the people would live in accordance with their religion, problems would end. This has resulted in a political climate where solutions to political questions – be it youth unemployment, poverty or economic growth - are sought in religious norms and prescripts. As a result, the actual underlying causes of unemployment or poverty become extremely difficult to identify and tackle, since every social contradiction (and their solution) is framed in religious terms.

To preserve the autonomy of the political domain and in order to prevent one domain from subsuming another, Michael Walzer (1984) famously stated that we should uphold the so-called ‘walls of separation’ between these autonomous domains. The most well-known example is the so-called separation between ‘church’ and ‘state’. Secular societies have acknowledged that every domain – the political, religious, social, economic, aesthetic, etc. - has its own internal logic, lawlike patterns and terminology. Once the political gets absorbed by religion and political issues turn into religious issues, inevitably a situation is created that fails to do justice to the actual complexity of these political questions. Religious terminology and logic is simply unable to fully grasp the essence of political issues, and vice versa. If these walls of separation were to come down and one domain gets to dominate others (e.g. the economy dictates politics, or political issues are translated into religious issues), totalitarianism lurks.

Chapter 2: Salafism

The previous chapter presented a theoretical discussion of ‘the political’. The central purpose of this chapter is to apply this theoretical discussion to Salafism in order to locate ‘the political’ in Salafi thought. To do so, it is important first to get a solid understanding of this religious movement. Therefore, the next section introduces some of Salafism’s central theological concepts and touches upon the divergence among its followers.

2.2 Doctrine

Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam, whose term derives from the so-called *al-salaf al-salih*, or ‘pious predecessors’: the first three generations of Muslims who are believed to have represented the purest and most authentic form of Islam. In essence, Salafis can be referred to as those Muslims that want to revive the utopian image of their ‘pious predecessors’, by emulating their beliefs and practices in as many spheres of life as possible (Wagemakers, 2016:30). To purify Islam, Salafis revert back to a literalist interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunna (i.e. the examples of the prophet Mohammed as described in the various *hadiths*), which they regard as the only two legitimate sources of Islam. That is, Salafis reject the centuries old Islamic jurisprudence, as produced by scholars of the different schools of Islamic law (*madhahib*). Rather than blind imitation of these legal schools and their jurists (*taqlid*), Salafis turn to the Qur’an and Sunna alone and interpret these sources through the prism of the first three generations (Wagemakers, 2012:4-5). This is perhaps the key legal difference between ‘ordinary’ Muslims and Salafis. Whereas the former group sees *al-salaf al-salih* as a group of Muslims whose model should be followed through the prism of one of the four schools of Islamic law (the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi’i*, or *Hanbali* school), Salafis wish to follow their example directly and reject all forms of extra-textual sources in deciding theological issues (Wagemakers, 2016a:31-32). If clear-cut answers to religious issues cannot be found in either of the two sources, Salafis prefer independent interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna (*ijtihad*) over *taqlid* (Wagemakers, 2012:5; Roex, 2013:80-81). By strictly emulating the first generations of Muslims, Salafis regard themselves adherents of the only ‘true’ and authentic form of their religion (Wagemakers, 2012:3). Even though the utopian image Salafis wish to restore dates back to the early years of Islam, the Salafi movement as such is a relatively modern phenomenon that originated in the twentieth century. The next section identifies a number of core concepts that form the roots of Salafis’ religious creed (‘*Aqida*’).

2.2.1 The Salafi ‘*Aqida*’

Salafism’s central theological principle is the concept of *tawhid*, or the unity of God. While *tawhid* is a general Islamic, rather than an exclusively Salafist concept, Salafis have a very specific understanding of this principle. Like all Muslims, Salafis believe in the so-called *tawhid al-rububiyya*: the idea of the oneness of God’s lordship (commonly translated as ‘monotheism’). In addition to this form of *tawhid*, however, Salafis distinguish between two other variants: *tawhid al-uluhiyya* (the belief that God alone is worthy of worship) and *tawhid al-asma’ wa-l-sifat* (the belief that God is unique in his characteristics, and therefore incomparable and unparalleled in all of its features) (Wagemakers, 2012:4; Roex, 2013:78-79). It is hard to overestimate the importance of *tawhid*, since basically every argument or position Salafis adopt can be traced back to this very concept. For example, Salafis’ extremely rigid interpretation of *tawhid* also has an effect on their understanding of *shirk*. *Shirk*, also known as idolatry or polytheism, is the act of worshipping or deification of anyone other than God (Roex, 2013:79-80). Some examples that Salafis would regard as expressions of idolatry - i.e. as violations of the principle of *tawhid al-uluhiyya* - include the celebration of the prophet Mohammed’s birthday or venerating saints.

Other doctrinal issues that Salafis deem important – but on which different intra-Salafi groups can hold diverging views – concern the questions of what constitutes faith (*iman*) and what constitutes

unbelief (*kufir*). Discussions on *iman* have been ongoing since the 7th century, but aside from some specific branches within Salafism, Salafis generally agree that faith is expressed by a belief in the heart, through speech, and by acting it out (Wagemakers, 2016a:48). Arguably more contentious is the issue of what constitutes *kufir* and – consequently – the question of when someone can be called an apostate (*murtadd*) or unbeliever (*kafir*). For the purpose of this thesis, the specific details on these discussions (e.g. what constitutes major disbelief (*kufir akbar*) and minor disbelief (*kufir asghar*)?; what type of sins do Salafis distinguish between?) are of less importance. What is important, however, is that these two concepts of *iman* and *kufir* occupy a central position in the Salafi creed. That is because it is on the basis of these concepts that Salafis assess other people and decide how to engage with them.

Salafis' specific ideas on how to approach their 'pious predecessors' and their distinct views on *tawhid* almost seems to suggest that Salafis see themselves as part of a somewhat exclusive or elevated branch of Islam. In fact, this is indeed the case. In many ways, Salafist constantly try their best to emphasize their group's exclusive and distinct character. They stress their exclusivity – for example - by claiming to be members of the “victorious group” that will be saved in the hereafter (*al-ta'ifa al-mansura* or *al-firqa al-najiya*). Also, they see themselves as a group of 'strangers' (*ghuraba*) in comparison to the rest of the *umma* (Haykel, 2009:35; Wagemakers, 2016a:42).

One of the primary theological principles on which Salafis base their exclusivist character and remain committed to Islam's purity is that of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal). This Islamic principle dictates Muslims to display an absolute dedication to their own religious beliefs and practices, and to actively renounce anyone who can cause them to diverge from “the straight path” (Wagemakers, 2016a:44). The concept implies the existence of a strictly dichotomous worldview, dividing the world into an essentially 'good' and 'evil' or Islamic and non-Islamic part. In practice, there is lots of divergence among Salafis on how to apply this principle in daily life. If applied, however, it expresses itself on a personal, political or legislative level (Wagemakers, 2016b:12-13). On a personal level, for example, most Salafis refrain from participating in non-Islamic rituals or holidays (such as celebrating Christmas) and try to shun friendships with non-Muslims. You are also unlikely to find Salafis wearing a business suit and tie, since these clothes are associated with Western practices, which are essentially un-Islamic (Roex, 2013:183). Because of these specific behavioural rules on how to engage with non-Muslims and non-Islamic elements, Salafis' integration into broader society – particularly into non-Islamic societies - can often be very challenging. Some Salafis also wish to express the concept of loyalty and disavowal on the political level. On this level, it is traditionally tied to the question whether Muslim countries can engage into military conflicts with non-Islamic countries or whether Muslim countries should come to the aid of non-Muslim countries (Wagemakers, 2016b:13). While most Salafis basically agree on how to apply *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* on a personal level, its application at the political level is more contested. Even more contentious is its application at the legislative level. Given the idea that Muslims should display complete loyalty to God, some Salafis believe that living under “man-made” laws should be actively resisted (Wagemakers, 2016b:13). Such an interpretation of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* at the legislative level, however, is extremely controversial and is most certainly not shared by all Salafis. Despite the internal discussions among Salafis on how to apply the principle of loyalty and disavowal into practice, the principle as such constitutes a central aspect of Salafis' religious creed.

Apart from their specific ideas on *tawhid*, *iman* and *kufir*, and adherence to the principle of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, Salafis also wish to restore the “purity” of their religion by actively renouncing all practices or beliefs whose origins cannot be traced back to the living days of the pious predecessors, but which have crept into the religion throughout the centuries nevertheless. These 'religious innovations' that have been added to the original practice of Islam, or *bida'*, should be actively eschewed.

Even though the aforementioned intra-Salafi discussions on issues such as *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, and *iman* and *kufir* are real, it remains accurate to conclude that Salafis are generally united by a common

religious creed (Wiktorovicz, 2006). As I have tried to illustrate in this section, this creed revolves around a very specific understanding of the concept of *tawhid*, and an absolute rejection of any extra-textual sources.

2.2.2 The Salafi '*Manhaj*'

The most substantial and practical differences between Salafis do not stem from creedal issues. The most apparent fault lines only start to emerge when looking at the concrete method (*manhaj*) in which they translate their religious doctrines into concrete practices. That is, lines of division between Salafis become apparent only when looking at how different groups of Salafis engage with society and how they apply their religion to contemporary issues and problems (Wiktorovicz, 2006:208; Wagemakers, 2017:8). On the basis of differences in *manhaj*, Wiktorovicz has identified three distinct Salafi categories: 'purists', 'politicos' and 'jihadi-Salafis'. Each category will be discussed in the sections underneath.

Purists / Quietist Salafis

The first branch identified by Wiktorovicz is that of purist Salafism. Rather than sticking to Wiktorovicz's terminology, however, I will follow De Koning, Wagemakers & Becker's (2014:51) criticism of the term 'purist' and adopt their alternative label 'quietist' to describe this first branch of Salafism.¹

As suggested by its label, quietist Salafis' engagement with society is characterized by political quietism. That is, they reject every form of political action or involvement, in the sense that they refuse to participate in things like parliamentary politics, discussions on contentious political issues, or political demonstrations. Instead, quietist Salafis are primarily concerned with the study, education (*tarbiya*) and peaceful propagation (*da'wa*) of their Islamic views (Wagemakers, 2016a:53). Quietist Salafis believe that God's sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) – i.e. true Islamic governance (however that is defined) - will not be established until society is ready for it. Therefore, they feel that society should first be prepared for this eventual transition. By educating Muslims on Islam, combating deviant practices and propagating their specific Salafi creed, quietist Salafis wish to purify Islamic doctrine and practice, and try to Islamize society from the bottom-up, preparing it for an eventual life under Islamic policies. Quietist Salafis regard themselves as a vanguard or 'group of pioneers' in this respect. Their quietist attitude does not necessarily mean that they believe political action is wrong in principle. In their eyes, however, until their religion is entirely purified and society understands the tenets of faith, political action will only create greater evils, such as social division and civil strife (*fitna*) or weakening of the Salafi *da'wa* (Wiktorovicz, 2006:217-218). Besides, most quietist Salafis believe that God has entrusted political leaders – even oppressive ones – with power. Therefore, they should be obeyed at all time.

Given all of this, quietist Salafis reject opposition to political leadership and are known for their subservient attitude towards political regimes, even under conditions of repression (Wiktorovicz, 2006:217). Nevertheless, some sub-trends can be identified regarding the specific positions they adopt towards their political rulers. The first sub-trend consists of so-called 'aloofist' Salafis. Aloofists can be seen to represent the most strict version of quietist Salafism, in the sense that they not only reject political action, but also maintain a certain distance from their political leaders. That is, they neither reject nor endorse their rulers by any means. At best, they provide their leaders with discrete advice on how to handle political issues (*nasiha*). Thereby, aloofists maintain a different position than the so-called 'loyalists'. This second sub-trend consists of Salafis who – like all of their quietist brethren – reject overt political action, but – when called upon by their political leaders – are willing to show their

¹ De Koning, Wagemakers & Becker argue that the term 'purist' is problematic. Since Salafis from all different branches consider themselves adherents of the purest form of Islam, 'purist' is an inadequate label to demarcate the actual differences between these groups.

political allegiance, for example by issuing fatwas that justify certain policies. Finally, ‘propagandists’ go one step further. They not only actively endorse their rulers, but also exert their moral authority to denounce any criticism of the regime (Wagemakers, 2016a:54).

Some scholars – such as Meijer (2009) – have argued that quietist Salafis are politically engaged after all. Indeed, one could argue that vehement rejection of political opposition or providing tacit support to political rulers is an essentially political stance.

Politicos

A second category identified by Wiktorovicz consists of what he calls ‘politicos’. Politicos distinguish themselves by their activist posture. Contrary to quietist Salafis, politicos believe engaging in politics is actually desirable. Politicos do not shy away from expressing criticism against political authorities, but – unlike Jihadi Salafis – generally do not call for a revolt against these leaders (Wiktorovicz, 2006:221). Adherent of this politicised branch of Salafism were highly influenced by political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, from which they adopted their activist posture (Wagemakers, 2016a:55).

Politicised Salafism can be divided into two main trends. The first trend consists of those Salafis whose political engagement focuses on participation in political debates, protests or other forms of political involvement, other than participating in parliamentary politics. The best known example of this trend is the Saudi-Arabian *Sahwa*-movement, but similar groups can be found in other countries too. Their political activism may focus on all kinds of (domestic or international) political issues, such as regime corruption or the human rights situation in their countries (De Koning, Wagemakers & Becker, 2014:54). The second trend consists of politicos who are actually willing to participate in parliamentary politics. Contrary to the first trend, Salafis of this second trend try to influence their countries’ policies by participating in political parties and competing in parliamentary elections. The Egyptian political party *Hizb al-Nour* – which was founded right after the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and participated in the 2012 parliamentary elections – is an example of a group belonging to this second trend (Wagemakers, 2017:17).

Jihadi Salafis

The third (and most notorious) category of Salafism is that of Jihadi-Salafism. Based on this label, one might assume that Jihadi-Salafis are the only branch of Salafis who believe in the legitimacy of jihad. This is not entirely correct, however. That is because all Salafis – whether they are quietist, politico or jihadi – regard jihad as an elemental component of Islam (De Koning, Wagemakers & Becker, 2014:55). Jihadi-Salafis, however, distinguish themselves from the other categories by their specific views on when jihad can be waged. Roughly, there are three types of armed jihad. Firstly, there is classical jihad: a (mainly) defensive type of warfare between the territory of Islam and a territory that is not under Islamic control. Secondly, there is revolutionary jihad: an armed struggle with the intended goal of overthrowing regimes in Muslim countries for not applying Islamic law. And lastly, there is global jihad, which is directed against Western countries, to make them terminate their support for unjust – and supposedly apostate - rulers in Muslim countries (Wagemakers, 2017:18). Contrary to the quietists and politicos who approve of classical jihad only, Jihadi-Salafis believe a revolutionary (and global) jihad must be waged against apostate leaders who fail to apply Islamic law (and against their Western allies).

In his book “*Salafi-Jihadism: the history of an idea*”, Maher (2016) describes how Jihadi-Salafis’ ideological justifications for revolutionary jihad are based on extremely rigid interpretations of creedal issues and religious concepts, such as *takfir*, *al-wala wa-l-bara’* and *hakimiyya*. It is because of these extremist interpretations – and because of the danger of *fitna* – that revolutionary and global jihad are fiercely rejected by quietists and politicos (Wagemakers, 2017:18).

2.3 Salafism and ‘the political’

The final section of this chapter attempts to locate ‘the political’ in Salafi thought. The central argument I will try to make is that the Salafi doctrine neither recognizes ‘the political’ as an independent and autonomous sphere of its own, nor acknowledges its radically indeterminate nature. By making religious beliefs and concepts – which operate as tools of exclusion – the cornerstones of their political views, Salafis turn any essentially ‘political’ question into a religious issue. As such, ‘the political’ has become absorbed by the religious domain and the former is denied any independent space of its own. Moreover, the uncompromising and – to a certain degree – totalitarian nature of the Salafi doctrine completely denies the legitimacy of social antagonism and crushes the room for pluralism.

The previous section identified various sub-trends within the broader Salafi movement. Even though the differences between these groups are real, the quietists, politicos and jihadis share more in common than what separates them. Regardless of the specific sub-trend one Salafi adheres to, all Salafis are (generally) united on creedal issues. They all share a very specific understanding of *tawhid*, and vehemently oppose any use of extra-textual sources in deciding theological issues (Wiktorowicz, 2006:207). By interpreting the sources of Islam through the prism of *al-salaf al-salih*, Salafis of all different sorts claim to be adherents of the purest and most authentic form of their religion; to be adherents of an absolutist, superior and universal truth-claiming doctrine. In and of itself, a religious movement’s claim to truth, superiority and exclusivity does not have to have any bearing on ‘the political’, as long as these claims apply to the religious domain only. Whether someone is Christian, Muslim or Hindu, every religious movement claims to teach a religious truth. As long as the “walls of separation” between the religious and political sphere are upheld, religious convictions will not have any bearing on the degree to which the political can operate as an independent domain.

The issue with Salafism, however, is that its religious doctrines also have come to govern questions related to other spheres, including the political domain. In Lefort’s words: “*power, law and knowledge*” have become incorporated in the religious. Islam has subordinated all separate domains to its absolute and transparent truth. Salafis’ entire interaction with the outside world, including their attitude towards political issues, is governed by their religious creed. The Salafi doctrine not only incorporates questions related to religious issues (e.g. “What is the best way to get into heaven?”), but also questions related to politics (e.g. “Who is qualified to govern our countries?” or “What type of laws should we abide?”). Whatever branch of Salafism someone adheres to, answers to such essentially political questions are formulated on the basis of religion-based beliefs. Salafis channel any essentially political issue into religious terms. In doing so, they have taken down the walls of separation between the religious and political domain; the political has become absorbed by religion. Just how conflated these two domains have become, is apparent from the manner in which Salafis use some of their theological concepts – which operate as tools of exclusion – to justify their political stances. This politicisation of religious concepts will be explained in more detail below.

As mentioned before, Salafis constantly emphasize their exclusivity in relation to others in order to reinforce their claim to religious authenticity and purity. Drawing lines of division between their own religious “in-group” and anyone they regard as “outsiders” constitutes a central aspect of the Salafi doctrine. One way in which Salafis tend to accentuate their exclusivity is through the use of specific vocabulary, such as: *al-firqa al-najih*a (the saved sect), *al-ta’ifa al-mansura* (the victorious group), and *ghuraba* (strangers). However, Salafis use more than just words to stress their exclusivity. A more practical way in which Salafis wish to maintain an imaginary ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy and delineate the boundaries of faith, is by bringing some of their theological concepts into practice. One such example is Salafis’ practice of *al-wala wa-l-bara*’. This religious concept calls for an absolute obedience and loyalty to Islamic principles and disavowal of everything that is deemed un-Islamic. As discussed in the

previous section, different Salafi groups can hold different ideas on the precise interpretation of this doctrine and on how to apply it in practice. However interpreted and applied precisely, the concept of loyalty and disavowal always operates as a tool of exclusion. It draws a radical boundary between ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers’, between ‘faith’ and ‘unbelief’, between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. It propagates an extremely intolerant view of everything that lies outside the Salafi interpretation of Islam, and makes Islam the sole basis for someone’s loyalty. It produces a strict dichotomy between – on the one hand - anyone who shares the Salafi worldview and therefore is on God’s side, and – on the other hand – those who do not share the Salafi worldview and who are therefore considered religious, political and ideological enemies. When applied into practice, it constitutes one of the best examples of how Salafis engagement with the outside world is predicated on the belief that there exists a certain moral hierarchy between groups of people, which is solely based on someone’s religious identity. All that matters is whether someone or something is regarded Islamic. If not, its views are deemed illegitimate beforehand. What matters is faith alone.

The fact that Salafis consider communal interaction exclusively through a theological framework also has come to determine their engagement with politics. As mentioned before, traditionally, *al-wala wa-l-bara’* regulates Salafis interaction with non-Islamic elements at the personal level. However, Maher has described how Jihadi-Salafi theorists have transformed this doctrine into an aggressive and muscular one. One in which making *bara’* (disavowal) from un-Islamic practices requires active resistance, rather than quiet omittance of such practices. Following this line of reasoning, waging revolutionary jihad against supposedly apostate rulers has become an obligation in the eyes of Jihadi-Salafis (Maher, 2016:120-121). So, while for some Salafis (i.e. Jihadis) *al-wala wa-l-bara’* licenses the use of violence against apostate rulers, for others (i.e. quietists) it may justify their aloofist attitude toward politics (“stay away from un-Islamic regimes, man-made laws and democratic processes”). These political applications of *al-wala wa-l-bara’* constitute a good examples of just how conflated the political and religious domain have become. It indicates how essentially political questions are turned into religious issues. Or as Sheldon Wolin would have argued: *al-wala wa-l-bara’* has absorbed politics.

The concept of loyalty and disavowal closely resembles Carl Schmitt’s ideas on the political. It draws a radical boundary between ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic’, between ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers’, or as Schmitt would argue: between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’. Schmitt stated that the dichotomy between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ is the fundamental dichotomy of the political, and that it is precisely this specific distinction where all political actions and motives can be reduced to (Schmitt, 1932:26). In Schmitt’s eyes, thus, any practical application of *al-wala wa-l-bara’* – whether it manifests itself at the personal, political or legislative level – constitutes an essentially political act.

Lefort holds a more democratic notion of ‘the political’. In his view, ‘the political’ can be envisioned as a symbolic domain outside (or above) society, containing a set of abstract principles through which society’s antagonistic segments understand themselves as a unity (i.e. as a political society). The defining characteristic of Lefort’s democratic notion of ‘the political’ is that it is characterized by a radical indeterminacy. This means that the abstract principles and fundamental assumptions by which the political society understands itself as a unity are not stable or fixed. There is no eternally valid or ‘true’ vision of how the political society should look like and what goals it should pursue. The question of what constitutes our identity, what norms and principles bind us together, what is our shared purpose and who does and does not belong to our political community are not fixed. Instead, they are negotiated by society’s antagonistic segments and remain in a constant need of revision. The – so called – seat of power remains empty and is occupied only temporarily by ‘politics’.

The Salafi doctrine stands at odds with the most fundamental characteristic of ‘the political’, as formulated by Lefort and Mouffé. In fact, it is more likely that both philosophers would describe

Salafism as an ideology that holds a totalitarian view of society. Salafism fails to recognize the “radical indeterminacy” of the political. Regardless of the specific branch one adheres to, Salafism is a uncompromising, absolutist doctrine, calling for a fixed and static image of a purist Islamic community that is purely devoted to the Oneness of God. Albeit through different methods (*manahij*), all Salafis ultimately wish to Islamize society and to bring about a “People-as-One” society; one in which God’s sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) has manifested itself entirely. As Lefort would describe it, Salafism advocates a political society in which the “seat of power” becomes permanently “occupied” again. Instead of pursuing a political society whose “*identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent*”, Salafism propagates an eternal and universally valid image of society’s identity and its fundamental principles. This image is actually non-negotiable, since any compromise to this utopian image would actually undermine Salafis’ claim to authenticity and purity.

Thereby – at least in theory - Salafism fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of pluralism, the importance of diversity of opinions and the notion that there is no “absolute” truth regarding how the political should be constituted. Rather than recognizing political opponents as adversaries “*whose existence is legitimate*” (Mouffe, 1993:4) and instead of calling for a “*vibrant clash of political positions*” (Mouffe, 1993:6), Salafis purposefully steer away from any of such engagements with outsiders’. Again, the doctrine of *al-wala wa-l-bara*’ justifies this attitude. Salafis’ intolerance of any outside perspective crushes the room for legitimate social conflict; the very characteristic that any democratic vision of the political requires.

To summarize: Salafism is a form of what Luuk van Middelaar would describe as *politicide*. It develops a form of identity politics that turns every essentially political issue into a religious question. Thereby, it fails to recognize ‘the political’ as an independent and autonomous domain of its own. Moreover, its extremely intolerant view of any “outsiders” perspective completely crushes the room for any legitimate social conflict and pluralism; the fundamental conditions for a democratic notion of the political. The Salafi thought carries in it the perspective of a fixed and totalitarian – and thereby completely ‘depoliticised’ – society.

Chapter 3: Hizb al-Nour

The previous chapter presented a theoretical and philosophical outlook on the relationship between Salafism and the political. Its central conclusion is that – at least in theory – the Salafi religious doctrine stands at odds with the democratic notion of the political, outlined by Claude Lefort. The doctrine’s sectarian nature, which regards any outsiders’ perspective a threat to the utopian Islamic society Salafis wish to restore, better resembles Carl Schmitt’s ideas on the political: one that is characterized by a fundamental and irreconcilable dichotomy between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ and one in which social antagonism between these two can only be settled by one group’s total domination over the other. Now that this theoretical perspective has been established, the current chapter presents an empirical analysis of Salafis’ actual political decision-making. This chapter, thus, no longer deals with the political. Instead, it examines the concrete behaviour of Salafis in ‘politics’.

For many years, Salafis’ desire to maintain their uncompromising, authentic and purist character has mostly prevented them from forming political parties and from entering politics. Even if some groups were willing to participate, the authoritarian nature of regimes in the Middle East prevented them from taking part in politics. All of this changed after the Arab Spring. As the old authoritarian regimes were dismissed and new political set-ups had to be established across the Middle-East, various quietist Salafi groups – who had previously rejected all forms of participant politics – began to compete for elected power. For the first time, Salafi political parties were established in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Egypt (McCants, 2013). Among the various parties that made their entrance, the Egyptian Hizb al-Nour (Party of Light) undoubtedly has been the most successful from an electoral point of view. It was founded in June 2011 – four months after the ouster of former president Mubarak - by the leaders of *al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya*: a quietist Salafi movement from Alexandria. A couple of months later, Hizb al-Nour gained a massive victory in the country’s 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, becoming Egypt’s second largest political party (BBC, 2012). Even though today, Hizb al-Nour’s presence in parliament is just a fraction of what it was back then, its participation in democratic politics remains remarkable and prompts the question: what to make of this paradox of a former quietist Salafi group establishing a political party and entering the domain of pluralist politics?

Given Salafis’ previous rejection of politics, it is interesting to examine how Hizb al-Nour came to view politics, and to what extent its acceptance of politics changed its nature. Some scholars, like Poljarevic, assert that Salafis’ acceptance of democratic politics signifies a true change of character. After all, by engaging in politics, Salafis make a conscious shift from considering communal interaction exclusively through a theological lens to a more pragmatic form that recognizes the legitimacy of other groups and their opinions (Poljarevic, 2017:348). Others seem less convinced of this assertion. According to Meijer, Salafis’ uncompromising theological stances continue to have political implications – even once they have entered the field of politics. “For Salafism”, he argues, “politics for its own sake is not important, but rather it is doctrinal purity that is the basis for political involvement” (Meijer, 2009:18). So, even though these political Salafis have formally accepted the rules of the democratic game, this does not mean – by definition – that they have accepted politics as an independent domain with a separate logic. Meijer’s position corresponds with what Lacroix (2012a) describes as a “pre-political” stance, which means that Islamist groups enter the political sphere only as a means to spread, purify and defend their Islamic doctrine, rather than performing politics for the sake of politics.

This chapter offers a case study of the Egyptian Hizb al-Nour and its participation in democratic politics after the 2011 revolution. The main focus will be on how the party came to view politics and with what purpose it entered it. Can we really call them ‘political’ – as Poljarevic does -, in the sense that the party was willing to fully embrace the democratic political logic? If this were the case, we would expect to find empirical evidence that Hizb al-Nour indeed recognized the legitimacy of pluralism and

was willing to negotiate and cooperate with ideological adversaries and make compromises related to all kinds of social, cultural and political issues. Rather than performing politics strictly on the basis of their religious convictions (i.e. identity politics), we would – for example - expect the party to extend civil rights to Christians and other minority groups too. Or did Hizb al-Nour – as Meijer seems to predict – enter politics solely as a means to promote and safeguard its theological principles? Did they cling to their rigid identity paradigm, thereby letting their religious doctrine govern their political agenda entirely? The empirical analysis starts with a brief introduction into the history of Hizb al-Nour, and is followed by an analysis of the party’s decision-making between 2011 and 2015.

3.1 Roots of Hizb al-Nour

Even though many political observers were caught by surprise by the abrupt electoral success of Hizb al-Nour, the existence of Salafism in Egypt is not a new phenomenon. Salafism in Egypt has its roots in the early decades of the 20th century, and the first association in Egypt that claimed to have an explicitly Salafi character was called “Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya” (Hoigilt & Nome, 2014:37-38). It was founded in 1926, in order to resolve the alleged crisis of the Islamic nation through a religious revival. The association called for a purification of the Islamic doctrine and attempted to reform their country’s social and religious practices. The association – which never aspired to become a mass movement and merely remained a loose network of religious scholars – committed itself primarily to publishing and distributing literary works from the Salafi tradition. As such, it was able to introduce Salafism to large segments of Egyptian society (Lacroix, 2012b).

In the 1970s, a second wave of Salafism emerged in Egypt. During this period of relative religious freedom granted by then president Sadat, various Islamic movements were allowed to propagate their ideas and carry out their activities relatively unhindered. The most prominent among these movements were various university groups called the Gama‘at Islamiyya. These groups of students shared an Islamist character, but – at the same time – were divided among themselves. Some, for example, were influenced by the Salafi literature distributed by Ansar al-Sunna, while others felt more attracted to the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and the political activism of its ideologues (Lacroix, 2012a). Eventually, this ideological diversity led to a split in the movement. While the Gama‘at’s leadership and the majority of its members joined the Muslim Brotherhood, others - who believed in a violent approach to politics - organized themselves in jihadist networks. Finally, there was another group of students. This group had come to adopt a Salafi approach to Islam and wanted to actively distance themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood, because they considered their understanding of Islam as insufficiently orthodox. Also, they renounced the Brotherhood’s political activism and its calls for political change, not because they rejected political participation in principle, but because they felt that – if they were to engage in politics under the current circumstances – they simply stood no chance against the regime without abandoning some of their Islamic principles. Therefore, the group adopted a quietist approach to politics (Obaid & Abha, 2018:258; Hoigilt & Nome, 2014). In 1977, the leaders of this group – a number of medical students from the University of Alexandria – formally created their own Salafi organization called: *al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya* (the Salafi Call)² (Hoigilt & Nome, 2014:38; Lacroix, 2016). The main founder of *al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya* was Mohamed Ismail al-Moqadim, a surgeon from Alexandria. Other prominent figures included Yasser Borhami, Mohamed Abdel Fattah, Said Abd El-Azim and Ahmed Farid. Even though these members were educated as engineers or doctors, they started to preach in mosques and began to act as religious sheikhs (al-Anani & Malik, 2013:59).

² Initially, the organization was called ‘al-madrassa al-salafiyya’, but in 1982 the group began to call themselves ‘al-da‘wa al-salafiyya’ (Mokhtar, 2014).

Contrary to Ansar al-Sunna, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya wanted to establish itself as a well-structured and institutionalized mass-movement. Even though it never reached the level of institutionalization of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya adopted some elements of the Brotherhood's organizational template (e.g. it appointed a so-called *qayyim*: the equivalent of the Brotherhood's *Murshid al-'Amm* or Supreme Guide) and was able to establish various local bureaus across the country. These local branches primarily focused on providing social services in poor neighbourhoods, through which the organization established strong ties with ordinary Egyptians. As a result, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya's influence significantly grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Lacroix, 2012b:2).

A second condition facilitating their growth, was the relative tolerance al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya enjoyed from the government. Its sheikhs primarily focused on religious education and on promoting and sponsoring grass-roots social activism to address social issues, such as poverty. Political issues were purposely shunned, or – at best – discussed in a theoretical manner. For example, even though they disapproved of democracy as an apostate political system, they would always avoid openly denouncing the Egyptian government (Lacroix, 2016:4). They also refused to participate in elections, since they believed their social and religious message had to be disseminated from the bottom-up (Lacroix, 2016:4). This quietist attitude allowed al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya to escape political repression. After Sadat's assassination in 1981, for example, the group avoided massive persecution, unlike other Islamist groups (Lacroix, 2012a). Under Mubarak, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya was sometimes even used as a counterweight against other Islamist groups. The hopes of Egypt's security apparatus was that al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya's apolitical message would drive conservative Muslims away from the more politicized Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi groups. This is not to say that the movement did not face state repression at all. Al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya members were constantly monitored and did – from time to time – face repression. When compared to other Islamist movements, however, the organization enjoyed a degree of freedom not allowed to others (Hoigilt & Nome, 2014:39). In the 2000s, for example, Salafis were allowed to broadcast their own tv-shows. And although not all of these sheikhs were affiliated with al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya, they helped to disseminate and popularize the Salafi message far beyond the networks of al-Da'wa (Field & Hamam, 2009).

When on January 25, 2011, the Egyptian Revolution started to unfold, the events were initially viewed with suspicion. Reluctant to back the protesters, some of the sheikhs publicly spoke out against the revolution and called upon their members not to participate in it (Lacroix, 2016:4). Given al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya's traditional quietist attitude, this initial reaction was unsurprising. Throughout the following days, however, when the odds that Mubarak would prevail became smaller and smaller, the leadership of al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya gradually shifted its rhetoric and ultimately changed its position by joining the demands for regime change (Mokhtar, 2014). It is hard to tell whether this change of position was merely a form of opportunism given the shifted balance of power in favour of the protesters, or whether the organization's leadership genuinely supported the uprising. In any case, the decision to support the revolution – and thus to openly adopt a political position – would mark the start of a fundamental transformation of the movement.

In the weeks following the revolution, namely, some members within the organization argued that – because the political situation had changed – al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya should change its attitude towards politics as well. As stated previously, the movement's founding members had never rejected political participation in principle. They just did not see any openings under the current regime, without being forced to compromise on their Islamist ideals. Now that the political environment and balance of power had shifted, however, some prominent members believed they had to take advantage of this opportunity (Lacroix, 2012a). And so, it would not take long before the movement definitively plunged itself into politics. In March 2011, one month after Mubarak's ouster, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya's leadership called upon their followers to vote 'yes' on the upcoming constitutional referendum, to protect the

provision in Egypt's constitution that "the principles of the Shari'a are the principle source of legislation" (Brown, 2013). According to Mokhtar, a researcher who conducted several personal interviews with al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya's leaders, the decision was based on the assessment that the benefit (*maslaha*) of preserving Shari'a far outweighed the potential harm (*mafsadah*) of letting secularists and Christians abolish the provision (Mokhtar, 2014).

After the constitutional referendum, calls for further political involvement continued to grow. Some members argued that al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya should create its own political party. One of the biggest advocates of launching such a party was 'Imad Abd al-Ghaffour. Abd al-Ghaffour had been one of the movement's founding figures in the 1970s and had worked and lived in Turkey over the past few years. Gradually he was able to convince the sheikhs – including sheikh Yasser Borhami, who had always been a radical opponent of pluralist politics – of his plan to create a political party, and on June 15, 2011, Hizb al-Nour was officially established. Abd al-Ghaffour became its first president (Mokhtar, 2014).

3.2 The purpose of politics - Hizb al-Nour (2011–2012)

Having presented a historic overview of the roots of Hizb al-Nour, the following section examines the party's actual political decision-making during the first two years of its existence. As one can image, establishing a political party is not an easy challenge, particularly for a group that had never been involved in politics before. How will we position our party in the democratic landscape? What will be our position on mundane issues? What are our red lines? In other words, how are we going to perform politics? The central aim of this section is to examine how Hizb al-Nour came to view the purpose of politics during the initial phase of its existence. Did the party perform 'politics for the sake of politics', meaning they accepted the full logic of democratic politics, were willing to compromise on doctrinal issues and cooperate with ideological adversaries on a wide range of social, political and economic issues? Or did they simply view political participation as a means to defend their religious interests and did their theological convictions govern their political positions entirely?

When Hizb al-Nour was established in June 2011, it had to create a completely new political discourse. Politics was an entirely new endeavour, so its leaders soon realized they had no experience whatsoever with any of the challenges that awaited them. One of the first challenges they encountered was to draw up their party programme. Until then, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya sheikhs had dealt only with questions related to the religious domain. Now, all of sudden, they were expected to formulate a position on all kinds of worldly affairs. To this end, Hizb al-Nour's president – Abd al-Ghaffour – put together a group of academic experts, many of whom were not Salafi themselves, to assist the party in creating their own party programme. The party leaders – in turn – made sure no religious red lines were crossed. It is said that they even hired a number of Japanese experts, to help them develop their position on Egypt's education system (Lacroix, 2012b). Reading its political programme – which was translated into English – one cannot but conclude that - in many ways - it was very similar to that of 'regular' political parties. The programme outlines – for instance - the party's views on all sorts of issues, ranging from healthcare to agricultural policy, from pharmaceutical policies to preservation of the environment, and from combating illiteracy to international affairs. Its economic policies had some very leftist overtones and when it comes to international affairs, their nationalist rhetoric appeared very similar to that of other parties (Hizb al-Nour, 2011).

What is particularly interesting, is the party's position on democracy. Prior to the revolution, al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya had always rejected democracy and pluralism, because it considered it an apostate form of governance. Absolute sovereignty, after all, resides with God and should not be transposed to the people. After the revolution, the party seemingly made a distinction between the "philosophy of democracy", on the one hand, and its procedures on the other hand. While it still rejected the notion that

ultimate sovereignty should lie with the people, the party did commit itself to the procedures of democracy (Obaid & Abha, 2018:260). For example, the programme recognizes “the need to respect the independence of the judiciary fully independent from the executive authority” and affirms that “election must be approved as means for selecting representatives for the bodies and institutions that represent the national Egyptian community” (Hizb al-Nour, 2011:6). Even the word ‘democracy’ is explicitly mentioned several times in the programme.

With regards to the rights of Christians, the programme recognizes “Islamic Shari‘a as the main source of legislation that includes securing religious freedom for Copts”, and specifies that “they [i.e. Copts] have what Muslims have”, referring to their shared rights and duties (Hizb al-Nour, 2011:3). There were even some Christians accepted among the party’s founding members. I should add, however, that this was one of the requirements that had to be met in order to be legally accepted as a political party. With regard to the position of women, the party programme explicitly states that “the status of women in society adopts full equality in human dignity between man and women” (Hizb al-Nour, 2011:31). And despite their extremely conservative views on women’s political participation, the party announced it would enlist a total of 60 female candidates to run for the upcoming 2011-2012 parliamentary elections. Since most Salafis believe women are not free to vote or run in elections, this decision caused quite some controversy. Party president Abd al-Ghaffour responded that this decision had been a necessary compromise, since the electoral law insisted that a certain percentage of candidates were women (Ahram Online, 2011).³

Now, as minimal as these commitments may be, they do mark a significant break from al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya’s earlier positions. In the past, prominent sheikhs – such as Yasser Borhami – had written lengthy books in which they denounced democracy and the role of women in the public sphere. Now, all of a sudden, their party adhered to these principles (at least in practice).

3.2.1 Sheikhs vs. Politicians

Although these ideological concessions were initially supported by the sheikhs of al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya, tensions between Hizb al-Nour’s leaders and al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya’s sheikhs became increasingly noticeable in the run up to the parliamentary elections. According to Lacroix, these tensions were due to a fundamental disagreement on the precise purpose of Hizb al-Nour’s participation in politics.⁴

On the one hand, Hizb al-Nour’s leaders – headed by president Abd al-Ghaffour – wanted the party to become a political party like all others (Lacroix, 2016:14; Hoigilt & Nome, 2014:12). The party’s programme, discussed above, can be seen as an expression of this desire. Even though its leaders saw Hizb al-Nour as a religious party, they wanted to commit themselves to the rules of the democratic game and were willing to compromise on some of their ideological convictions, in order to attract votes and become politically relevant. To achieve this goal, Abd al-Ghaffour believed the party should cut itself loose from the Da‘wa al-Salafiyya movement and act independently. The following quote from an interview with a close associate of Abd al-Ghaffour captures the essence of their view. He argued: “We may consult the Da‘wa sheikhs, whom we deeply respect, if we need a fatwa from them on a specific issue, but we don’t want them to meddle with the party’s daily business, because this is politics and politics is not their specialty” (Lacroix, 2016:14). On the other hand, a group of sheikhs – most notably Yasser Borhami – pursued a very different line. He and his fellow sheikhs believed the party should always benefit the interests of the Da‘wa al-Salafiyya movement. Political power, as such, should not

³ To meet this requirement and limit the chances of success for these women, they were placed at the tail ends of the list. They also avoided publishing the pictures of the female candidates and replaced their photos with images of flowers (Obaid & Abha, 2018:253).

⁴ The following parts of this empirical analysis are largely based on this study by Lacroix from 2016.

be the goal, per se. The purpose of politics, instead, was to spread and purify their Islamic doctrine (Lacroix, 2016).

During the first two years of Hizb al-Nour's existence, these contradicting views led to various conflicts between Abd al-Ghaffour and Borhami. One of these incidents emerged over the issue of *jizya*: a form of poll tax that was levied on non-Muslims in premodern times. To counter fears among Christians and other religious minorities that Hizb al-Nour would want to reinstate this medieval practice, the party's spokesperson argued it would no longer be rational to practice this tradition in modern Egypt. This view, however, was immediately challenged by Borhami, who insisted that this tradition – which was established in the days of the Prophet – would be observed (Hoigilt & Nome, 2014:45).

In December 2011, another point of contention came to the fore. In a talk show, Abd al-Ghaffour was asked why his party had decided not to enlist any Christian candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections. In response, he said he regretted this fact, and invited Christians to join his party and run for office in future elections. Again, his statement was fiercely criticized by Borhami, who argued non-Muslims could have no authority (*wilaya*) over Muslims, and therefore no Christian should ever be allowed in parliament (Lacroix, 2012a:6-7; Lacroix, 2012b:15).

The two central figures also held different views on the issue of political alliances. Even though Hizb al-Nour was part of an Islamic coalition,⁵ Abd al-Ghaffour stated multiple times during the campaign that he did not mind forming political alliances with his ideological adversaries. As long as liberals and leftist shared some of his political goals, he would be willing to work with them on these issues. Again, Borhami spoke out against the party's president. He believed Hizb al-Nour could only ally itself with other Islamic parties (Lacroix, 2012a:6).

Two final incidents occurred after the parliamentary elections. After Hizb al-Nour's massive electoral victory, capturing 121 seats out of the 508 seats in total, its leaders believed the party should attempt to maintain good relationships with all foreign states, regardless of their religious background (BBC, 2012). In light of this statement, some of the party's leading figures attended an event at the Iranian embassy. In the same spirit, a commemoration of the creation of the Turkish state at the Turkish embassy was attended. Both visits were condemned by Borhami, however, who issued a fatwa stating that Muslims should not engage in any relationships with Shiites (Lacroix, 2012a) and denounced the second event as a "celebration of the end of the Ottoman caliphate" (Lacroix, 2012b:15).

One of the few instances in which both camps actually agreed was during the country's presidential elections in May and June 2012. During the first round of the elections, both factions agreed to support presidential candidate Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futuh (Chick, 2012). Abu al-Futuh, who presented himself as a liberal Islamist, was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood and wanted – if he were to be elected – to form a large united coalition between parties from all ideological backgrounds. Abd al-Ghaffour was convinced that Abu al-Futuh – still an Islamist candidate - represented the best chance for a continuation of the political process. Initially, many of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya sheikhs were against Abd al-Ghaffour's decision. This time, however, it was precisely Borhami who convinced his fellow sheikhs to also endorse Abu al-Futuh, albeit for a different reason. In contrast to Abd al-Ghaffour's political rationale, the Da'wa al-Salafiyya sheikhs wanted to do everything within their power to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi from winning the elections. If the Brotherhood would come to dominate the country's political domain, eventually it would also become Egypt's leading religious authority and come to dominate the religious domain, their fears were (Lacroix, 2012a; Lacroix, 2012b).

⁵ It had refused to join the Brotherhood's Democratic Coalition, because it included several non-Islamist parties (Mokhtar, 2014)

Despite this rare moment of unity between Abd al-Ghaffour and Borhami, the internal struggle between the two figureheads increasingly escalated in the latter half of 2012 (Egypt Independent, 2012). Eventually, after several new incidents, Abd al-Ghaffour was forced to resign from the party. In December 2012, he announced the creation of his own political party - Hizb al-Watan (Ahram Online, 2012; Ahram Online, 2013a). From now on, Borhami would be in charge of Hizb al-Nour.

3.3 The purpose of politics – Hizb al-Nour (2013 – present)

As the previous paragraph has illustrated, Abd al-Ghaffour's political pragmatism and his preparedness to compromise on fundamental doctrinal issues in order to become politically relevant ignited an internal struggle for power within the party. After his resignation and with Borhami in control, one might expect decision-making to reflect a more intransigent attitude towards doctrinal issues. The next section, however, will illustrate that this has not entirely been the case. Under Borhami's leadership, Hizb al-Nour has shown signs of political pragmatism, too, albeit for a different reason than under Abd al-Ghaffour.

Rather than seeing politics as a goal in itself, Borhami adopted a purely instrumental approach to politics. Under his leadership, the party came to function as the political arm of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya movement, with the sole and only purpose to defend the interests of the movement (Lacroix, 2016). Being a Da'wa al-Salafiyya sheikh for decades, Borhami had always believed Islamic reform should occur from the bottom-up, instead of being forced upon society by the state. As one of his associates argued: "The parliament is not, has never been, and will not be the solution for us. We believe change will only come from below, not by simply changing the laws. The parliament is only a means to help us practice what is the basis for us, *da'wa* (i.e. propagation of Islamic views)" (Lacroix, 2016:24). The party's major strategic decisions between 2013 and 2015 – which were the decision to turn itself against the Muslim Brotherhood and to act in support of al-Sisi and his 2013 military coup – must be interpreted in light of this instrumental approach to politics. They were made only to protect the interests of al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya. The next section discusses these decisions in more detail.

In the eyes of many sheikhs, including Borhami, the Muslim Brotherhood has always been one of the biggest threats to the survival of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya. Since the Brotherhood was established in 1928, its central goal has always been to seize political power to carry out their conservative Islamic political agenda. Its ideas, however, are far from being Salafi. Muslim Brothers preach a conservative vision of society, but do not really care about theological disputes and allow for some variance in interpretation of Islam. This in sharp contrast to Salafis. The previous paragraph has shown that - already in May 2012, when Borhami decided not to endorse Mohamed Morsi during the first round of the presidential elections - Borhami and his fellow sheikhs were willing to go quite far to limit the Brotherhood's authority. After Borhami was finally in charge of the party, he continued to pursue this strategy.

The last time Hizb al-Nour and the Brotherhood had a joint interest and formed an alliance together was during the drafting of the 2012 constitution (Lombardi & Brown, 2012) During this process, both the Brotherhood and Hizb al-Nour shared a mutual interest in making sure language on Egypt's Islamic identity and Shari'a legislation would remain unchanged. In fact, due to their shared efforts, they even managed to strengthen Islamic references by adding a second 'Islamist' article to the constitution (Article 219). One month after the adoption of this constitution, however, Hizb al-Nour began to turn itself against the Brotherhood.

Since the end of 2012, namely, the Brotherhood had increasingly taken control over various governmental institutions, including Egypt's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Morsi had appointed servants loyal to his regime to numerous key positions in the Ministry, which Hizb al-Nour saw as an attempt by the Brotherhood to take-over the religious sphere (Fahmi, 2014). Another incident that went against the interest of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya was Morsi's legislative proposal to ban unlicensed

preachers from giving sermons. As indicated before, many Da'wa sheikhs held no official religious degrees, and thus, the proposal was seen as another attempt by the Brotherhood to overtake the religious domain. In response, Hizb al-Nour stepped up its criticism against Morsi's presidency. It threatened, for example, to publish a report documenting, what they called, the "Brotherhoodization" of the state (Egypt Independent, 2013). Ultimately, on July 3, 2013, Morsi was ousted in a coup d'état by the Egyptian military: a move that was supported by Hizb al-Nour.

Now, there are probably multiple factors that contributed to Hizb al-Nour's decision to gradually turn itself against the Brotherhood. The gradually shifting political tide against Morsi's regime – of course – made it easier to take a stance against his policies. Still, supporting a military take-over at the expense of what was still an Islamist regime, can only be understood entirely when taking into consideration the supposed threat the Brotherhood posed to Hizb al-Nour's influence in the religious domain. According to some, the rationale for the party's decision to support the coup was that a military and non-Islamist government would still be preferable to a Brotherhood-regime, because the former supposedly has no interest in the religious domain (Lacroix, 2016:19). So, the decision to turn against the Brotherhood offers a good example of how Hizb al-Nour (under Borhami) acted in service of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya movement's interests.

After al-Sisi's take-over of the country in July 2013, things quickly started to move downhill for Hizb al-Nour. First of all, the decision to back the coup led to a great loss of membership and support. Especially after a bloody crackdown of Muslim Brotherhood supporters and anti-coup protesters at Raba'a Square in August 2013, many party members were in shock by al-Sisi's extreme repression of Islamists. In response, they began to blame their party's leadership for not distancing itself from al-Sisi (Davis-Packard, 2014). While the al-Nour's leadership might have had some initial hopes that – by supporting the coup – they would be allowed to maintain some degree of political influence, it soon became clear these hopes were futile. Under al-Sisi's extremely repressive political environment, the party would make some concessions it presumably would have never made under 'normal' circumstances.

A first major blow was the draft of a new constitution, which would be subjected to a referendum in January 2014. To the party's disappointment, all previous 'Islamic' language – including article 219, which had been added just one year earlier through shared efforts from Hizb al-Nour and the Brotherhood - was removed from the new draft. The new draft even included an article that would place a ban on political parties founded on religious grounds. The article was initially criticized by Hizb al-Nour's new president Makhyouun (McTighe, 2014). Later, however, he stated his party would vote 'yes' in the upcoming constitutional referendum to support stability, "even though the constitution includes articles that the party does not agree upon" (Ahram Online, 2013b; Ashraf, 2013). It is quite remarkable, that a party would vote in favour of a constitution that would effectively place a ban on its existence. Nonetheless, Hizb al-Nour decided to do so.

Moreover, the party also decided to endorse al-Sisi's candidacy for the 2014 presidential elections, despite the unabated criticism from al-Nour's members (El-Dabh, 2014). A final example of Hizb al-Nour's pragmatism became apparent during the country's 2015 parliamentary elections. Under al-Sisi, a new law had been passed which required a minimum number of Copts to be represented on the party lists (Mokhtar, 2014). To the surprise of many, Hizb al-Nour accepted the demand and listed a number of Christian candidates; a decision that marked a departure from Borhami's earlier position (El-Fekki, 2015; Legal Monitor Worldwide, 2015). Only four years earlier he had a clash with the party's former president – Abd al-Ghaffour – about precisely this point. Eventually, the 2015 parliamentary elections turned out to be a disaster for the party. With only twelve seats left, its presence in parliament decreased with over 90%.

The aforementioned events under Borhami's leadership are all examples in which Hizb al-Nour showed signs of extreme political pragmatism and opportunism. It demonstrates the party's preparedness to set aside and even vote against some of its central religious doctrines and interests. Contrary to Abd al-Ghaffour, who was willing to compromise and act pragmatically, because he considered politics an independent domain with its own rationale and logic, Borhami's pragmatism reflected a different rationale. Under Borhami's leadership, Egypt's political climate had drastically changed. It appears that Borhami understood retracting from politics or opposing al-Sisi would have disastrous consequences for the survival of al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya. In an extremely repressive political environment, where thousands of Islamists had already been imprisoned, turning against al-Sisi would risk an enormous backlash – not just for the party, but also for al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya. Therefore, it is likely that – once Borhami had taken the decision to support al-Sisi's military take-over in July 2013 – he knew he could not retract his support. And so, to protect the Da'wa – which he had always regarded as the main tool for an Islamic revival – he decided to adopt an extreme form of political pragmatism and opportunism, whatever the political costs for Hizb al-Nour would be.

3.4 Hizb al-Nour and the political

This chapter has examined the political decision-making of Hizb al-Nour between 2011 and 2015. The analysis focused on how the party came to view politics and with what purpose they entered it. Did they fully embrace 'politics' in the sense that the party was ready to recognize the legitimacy of pluralism, willing to compromise on doctrinal issues and to negotiate and cooperate with ideological adversaries?

The analysis has shown that – between 2011 and 2012 – Hizb al-Nour indeed seemed to fully embrace 'politics'. That is mainly because, during these first two years, the party was led by 'Imad Abd al-Ghaffour. Abd al-Ghaffour can be seen as a politician. His decisions were entirely driven by a desire to acquire political power and turn Hizb al-Nour into a politically relevant actor. Under his leadership, the party gradually adapted itself to the rules of the political game. The party developed its own political programme, in which it detailed its views on all sorts of political, economic and social issues, just as any other political party. Abd al-Ghaffour understood that becoming politically relevant called for a more flexible approach to doctrinal convictions, and to negotiate and cooperate with ideological adversaries. Several elements in the party's political programme support this conclusion. For example, the programme explicitly mentions the equality between man and women and secures the religious freedoms of Copts. Abd al-Ghaffour believed he did not need to justify all of his political positions in religious terms, because he understood the domain of politics has its own dynamic, which requires different tactics and different kinds of answers.

Now, it would be way of an overstatement to conclude that Hizb al-Nour fully embraced the democratic political logic and respected the 'walls of separation' between the religious and political domain during the first two years of its existence. Even though Abd al-Ghaffour was prepared to compromise on some of its religious doctrines and was willing to cooperate with ideological adversaries, the party programme still envisioned an ultra-conservative and religiously inspired view of society. Even though the programme recognized things like the equality between man and women or the religious freedom of Copts, the party never unequivocally acknowledges the full civil rights of these groups, for example. Instead, the party remained fairly ambiguous on these issues. Nonetheless, Hizb al-Nour's entrance in democratic politics seemed to have given rise to a modest secular discourse carried out by Salafi politicians – such as Abd al-Ghaffour – who believed they did not need to cast their political positions in religious terms entirely, because they – at least partially – respected the walls of separation between the political and religious domain, and regarded politics as a – relatively – independent domain of its own.

This modest secular discourse would soon ignite an internal debate between Abd al-Ghaffour and Borhami. A consequence of Hizb al-Nour's entrance into politics, namely, was that it undermined the Salafi conception of the political. Abd al-Ghaffour's acceptance of politics, forced him to compromise on his doctrinal convictions. Essentially, it forced him to accept the principle of pluralism, i.e. the idea that other people's perspectives are valid. Also, embracing politics implies the acceptance of the idea that conflicting visions and social antagonism can be made manageable through negotiation and compromise. This of course, stands at odds with the Salafi notion of the political, in which political opponents are treated as 'enemies' instead of 'adversaries whose views are legitimate'. The idea of pluralist politics does not match the Salafi conception of the political, which assumes an irreconcilable dichotomy between 'friend' and 'enemy'.

Borhami's vision of politics was much more in line with the Salafi notion of the political. Contrary to Abd al-Ghaffour, Borhami did not aspire political power, per se. He just wanted to stay loyal to the Salafi ideology and perform politics with the single goal of promoting and safeguarding the interests of the Da'wa al-Salafiyya movement and perform politics as a means to spread and purify the Salafi doctrine. 'Negotiation' and 'compromises' were not part of his political vocabulary. Borhami's conception of 'politics', thus, was much more in line with the Salafi notion of the political than that of Abd al-Ghaffour. It is this difference in views of 'politics' that eventually led Abd al-Ghaffour to break free from Hizb al-Nour, Borhami and his theological rigidity.

It may seem surprising that – once Borhami had taken control of the party – the party continued to act rather pragmatically, rather than driven entirely by religious convictions. This time, however, Hizb al-Nour's pragmatism and preparedness to compromise on doctrinal issues can be best explained by taking into account the actual political circumstances. In order to avoid state persecution of his party and – more important – his Da'wa al-Salafiyya movement, the party's leadership simply felt compelled to keep a low profile and maintain a relatively peaceful relationship with al-Sisi, whatever the political costs would be.

Conclusion

Salafism is a contentious topic. This orthodox branch of Sunni Islam has drawn the attention from all sorts of public policy makers, journalists, scholars and academics, as well as from the general public. In particular, Salafism's relation with politics is often viewed with suspicion. Not only in the West, where debates on Salafism often focus on the question whether Salafism is compatible with modern democracy, but also in the Middle East, where Salafi parties have entered the democratic political scene after the Arab Uprisings in 2011, the relationship between Salafism and politics has been debated and questioned unabatedly. It has been the central purpose of this thesis to generate new insights into this relationship, by examining the research question:

“What is the relationship between Salafism, the political and politics”?

To answer this question, the thesis was divided into two sections: a theoretical and empirical part. In the first section, a theoretical-philosophical outlook on the relationship between Salafism and the political was established. Primarily on the basis of the works of Claude Lefort, I have developed a theoretical framework, detailing the fundamental characteristics of a democratic notion of the political. Then, this framework was applied to the doctrine of Salafism, to examine whether the Salafi doctrine is compatible with these assumptions. The second part – i.e. the empirical section - offered a case study of Hizb al-Nour, a Salafi political party that rose to prominence in Egypt's post-revolutionary politics. The purpose of this case study was to reflect on whether the party's political behaviour actually reflected any of the assumptions and conclusions drawn earlier in the theoretical section.

5.1 Results

According to Lefort, 'the political' refers to an independent and symbolic domain outside society, containing the central and abstract principles through which a society understands itself as a unity, i.e. as a *political* society. In modern democratic societies, these abstract principles and fundamental assumptions are not fixed. Rather, they have become indeterminate and subject to debate. In democratic societies, thus, there is no 'true' vision of how political society should look like. Boundaries of who does and who does not belong to the nation, as well as society's norms, values and abstract principles are open for discussion. This is what Lefort calls the 'radical indeterminacy' of the political. To maintain this radical indeterminacy, it is important to recognize the legitimacy of social divisiveness and conflict. Pluralism and the acceptance that there is no absolute truth are considered vital elements of any democratic notion of the political, too. It follows, that the rejection of heterogeneity, the denial of pluralism and an overemphasis on harmony constitute some of the main threats to a democratic notion of the political. After all, the idea that One People or idea represents and embodies society's true purposes, values and abstract principles threatens the radically indeterminate nature of the political. Once the radically indeterminate nature of the political is replaced by fixed, static and essentialist ideas or identities, totalitarianism lurks.

The theoretical analysis indicates that Salafism fails to recognize the "radical indeterminacy" of the political. Regardless of the specific branch of Salafism one adheres to, Salafism is an uncompromising, absolutist doctrine, calling for a fixed and static image of a purist Islamic community that is purely devoted to the Oneness of God. Albeit through different methods, all Salafis ultimately wish to Islamize society and to bring about a "People-as-One" society. This uncompromising and – to a certain degree - totalitarian nature of the Salafi doctrine completely denies the legitimacy of social antagonism and crushes the room for pluralism. Thereby – in theory - the Salafi doctrine stands at odds with the radical indeterminacy of the political, i.e. the fundamental characteristic of a democratic notion of the political, as formulated by Lefort.

A second threat to the political resides in people's tendency to reduce political questions to issues of a completely different nature. This is precisely what the Salafi doctrine tends to do as well. By making religious beliefs and concepts – which operate as tools of exclusion - the cornerstones of their political views, Salafis turn any essentially 'political' question into a religious issue. This is what Wolin would refer to as the 'absorption' of the political. By absorbing the political, Salafis fail to recognize the political as an independent and autonomous sphere of its own.

Now, if the Salafi notion of the political does not correspond with Lefort's democratic notion of the political, then how do Salafis conceptualize the political? Whereas Lefort advocates an indeterminate nature of the political, the Salafi conception of the political is fixed and static. This conceptualization of the political entails the idea of superiority of One People (i.e. the Salafi) and one fixed set of abstract principles (i.e. based on the Salafi interpretation of Islam) over any other perspective. Contrary to Mouffe, who argues political opponents should be considered adversaries whose existence is legitimate, the Salafi doctrine – essentially – regards any outsiders' perspective illegitimate and an imminent threat to the existence of the Self. The doctrine of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, for instance, is indicative of such intolerance. Thereby, Salafism better resembles Carl Schmitt's idea of the political; one that is characterized by a fundamental and irreconcilable dichotomy between 'friend' and 'enemy' and assumes that social antagonism between these two camps can only be settled by one group's domination over the other. Salafism, thus, holds a more totalitarian notion of the political.

Finally, this thesis sought to examine how the Salafi notion of the political actually reflects Salafis' behaviour in 'politics'. Politics is the domain in which people pursue their interests regarding issues of public policy or public governance. It is the domain where abstract principles – embodied in the political – are translated into actual behaviour. Politics, thus, is specifically about the interplay of conflicting interests. The decision of Salafis to enter politics – and thus, to enter the domain of conflicting interests - is remarkable, because by entering this domain they effectively undermine their own notion of the political. That is because, by entering the domain of pluralist politics, they are forced to act contrary to the Salafi principles of the political. After all, 'politics' implies the idea that people with conflicting visions can join together and come to a shared agreement. In other words, accepting 'politics' implies accepting pluralism, i.e. the idea that other people's ideas and visions are intrinsically valid. It also implies the idea that conflicting visions and social antagonism can be made controllable and manageable through negotiation and compromise. Again, this stands at odds with the Salafi notion of the political, which assumes an irreconcilable dichotomy between 'friend' and 'enemy'.

The empirical analysis of Hizb al-Nour has illustrated this tension between 'politics' and the Salafi notion of the political. During the first two years of its existence – under the leadership of Abd al-Ghaffour – the party wanted to embrace politics. Although it would be an overstatement to conclude that Hizb al-Nour fully embraced the logic of political pluralism and respected the 'walls of separation' between 'politics' and the religious domain entirely, the party's entrance into politics did give rise to a modest secular discourse carried out by Salafi 'politicians' who believed they should (at least partially) abandon their rigid identity paradigm, accept political pluralism and consider politics as an independent domain of its own. Soon, however, this discourse caused controversy and an internal struggle within the party. That is because, by making these pragmatic decisions, they effectively undermined their own Salafi principles of the political. For Borhami, this was a problem. He saw how politics diluted his religious principles. Borhami, therefore, never regarded politics as a goal in itself and did not want to perform "politics for the sake of politics". His objective was to perform politics as a means to spread, purify and defend the Islamic doctrine. That way, his view of politics was much more in line with the Salafi concept of the political.

5.2 Reflection

As the theoretical analysis has shown, there exists a strong tension between the Salafi doctrine and some of the fundamental assumptions of a democratic notion of the political. What to make of this conclusion? Does this mean Salafism is decisively incompatible with democracy? The empirical analysis has shown us this is not necessarily the case. The Egyptian Hizb al-Nour tells us that, even within the ranks of Salafism, there is room for a more secular discourse. One that accepts politics as an independent domain of its own, which is not entirely governed by Salafis' rigid identity paradigm, and one where – perhaps in the future - civil rights will be granted to all citizens. However, considering the fundamental theological assumptions and principles of the Salafi doctrine – which legitimises discrimination against non-Muslims (*al-wala wa-l-bara'*) and renounces religious, political or ideological pluralism – it will be very difficult for Salafis to actually pursue such a transition. It is for this reason, that we cannot generalize the conclusions of this thesis' case study to other cases. The experiences of Hizb al-Nour simply cannot be seen as an example for any other Salafi party.

Therefore, it would be fruitful to conduct further research into the experiences of other Salafi political parties that entered democratic politics. It would be particularly interesting to assess how the specific socio-political circumstances of certain countries or regions affect decision-making. As we have seen in the case of Hizb al-Nour, Salafis never operate in a vacuum. In this case, the specifics of Egypt's post-revolutionary environment – which shifted back and forth between repressive authoritarianism and avenues for political engagement within the course of only a few years – heavily determined Hizb al-Nour's decision-making. As of yet, no Salafi parties have been participating in any elections in the West. However, if this were to happen, it would be interesting to examine the behaviour of these parties in more democratic contexts.

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