The Strong Egypt Party: Progressive/Democratic Post-Islamists or Just Another Islamist Party?

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Introduction

Islamism in Egypt has been seriously challenged by the dramatic events of the past two years since the 25 January Revolution, which undid conventional politics in the country. Well-established classical Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) were defied by several detractors from both ends of the political spectrum. Among such challengers were new types of Islamists, some of them departing from the 80-year-old group to set their own course in the hope of creating a new, democratic type of Islamist politics. This article will showcase the post-25 January Revolution rise of the Strong Egypt Party (SEP), *(Masr al-Qawiya)*, which, along with other groups such as *al-Tayyar al-Masri* Party (the Egyptian Current Party), is an exponent of democratic Islamist politics out of the MB politics box. To do so, I will highlight elements of ideological and institutional continuity and change, and will situate the party within the broader national political coordinates. A key process is underway in Egyptian Islamism. Moderate mainstream Islamism is facing the prospect of factionalism on sociopolitical and economic issues. Different Islamist parties are emerging in Egypt, manifesting class and generational divisions, in addition to variations in social outlook, cultural sensibilities and approaches to Islamic texts. Many ex-MB followers, dubbed ‘Islamist reformists’, are putting themselves forward as fully-fledged democrats who are establishing new Islamist polities whose ingenuity is unmistakable. However, the incumbent more conservative mainstream, in charge of the large MB body, is still hesitant to join the movement of reformist democratic Islamism. Instead, they prefer to play the role of the ‘centrist’ political force that can pull the threads of the new Egyptian polity together, effectively securing very limited policy reforms but no revolution.

This conservative attitude was clearly demonstrated in MB policymaking throughout the tumultuous post-Mubarak transitional period, which witnessed the 19 March 2011 referendum on constitutional amendments that set the stage for a transitional road map; the election of the parliament in November–December 2011; parliament’s selection of the Constituent Assembly to draft the new constitution in May 2012; the presidential elections in May/June 2012 that brought the MB candidate Mohamed Morsi to the presidential palace, and finally the policies of President Morsi’s administration since his inauguration on 30 June 2012 and the ratification of the new constitution in December 2012. Throughout this unstable period, the MB was mostly concerned
with consolidating its political power in the newly created fragile political sphere, and maintaining its internal organizational unity and ideological cohesiveness. To achieve these objectives, the MB forsook consensual politics and opted for confrontational politics against the secularist opposition, non-democratic exclusionary practices, and power-sharing arrangements with the old regime authoritarian state institutions such as the military, state bureaucracy, judiciary and the business class. Religious and identity-based discourses of legitimacy were proactively invoked by the MB to justify its politics. The MB is facing a historic crisis. It appears to be caught between shaky, unconvincing, tactically rewarding but strategically ill-advised and future-lacking identity politics on the one hand (implementation of sharia and deployment of identity politics to preserve the unity of its ranks, coupled with accommodation of old power interests and state structures), and the politics of governance on the other. This politics of governance threatens to divide the already diverse MB organization on socio-economic, regional and interests issues and cause the break-up the MB monolith into several small and weakened Islamist organizations, which will strive to exist and compete politically via political alliances with a variety of different Islamist and non-Islamist actors in Egypt. The future of the organization thus looks uncertain indeed. This crisis might undermine the Islamist project itself as a concept. If left to its own free dynamics, this debate between politics of identity and politics of governance should open the door for new forms of Islam-based political and social activism and new religiously-motivated political experiments, which we can call post-Islamist. ¹ And herein one can identify the potential role of the progressive democratic Islamists such as the SEP, or post-Islamists for that matter.

The SEP and other Islamist democrats claim to be heralding a new type of Islamist politics that appeals to good governance, democracy, pluralism and a new approach to an Islamic frame of reference that basically departs from the typical Islamist identity politics. Strong Egypt staged meaningful critiques against the classical Islamists’ shortcomings in ideology, organization, discourse and policies. Ostensibly, as an Islamist democratic actor, Strong Egypt can survive any new party test. However, this aptitude to construct a credible alternative is still in

¹ Assef Bayat argues that ‘post-Islamism represents both a condition and a project, which may be embodied in a master (or multidimensional) movement’. With the rise of Islamists to power in Egypt, there is a definite change or transformation in the political conditions, which also triggers changes in conditions on a societal level. The second representation of post-Islamism is a project. Bayat goes on to describe post-Islamism as ‘the endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty … emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past.’ Bayat 2007, 10, 13, 47.
doubt. The anti-MB protest vote is not enough. The SEP and other Islamist democrats have yet to develop an effective electoral support base, consistent political performance and a clear policy line that is active but not reactive. Moreover, for a party to succeed in climbing up the political ladder it needs both a fixed and loyal bloc that constitutes its permanent constituency ideologically, and a floating block reached out to via political accommodation, incentives and assurances. Islamist democrats’ limited outreach, so far, reflects not just the lack of a strong organizational and mobilizational capacity but, no less importantly, a consistent discourse that can appeal to broad segments of the population. Strong Egypt still finds a problem in building a hard-core constituency that can translate into a considerable loyal electoral support base. This is due to doctrine-building crises in Egypt or the inability to transcend old dogmas and furnish a new type of politics that is concerned about development, good governance and is enshrined in a spirit of democracy and pluralism. The newly founded party present their message as both democratic and friendly to the Islamic tradition and culture. They situate themselves within the camp of revolutionary change, implying the need for democratic state–society relations, public and private liberties, and new egalitarian and developmental public policies. However, this is still more wishful thinking and hope than reality. Post-Islamism requires more far-reaching ideological and political transformations than the ones already introduced by these ‘Islamist democratic’ movements in Egypt.

The Islamist democrats’ difficulty is how to attract the votes and active support of its supposedly stable bloc, i.e. the non-secularist segments who are disgruntled with MB and Salafist politics for different reasons. Apparently, this is still a hard task, and not just because of its doctrinal complexities. Partially responsible for the problem is the difference in reasons behind these segments’ discontent with MB politics. Those who are dissatisfied with both MB politics and the organization itself are allegedly aspiring to a post-Islamist politics diametrically opposed to that of the MB. However, those who departed from the MB in defiance of its organizational style but not its ideology nor worldview, will not be that motivated to look for any ‘post-Islamist’ new ideology/politics. They might be only interested in a reproduction of ‘Islamist’ politics in a different form. As a result, the supposedly hard-core constituency is still limited in numbers and internally discordant and incongruent. Different perceptions of the MB resulted in ambivalent standpoints on MB policies while in power, particularly regarding the stand-offs that resulted from the constitution-drafting process and President Morsi’s
controversial decrees in November 2012 and his subsequent decisions. Moreover, the possible floating bloc of Strong Egypt and other Islamist democrats, is, logically, even more shaky and limited as a result of the expected suspicions among the secularist segments of the population regarding the Islamist record of the Islamist democrats, widely seen as ambivalent, as in the case of the SEP and al-Tayyar al-Masri, or co-opted by the MB, as in the case of al-Wasat Party (Centre Party).

This paper will start by dissecting the MB factionalism and the rise of the hazy category of the ‘MB reformists’ as the gateway for the subsequent blossoming of the Islamist democrats, and will then shed light on Strong Egypt as one of the key Islamist democratic movements, making reference to other comparable parties like al-Wasat and al-Tayyar al-Masri Parties. The paper will endeavour to analyze whether Strong Egypt, in terms of its platform, socio-economic policy projects, targeted social constituencies and types of fomented political alliances is another version of Islamism, or whether it has the capacity to explore new potentials and furnish a new post-Islamist politics in the future. Arguably, progressive Islamist anxieties will drag on along the rugged terrain of poor organization, an absence of core constituency, ambivalent discourse and a lack of outreach mechanisms.

Islamism factionalized

Egyptian Islamism is becoming stratified in social bases and differentiated ideologically and on policy issues. Some of its factions can find more appealing bedfellows in non-Islamist movements than in their Islamist co-brothers. One can hypothesize that Islamism is becoming a commonplace item upheld by incongruent socio-political and ideological actors. As a matter of fact, this should sail closer to the shore of empirical reality if we bring in the feature stories of the established Islamist parties since the downfall of Mubarak on 11 February 2011. To date, the count reaches four or five. In addition to al-Wasat Party (an old MB offshoot) The MB alone has produced more than three parties. In addition to the official MB party (the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)), five other MB parties are being established: Strong Egypt, al-Tayyar al-Masri, al-Nahda (Renaissance), al-Riyada (Pioneers) and al-‘Adala wa al-Tanmiya (Justice and
Development) Parties. Salafists, Jihadists and *Al-Gama’a Al-Islamiya* (The Islamic Group) have their own parties as well. The *al-Nur* (Light), *al-Asala* (Authenticity) and *al-Fadila* (Virtue) Parties rallied the Salafist activists, while the Construction and Development and the Peace and Development parties represent *Al-Gama’a Al-Islamiya* and Jihadists respectively. Differences are unpretentious and are certainly not the misty division of labour that long haunted the anti-Islamist prejudices, but a real diversity that reflects not just the original discrepancies in ideological attitude but also the variation on a new spectrum of Islamist politics.

Strolling on a tight rope is the MB. MB factional politics, long christened as conservative versus reformist, is progressing in new directions. Key lines of contention between the two groups before the 25 January uprising were drawn primarily on issues of internal organization: bylaws, freedom of debate, decision-making rules, grassroots representation, women and youth participation and the question of an accountable and transparent administration whose figures are regularly rotated. After pulling the teeth of the monstrous regime, organizational contention is still to be reckoned with, but not as much as before. Real policy antagonisms have started to prevail. So what are the key factions of the group since the January earthquake?

**Reformist MBs**

‘MB reformists’ is a hazy term that has been employed in media coverage of the MB since at least 2004. It was mainly used to refer to the MB youth, who are disgruntled over the Guidance Bureau’s authoritarian leadership style. These youth found mentors and receptive ears in the 1970s generation, who helped integrate the MB within Egyptian society (mainly through professional syndicates, civil society and parliamentary elections) from 1984 onwards. This generation (which had joined the MB by the late 1970s) is known for flexibility, open-mindedness, an ethos of public activism and its appreciation of democracy and pluralism. It included figures like Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Ibrahim al-Za‘farani, Abu al-‘Ela Madi, Muhammad Habib, Essam al-‘Eryan, Moukhtar Nouh, Al-Sayyid Abdel-Sattar al-Meluigy,
Khalid Daoud, Hilmi al-Jazzar and others. This group of MB activists are known as the ‘1970s group’.  

Over the last few years, the ‘reformist MB’ has expanded to embrace constellations of Islamist political pundits, civil society workers, student movement leaders, public activists, social media consumers and community servants. Their activism stretches across different age groups (20s–40s), activity interfaces (real and virtual), professional backgrounds (civil servants, wired IT and communication professionals, and self-made young entrepreneurs. It can also be detected in small towns as much as in big cities. Dissimilarities in age, profession, residence and socio-economic status, usually overlooked by first-hand analysts, are mitigated by joint commitment to the values and processes of political modernity acquiescent with a creative approach to Islamic texts. The last five years of conservative/reformist squabbling and power-bickering, which made the newspaper headlines, left observers questioning if the MB reformists would have their own politics autonomous of the MB leadership’s enterprises, particularly after the exit of Aboul Fotouh (the most notable reformist guru) and Habib from the Guidance Bureau in its last elections before the revolution in 2010. MB reformists (large segments of which were reportedly on the verge of a historic secession only two months before the uprising, including some Aboul Fotouh and Habib fans, in addition to MB youth operating in MB civil society organizations such as the Sawasiya Center for Human Rights, who circulated a memorandum of ‘resignation’) argue their platform of democratizing the MB’s institutions and ideology is more judicious than ever. Between 2004 and 2011, MB reformist youth groups and bloggers wrangled with the conservative-led MB leadership over these questions of reform.

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2 All of them were al-Gama’a al-Islamiya activists during their university years in the 1970s. They later joined the MB and became very active in MB electoral politics in the 1980s, particularly in the professional syndicates of doctors, engineers, lawyers and others. These figures demonstrated considerable political acumen and communicative skills that enabled them to act as MB public relations campaigners and public interlocutors with other non-Islamist political forces. They advocate the primacy of public political and social action and the need for full integration with the public sphere, implying the need to revise the spent MB doctrines. In place of these, new doctrines should be established, highlighting democracy, pluralism and human rights. See al-‘Enani 2007, Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Misr: shaykhuka tusari’ al-zaman. [The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Old Age Battles Time.].

Following the model of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD), many reformists, such as Ibrahim al-Hudaiby (a key MB reformist youth activist who resigned from the group in 2009 and is, notably, the grandson of the second and sixth Murshids (Supreme Guides) Hassan and Ma’moun al-Hudaiby), insist that a new Islamist party should tap into the needs and demands of the people, represent their interests and develop civic networks of popular political participation that are indeed separate from proselytizing activities. Moreover, values of democracy and citizenship need be justified in Islamic terms. This will require far-reaching doctrinal and organizational reforms. These restive MB reformist youth were part of the restless ‘youth bulge’ in Egyptian politics. They drove their senior leaders to take part in the January 2011 uprising after an initial period of indecisiveness. Now, the ‘we-did-it’ euphoria is prompting many MB youths to join the ranks of the ‘continuous revolution’ bloc that is pushing for more revolutionary politics that targets incumbent state structures and entrenched political and economic policies and institutions. In their media and within-organization debates with the MB conservatives, reformists argue that such youth passion can be successfully assimilated into a modern Islamist party. In April 2011, the MB reformist youth held a two-day conference in Cairo under the banner of ‘MB youth’, which raised such issues in an articulate way. FJP leadership boycotted the conference, despite being invited.4

Consequently, the young MB reformists felt alienated from their leadership and its official FJP’s political profile during the transitional period. Major differences had to do with the mediocre standpoint of the FJP on questions of state reform, police and judiciary readjustment, and the liquidation of the regime’s political networks and resources, in addition to the all-important issue of labour rights and strikes. The MB guidance bureau and the FJP were disinclined to pressure the SCAF or regroup with the discontented secular revolutionary forces that started taking to the streets again as early as 8 April 2011. Arguably, the MB old guard was too conventional to match the radical zeal of its youthful reformist activists. To make matters worse, several critiques were presented against the top-down elitist organization of the FJP. MB youths critical of the issues mentioned above began to resign from the group, while many of them were fired by the Guidance Bureau after an official investigation into their ‘violations of group regulations’. The list includes some of the most active MB youth during the revolution: Islam Lotfy, Muhammad al-Qassas, Muhammad Osman, Ahmed Abdel-Gawwad, Abdel

Rahman Fares, Abdel Rahman ‘Ayyash and others. Consequentially, disaffected MB voices started searching for alternative political forums. Lotfy and al-Qassas are the founding leaders of al-Tayar al-Misri Party, while Osman and Abdel-Gawwad joined Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh’s presidential campaign in May 2011, and later participated in founding the SEP. In joining Aboul Fotouh’s campaign, they defied MB leadership orders not to do so. Aboul Fotouh himself was fired because he violated the MB Guidance Bureau decision not to nominate any MB member for the presidential race.

Another political forum is al-Nahda Party. It is headed by the veteran reformist Ibrahim al-Za‘farani and Muhammad al-Sayyid Habib (the incumbent deputy Murshid who resigned from the MB due to his two-year-long marginalization, a marginalization that reached its climax with his ‘engineered loss’ (according to his claims) during the 2010 Guidance Bureau elections. While there are no official proofs of this allegation, some fieldwork research found evidence that an orchestrated character-assassination campaign, instigated by conservative figures in the Bureau like Mahmoud Ezzat, Mahmoud Ghozlan and Rashad al-Bayoumi, tarnished his reputation in the eyes of the MB Shura Council members who are responsible for electing the Guidance Bureau. Al-Nahda Party also included other estranged reformist figures who had suffered previous ordeals with the group over the last few years like al-Sayyid Abdel-Sattar al-Meluigy and Tharwat al-Kherbawi, who resigned from the group in 2008.

Al-Riyada Party is the third forum. It is mainly concentrated in Alexandria and headed by Khalid Daoud, one of the 1970s generation of reformists, and includes renowned ex-MB civil society pundits and protégés of the ‘1970s group’ such as Haitham Abu-Khalil, Amr Abu-Khalil

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5 All were prominent MB student department activists and functionaries from the late 1990s onwards.
6 Al-Za‘farani was one of the 1970s group described above. He was prominent in the MB Doctors’ Syndicate electoral politics during the 1980s and 90s in his hometown of Alexandria. His wife Jihan al-Halafawi was the first MB female candidate in parliamentary elections in 2000. He was among the reformist-minded figures in the MB, a close associate of Abu al-Fotouh. He left the group right before the 2011 revolution in protest over what he perceived as serious violations during the 2010 MB internal elections. Muhammad al-Sayed Habib was an incumbent guidance bureau member for almost 20 years and a deputy of the general Murshid (2004–2010). He belongs to the 1970s group but politically and intellectually it is fair to dub him as a conservative MB. His disagreements with the MB were merely organizational. He left the group after what he described as ‘engineered’ elections that voted him out of the guidance bureau in the 2010 MB internal elections.
7 Mahmoud Ezzat, a doctor by profession and currently the deputy of the Murshid and a key guidance bureau member, was a member of Sayyid Qutb’s radical and secretive organization of the 1960s. After a long incarceration, he, among others, propagated a peculiar vision that sees the vitality of the MB resting on a tight, insular and closed organization with a static dogma. The ‘organization first’ option (advocated by Ezzat, Khairat al-Shater, Ghozlan, al-Bayoumi, Gom’a Amin and others) came to dominate the MB after the election of the fifth Murshid Moustafa Mashour in 1996.
8 Khaled Daoud and Abdel-Sattar al-Meluigy belong to the 1970s group described above.
and Khalid al-Za‘farani (who are all involved in the work of NGOs). Al-Nahda and al-Riyada Parties are very similar in their outlook and background (history of prior tensions with the MB leadership). Yet they took separate courses. Abu Khalil argues that this has to do with the ‘authoritarian leadership style’ of al-Za‘farani, the leader of al-Nahda Party. Notwithstanding, both parties are still in their infancy. However, most of the MB youth who were active during the revolution largely preferred the Strong Egypt and al-Tayyar al-Masri Parties. Generational variations within the reformist camp clearly play a key role with regard to choice of party.

A fourth option for the MB reformists is the incumbent Islamist al-Wasat Party (originally founded in 1996 by a plethora of ex-MB activists led by Abu al-‘Ela Madi), finally licensed by court ruling in February 2011, after fifteen years of legal battles. However, in spite of a similar intellectual outlook, originally ex-MB reformists were unmotivated to join al-Wasat Party for two reasons. First, many of the MB rank and file who might opt for the reformist option in party politics are equally interested in maintaining their friendly relations with the MB as a proselytizing association and social group. Joining the al-Wasat Party is not an optimal choice given the tug-of-war that has characterized al-Wasat–MB relations over the last fourteen years and left countless psychological, ideological and even personal blemishes. Dual membership is not a viable option or, at best, is a discouraging one in the eyes of MB reformist youth. A more agreeable solution for the MB reformists is to have their own Islamist democratic party. Ironically, MB–al-Wasat relations have completely changed over the 2011–12 transitional period and in the course of Muhammad Morsi’s presidency. However, the new friendly and cooperative relations between the two sides alienated those ex-MB members who wanted to distance themselves from the MB.

In their platforms, Islamist democratic parties argue for soft-politics engagements such as human rights, civil society organization and community development instead of the talismanic meta-politics of ‘Islamic state’ and ‘sharia’. This dictates a sweeping ideological revision and imaginative falling-out with traditions of Islamic learning and knowledge, an already ongoing process initiated by the Independent Islamist intellectuals in the 1980s and 90s. No less importantly, common understandings and commitments with non-Islamist liberal and leftist political actors can create a democratic front transcending identity politics demarcations. Al-Wasat, al-Nahda and al-Riyada Parties are entertaining this notion in their public rhetoric. However, action is still wanting. Only the Strong Egypt and al-Tayyar Parties have started
heading down this route. Notwithstanding, the democratic Islamist parties’ fortunes remain
decided by their ability to provide answers to issues in regard to which the FJP is found wanting.
Questions about what the Islamist democrats stand for still warrant an extensive analysis, which
we will address in the next section.

*Strong Egypt: Democratic Islamists, centrist Islamists or post-Islamist party?*

Strong Egypt’s founders were skeptical of Islamist versus secular dichotomies, and thus shunned
any Islamist label. They believe the Islamist label has already been tarnished by the bad political
performance of the MB and Salafists since the revolution. Besides, the Islamist label is often
used presumptuously and superficially. Instead, Strong Egypt preferred a label that reveals their
political and socio-economic biases across a political spectrum which stretches between
democracy and authoritarianism. Initially, they began to identify themselves as a ‘centre-left’
party, but finally settled with the ‘centrist social democratic’ party label, hoping to escape
ideological pre-packaged formations.  

> ‘Some people consider us to be a Post-ideological party. This might be debatable. But,
certainly we offer a set of ideas that defy the rigid ideological bifurcations existent in
Egypt.’

The party leaders describe the party as centrist regarding the Islamist frame of reference, i.e. it
situates itself between the literalist extremist Salafist hardliners to the right and the anti-sharia
secularists to the left. Not interested in religious details, unlike the MB and Salafists, the Strong
Egypt focus is on the general principles and objectives of the Islamic framework like freedom,

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11 Ibid.
12 This ideological Islamic spectrum is dynamic by definition. For example, after two decades of centrist positions
on various issues like democracy, tolerance and pluralism over the 1980s and 90s, the Egyptian Wasatiya School
(Tariq al-Bishri, Muhammad ‘Emmara, Fahmy Howeidi, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad Selim Al-‘Awa among
others) began to drift to the right in the last decade. Noticeably, this group of thinkers have adopted more
conservative standpoints on the questions of Muslim-Coptic relations, Sunni-Shiite dichotomies and state-society
relations over the last ten years. Arguably, this is due to the rise of the Salafist movement and the general religious
mood in Egypt over the same time period.
equality and justice. Islamic culture and identity is a framework of reference, but this should not contradict with the functional separation of religion and state and the enforcement of popular sovereignty and institutional democracy as the foundation of rulership. Democracy is understood as a disavowal of any kind of actual or disguised theocracy. In this respect, Strong Egypt is clearly distinguishable from the Salafists, but is nevertheless distinct from the MB as well. The MB stance on this question of state–religion relations has been ambivalent, thanks to its original ideological elasticism and diversity in place since its foundation, which facilitates pragmatism and freedom of manoeuvre. During the Mubarak era, the MB was always resilient on the inadequacy of writing down a detailed and elaborate Islamist platform for fear of arousing tangible intellectual, political and jurisprudential differences and divisions within the MB, seeing itself as more of a front-like organization that is inclusive of various religious traditions.

Instead of a platform, the MB confined itself to slogans and broad statements about the ‘Islamic solution’ or the ‘Islamic alternative’ rather than utilizing the sharia for electoral and political purposes. This ambiguity was justified in terms of necessity and the need to preserve unity. As a result, the MB maintained double discourses on state–religion and Islam–democracy relations issues. For instance, while reiterating its commitments to democracy, pluralism and human rights from 1994 onwards, the draft of the MB’s 2007 political platform included very controversial articles on the role of a religious council of jurisprudents in overseeing the elected institutions to maintain the ‘Islamic’ correctness of the policies and legislations, and the unequal rights of Christians and women regarding the highest political positions. After the revolution, still keen on maintaining identity politics and the utilization of the sharia for political and electoral gains, the MB remained true to its ambivalence on religion–politics relations. For example, it was more centrist on the question of sharia and state right after the 2011 revolution, and tried to placate non-Islamist demands and fears in that respect. It championed the cause of ‘a civic state with an Islamic framework of reference’ as a centrist, middle-of-the-road position. It was also uncomfortable with the obscurantist discourse of the 29 July Cairo ‘Million-strong Demonstration of Islamic Identity’ and tried, though in vain, to rein in this Islamist colouring. Nevertheless, during the first round of the May 2012 presidential elections, the MB portrayed their candidate Mohamed Morsi as an ‘Islamist candidate’ who employs blunt Islamist slogans, tools and networks, hoping to cajole the Salafist vote. Moreover, due to Salafist ideological pressure and ‘blackmail’, the MB caved in to more rightist and hardliner interpretations of the
place of sharia in the political system during the constitution drafting process. In addition, during the political stand-off with the opposition that began after Morsi’s controversial authoritarian decrees on 19 November 2012, the MB resorted to re-inviting the question of religion and sharia to the foray into hot political exchange with the opposition. MB asked the Salafists to join forces during the ‘Legitimacy and Sharia’ demonstrations in the vicinity of Cairo University on 1 December 2012, summoning the sharia cause to bolster the MB in its struggle with the democratic opposition. Sharia was not a contentious issue amid this stand-off, but was used by the MB in a very pragmatic fashion.

Strong Egypt argued arduously against the petitioning of sharia in socio-economic and political debates. The MB, as a pretext to justify its neo-liberal economic politics, argues that the Islamic economy is originally a free-market economy with no state intervention. Strong Egypt repudiates that statement as a justification of a purely capitalist orientation. And, all things considered, the party believes this has nothing to do with the Islamic correctness of these politics. Importantly, Strong Egypt argues for its blend of centre-left economic policies (based on state corrective measures, income redistribution, progressive taxation, expansionist fiscal and monetary policies and anti-monopoly measures) as a remedy for the serious misallocation of national economic resources and distribution, but not as religiously more correct than others, so as to avoid the struggle for Islam.13

Aboul Fotouh’s leadership and Strong Egypt

The party had its roots in Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh’s presidential campaign, which began in May 2011 and gradually accumulated human and political resources at a considerable pace. Aboul Fotouh stood for the democratic Islamic centrum that eschews identity politics and Islamic-civic polarization, and champions a consensual discourse of good governance, social justice and labour-oriented economic development. Being an ex-MB, and in addition to his own personal qualities and popular endorsement, he could break up the MB’s organizational clout without compromising his appeal to the MB grassroots. Aboul Fotouh was seen as a revolutionary candidate who could transcend the divisive Islamist-secularist polarization,

advocate the cause of revolutionary transformation against old regime candidates, and win the support of the youthful forces without alienating any of the Islamist or secularist forces. He ran his campaign under the ‘Strong Egypt’ slogan.\textsuperscript{14}

Aboul Fotouh’s campaign went through several stages\textsuperscript{15}:

1. Outreach and Profiling Aboul Fotouh (May 2011–February 2012). This stage was extremely successful. His campaign discourse situated him right in the place where he could make the best impression, i.e. a revolutionary candidate for change who can transcend identity politics and ideological polarization and win the hearts and minds of both religious and secularist supporters (particularly after the liberal presidential hopeful Mohamed ElBaradei left the race earlier).

2. Peak (February 2012–April 2012). From a relatively unknown figure in May 2011, except among MBs and political activists, to a candidate with high levels of publicity in the media and the streets almost one year later, Aboul Fotouh almost succeeded, thanks to his campaign.

The campaign was neither as organized as the MB campaign for Muhammad Morsi nor well-funded like Moussa’s or Ahmed Shafiq. But, it was the most creative: Conferences, posters, ads, online media, demonstrations, marches and rallies and other successful marketing strategies. And our discourse was carefully tailored, tapping into a wide constituency dreaming of change.\textsuperscript{16}

By February 2012, Aboul Fotouh ranked high among most of the public opinion polls right before the first round of the presidential elections in May 2012. He was projected to make it to the run-offs with the Islamist radical firebrand Hazem Salah Abu Ismail or the old regime figure Amr Moussa.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Fikry Muhammad, interview with author, February 27, 2013.
\textsuperscript{15} Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. See the results of opinion polls conducted by the al-Ahram and Baseera centers, published in al-Ahram newspaper: http://arabi.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/6516.aspx; AlA.almasryalyoum.com/node/807336, and al-Shorouk newspaper: http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=03052012&id=d2f2d618-ae82-4e7f-8158-c6306278fde7
3) Mistakes (April–May 2012): Fatal mistakes occurred, as confessed by the campaign leaders below. First, Aboul Fotouh’s debate with Amr Mousa proved to be counter-productive to both. Aboul Fotouh’s debate with Amr Mousa proved to be counter-productive to both. Second, Aboul Fotouh’s gaining the Salafi Call and al-Nur Party’s endorsement proved later to be an ill-advised blunder.

Aboul Fotouh and the Salafists

Many analysts point to the serious slip-up committed by Aboul Fotouh when he looked for Salafi Call and Salafist al-Nur Party electoral support, which he did secure. However, Strong Egypt leaders believed they could not say no to electoral support offered by a key and powerful electoral actor like the Salafists. In addition, denying Morsi the Islamist mobilization behind his candidacy is an indisputable gain. Their mistake resided somewhere else, according to Aboul Fotouh campaign planners. First, Aboul Fotouh’s campaign had to become increasingly rightist and religious to accommodate its new Salafist supporters. This alienated his original civic revolutionary supporters, who were intimidated by his newly-acquired rightist colours. The campaign overestimated the Salafist vote it could have gained, as ultimately, the decision of top Salafist leaders to back Aboul Fotouh paid few dividends, and most of the Salafist grassroots could not be persuaded ideologically to vote for Aboul Fotouh. Command and control among Salafists is not as disciplined as in the MB.

On the other hand, Aboul Fotouh’s campaign admits that, in seeking of the Salafist vote, it also underestimated the size of civil forces among Aboul Fotouh’s original supporters, who were appalled by his changing discourse, and thus the campaign could not anticipate the loss of votes from this potential source of support. Electoral mathematics killed Aboul Fotouh’s chances, but this was not foreseen in time. The campaign also plunged into its second serious

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18 According to al-Mohandes, who headed the debate preparatory team: ‘it was wrong, from the very beginning, to accept the idea of a two-person debate in a multi-candidate electoral process … No matter how the two candidates’ performance looked, the final outcome of the debate will only favour the other candidates. Besides, Aboul Fotouh didn’t fare well. He dragged his feet on many issues and was trapped into answering Amr Mousa’s critiques of his Islamist past. We had prepared ourselves to counter-argue Mousa on his specialty in foreign affairs. But, unfortunately, we didn’t expect Mousa’s critiques of Aboul Fotouh’s past history with al-Gama’a al-Islamiya and the MB.’ Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.

19 The Salafist al-Nur Party got about 8 million votes in the 2011 parliamentary elections, ending up as the runner-up in the People’s Assembly with 24% of the seats.
tactical mistake when it counted on the Salafist organizational machine in the critical last two weeks. The impressive far-reaching Aboul Fotouh campaign, which rested on the efforts of revolutionary and civic forces and decentralized and local fund-raising, was sidelined and deflated in the final weeks in favour of the supposedly large Salafist machine. Unfortunately for Abu al-Fotouh, the latter never materialized nor exerted any real mobilizational effort on voting days.\(^{20}\) In addition, Aboul Fotouh’s campaign activists believe he was dealt severe blows not just by the MB campaign (understandably for fear of undermining MB unity of ranks) but also by Ahmed Shafiq’s campaign. Arguably, both candidates (the MB’s Morsi and the old regime’s Shafiq) preferred to meet each other in the run-offs to maximize each other’s chances.\(^{21}\)

*From the presidential campaign to the party*

Transition was far from smooth or easy. The campaign developed short-term targets but no plans for continuity. Besides, the campaign was centred on one person but not one course of action. Its internal diversity, methodologically, naturally precluded consensus about future action. One can say that the campaign featured three types of supporters:

1. Ex-members of the MB who found themselves outside the MB umbrella either due to conflict with MB administrative decisions or MB current politics and ideology in general, or both.

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\(^{20}\) ‘According to our estimates, the Salafi Call and *al-Gama’a al-Islamiya* (who backed Abu al-Fotouh officially as well) each has about 100,000 members. Thus they could mobilize in total about two million votes. Of course, our arithmetic turned out to be totally flawed. The number of Salafist votes for Aboul Fotouh probably didn’t exceed 600,000–700,000 (mostly in Damietta, Fayyum, Mersa Matrouh and Gharbiya) out of the total four million votes Aboul Fotouh garnered. Some Strong Egypt leaders believe the total is even much lower and no more than 200,000, according to Muhammad al-Mohandes. The latter believe that even the good results Aboul Fotouh obtained in a Salafist stronghold like Alexandria (coming second only to Hamdeen Sabahi) had nothing to do with the Salafists, who only voted for Aboul Fotouh in al-‘Amriya suburb. In fact, compared to *al-Gama’a al-Islamiya’s* members, most of the Salafists were disengaged. They either voted for Morsi (buoyed by the MB propaganda which demonized Abu-al-Fotouh as ‘secularist’ and ‘un-Islamic’) or boycotted the elections altogether. Key Salafi Call leaders’ positions raised many questions. Other examples abound. Salafists in the district of Helwan in Cairo voted for Morsi upon their clerics’ recommendations, and contrary to previous promises to Aboul Fotouh. Sheikh Said Abdel ‘Azeem, vice-president of the trustees council of the Salafi Call, voted for Morsi in defiance of the Call’s official decision. Another vice-president of the trustees council (and probably the most prestigious Salafi Call scholar), Muhammad Ismail al-Muqaddim, turned off his phones on Election Day. Did the Salafi Call use the Aboul Fotouh card to tackle its internal crises ignited by Hazem Abu Ismail’s candidacy and also its relations with the MB? I cannot really tell, but I am not inclined to believe it was a conspiracy by a third party who tempted *al-Nur* Party to sell us out. I believe it has more to do with Salafist politics and organization, in addition to our serious tactical blunders.’ Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
2. Centre-leftist groups who balked at the avowed secularism of the radical leftist groups and instead looked for a leftist discourse that runs on Islamist cultural and social bases, i.e. communicating with the people in more familiar terms.

3. Non-ideological groups who participated in the revolution and value democracy and popular participation, in addition to Aboul Fotouh fans who elevate him as a potential leader of high-calibre.

In the aftermath, the campaign’s hard-core activists were undecided over the future course of action and whether the campaign, and all it stood for politically, socially and intellectually, should be extended into a political party or rather focus on civil society and social activism to win grassroots supporters and Aboul Fotouh fans who are not necessarily excited about political and party activism. For social reasons, many of the ex-MB members who supported the Aboul Fotouh campaign were reluctant to join an Aboul Fotouh-led political party for fear of antagonizing the MB politically. Internal debates began, and the ‘parallel courses of action’ plan prevailed. Basically, the decision taken was to move on parallel tracks. The key activists of the campaign established the SEP, while other activists preferred to found social and charitable organizations (like the Misr al-Mahrous Association), and student activists became preoccupied with student union politics under the Strong Egypt label. Arguably, for Aboul Fotouh to preside over the new party was indispensable, to keep the symbolic unity of an infant party whose identity is still contested. 22

But before that, the activists opted for a declaration of principles that would define the movement’s key principles, foundations and strategies. 23 The ‘Strong Egypt Document’ identified the foundations of the movement as intellectual centrism, humanism that is in line with the original spirit of Islamic religion and culture, freedoms and social justice, equality and integration of the poor and marginalized, rejecting elitist ideological polarization and squabbles, and stressing the need for eradicating dependency and achieving national independence politically and economically via the pursuit of sustainable and equitable national development.

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22 In an internal poll, about 67% of those who endeavoured to establish the party said they will leave if Aboul Fotouh resigns. Fikry Muhammad, interview with author, February 27, 2013.
Moral capital, social solidarity, national integration, non-discrimination and citizenship, family values and restructured state–society relations (towards accountability, civilian sovereignty and rule of law) are the key principals of the movement. The document justified its popular support in terms of the 4.5 million votes that Aboul Fotouh gained in the elections, notwithstanding ‘the campaign’s limited financial and human resources’. Against the backdrop of various detractors, including traditional ideological Islamist and secularist forces, business tycoons and the deep state, the Strong Egypt movement is looking to crystallize itself in a sophisticated form that attends to the hopes built on it, and further its goals institutionally, socially and politically. Importantly, five levels of action were delineated:

1. Political, via a political party or a non-partisan popular political movement
2. Civil society action
3. Intellectual
4. Economic
5. Ethical and educational, i.e. value-making and cultural and moral socialization.

What about Aboul Fotouh’s role now? One can say that right from its inception, Aboul Fotouh provided the charismatic leadership of the Strong Egypt movement. His political acumen and ability to relate to different segments of the Egyptian population attracted supporters and sympathizers. However, Aboul Fotouh is apparently not interested in creating a one-man show party. He does not go into detail and provide room for young party activists in decision-making and party deliberations. Moreover, he rejects the notion of running again for both party presidency and presidency of Egypt in 2016 due to factors of age and the need to support youthful leaders. Furthermore, his decision whether to run for presidency must be put in political context, i.e. whether the alternative to the MB president will emerge in a polarized or conciliatory situation. In addition, one can argue that the raison d’etre of Aboul Fotouh’s politics (during the presidential elections) was to evade polarized politics. Since polarization has already become normalized, Aboul Fotouh’s role is understandably becoming more limited.

24 Several civil society organizations such as the Misr al-Mahrousaa Association were formed subsequently, in addition to the Strong Egypt Student Organization and other charitable, aid and developmental organizations.
25 Ibid.
26 Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.
Democracy: Political, Social and Economic

Strong Egypt claims a unique adherence to participatory democracy (*al-dimuqratiya al-tasharrukiya*).

‘Citizens’ participation in political decisions and policies that have a direct impact on their lives and not just relying entirely on elected representatives,’ and thus ‘participatory democracy’ is complementary to ‘representative democracy’ and not a substitute for it. 27

Participatory democracy in the Egyptian context is based on five types of alignments (*inhiyazat*):

- Aligned to economic and social rights
- Aligned to equality and social inclusion and integration
- Aligned to political and civil liberties
- Aligned to a productive agrarian and industrial economy
- Aligned to the full national independence of domestic and foreign policies. 28

In their purported designs and platforms, these Islamist democratic parties are developing an ideological discourse and possible socio-political networks, working hard to be the Egyptian version of the Moroccan PJD, mainly in terms of its legacy of separating politics and proselytizing and building a discourse of good governance that is as democratic and conciliatory with the rest of the society as much as it is inspired by Islamic reference. The PJD experiment in elected municipalities was particularly inspiring for *al-Tayyar al-Masri* Party platform for instance. The formulation of an advanced Islamist discourse on citizenship, development, social freedoms, human rights, pluralism, gender, and civic participation by the Islamist democrats is already underway in their ongoing deliberations online and in print. Except for its intellectual impact, party activism is to be totally disconnected from the workings of the proselytizing and religious groups. Separation of politics and proselytizing ought to be organizational, institutional, operative, financial, programmatic and administrative.

28 Ibid., 14, 16, 18, 20, 23.
Strong Egypt comes out as the Islamist party with the strongest record for the defense of pluralism and public liberties. This is noteworthy, given that the Islamist default is to favour state censorship over ideas, culture and expression and controlled media, whenever convenient. According to Muhammad al-Mohandes, this has not changed at all, the only question now being about the appropriate conditions and circumstances that can enable such control in Egypt. In contrast to this, Strong Egypt believes the default is political and religious liberties and free societal intellectual interaction, which should not depart from any legal, political or constitutional restriction.  

Such reverberations are certainly a coup de grâce, repudiating the incumbent MB teachings on these issues. Of course, the Islamist democratic parties still have a long way to go to catch up with the PJD’s extraordinary party structures, parliamentary erudition and electoral competence. The latter have been accumulating since the foundation of the PJD in 1998 and its participation in Moroccan electoral politics on the municipal and parliamentary levels. The same can be said about the long time span which matured the Tunisian Islamist Ennahda Party’s democratic teachings that have been on the market since 1981. Notwithstanding such gaps, one might ask if it is merely a matter of time before the Islamic democratic parties in Egypt achieve similar successes, particularly if we consider the possibility of a different socio-political powerbase that the Islamist democrats are contemplating. Tapping into the socio-economic demands of a youthful labour force, the relatively deprived wired middle-class yuppies (at the heart of the 25 January uprising), Islamist democrats (specifically Strong Egypt and al-Tayyar al-Masri) are already debating the viability of relocation towards a centre-left position out of political practicality and ideological revision. This is becoming self-evident, as al-Tayyar al-Masri has joined leftist parties like the Popular Socialist Alliance and Equality and Development Parties, and other moderate liberal parties like Egypt Freedom, in a front that is advocating the radicalization of the revolution on the socio-economic level. It has entered the 2011 November parliamentary elections on a singular electoral list named ‘The Revolution Continues’. No less importantly, joining ‘The Revolution Continues’ as the front that includes ‘the most democratic of all ideological Egyptian trends: liberalism, leftism and Islamism’ in the words of Islam Lotfy, the head of the al-Tayyar al-Masri, is an illustrious step. It proves al-Tayyar al-Masri’s consciousness of the need for democratizing this class-attendant Islamist politics in order to

accommodate the sensibilities of the Muslim Yuppies. This is even to the left of the PJD’s centrism. Popular ‘neo-preachers’ or Muslim televangelists and their networked fans, long engrossed with apolitical self-development issues and morality questions, may ride on the Islamist democratic train as well. One of them, Amr Khaled, was particularly outspoken during the eighteen-day Tahrir Square demonstrations, indicative of a sweeping societal politicization. Inflation of the Islamist democrat ranks is a notable prospect, but is one that is also accompanied by the possibility of fragmentation. Electoral politics-wise, this is not particularly positive.

Sharia

The Maqasidi approach to sharia is optimized to articulate fresh interpretations on public and private liberties. The Humanist interpretation of sharia is seconded.

Sharia is identified in terms of its purposes or ‘maqasid’, i.e. freedom, justice and social justice. Islamic laws should be the outcome of societal call and demands but not authoritative imposition. Only rulings that are explicitly stated in texts and are clear in both language and substance are to be upheld.

However, Strong Egypt is still limited to the confines of the Egyptian Wasatiya School, despite its shortcomings.30 In contrast to the MB and Salafists’ profile, Strong Egypt shunned the utilization of sharia in political squabbles or electoral propaganda. The MB can always shift between the religious centrum and the religious right in accordance with tactical political interests; Islamist democrats claim to be more principled on their centrum.31 Rejection of the Islamist-Secularist polarization is a trademark for the Islamist democrats, Strong Egypt, Aboul Fotouh and al-Tayyar al-Masri groups. Aboul Fotouh ran for office as a revolutionary and national candidate. Even when he looked for Salafist support, this was more of a tactical measure than anything else, as will be explained below.32

But the party is more of a centre-left party when it comes to socio-economic questions. Social justice is the hallmark of the SEP, which differentiates it from other Islamic parties, Strong Egypt leaders fervently believe. Egalitarianism, political and economic democracy and

30 Raymond 2003.  
31 Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.  
32 Ibid.
sustainable development is less of a leftist ideological standpoint and more of a principled commitment to the practical concerns of the majority of the Egyptian population, which suggests a centre-left political package.\(^{33}\) The party advocates state intervention in the economy. The Maqasidi approach to sharia is optimized to articulate fresh interpretations on public and private liberties. The party dismisses the Islamist-civil duality in Egypt. It considers itself to be civil, madani, as opposed to military, and as committed to democracy but not in the anti-Islamist sense the term has acquired in the Egyptian political lexicon.\(^{34}\) Many authoritarian, undemocratic and even pro-Mubarak regime forces have gathered under the rubric of ‘Civil forces’ in Egypt.\(^{35}\)

**Organization**

Strong Egypt’s founding list started with about 8,500 members; the active members are yet to be counted.\(^{36}\) The actual number of members right now (those who have paid subscription fees and finalized their membership paperwork) might be around 4,000–5,000.\(^{37}\) The party outreach is quite diffuse geographically.\(^{38}\) Strong Egypt, in disavowal of the MB’s organizational malaise, opted for a new type of institutionalization. In the pursuit of a strong organization, specialized cadres, geographic spread, fundraising machinations and intellectual dynamism, Strong Egypt decentralized its party structure.\(^{39}\) By the end of the one-year transitional period, the structure of the party will be fully installed, whereby decision-making is decentralized, collectivized, and tied to grassroots preferences. Funding relies mainly on meagre sources like the annual subscription fees (LE 120 per member) and donations from committed members. Obviously, these resources are not enough to build a strong party, in comparison to the huge funds that the MB can raise. Given the fact that Strong Egypt refuses to be funded directly by businessmen (for fear of losing its independence), religious associations (detesting Salafist and MB manipulation of religion), or

\(^{33}\) Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.

\(^{34}\) Ahmed Salah, interview with author, January 24, 2013.

\(^{35}\) Muhammad Othman interview with author, January 24, 2013.

\(^{36}\) Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.

\(^{37}\) Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.

\(^{38}\) The number of members by location is as follows: Cairo: 1000, Giza: 700-800, Gharbiya: 600-700, Beheira: around 600, Asyut: 600, Alexandria: 400-500, Sharqiya: 300-400, Kafr al-Shaykh: 100-150, most of the Upper Egypt governorates: 100-150 each, and North and South Sinai and New Valley: 20 each. Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
civil society (supposedly a social support provider not funds-provider), the party has big financial problems.\footnote{According to Fikry Muhammad, the Aboul Fotouh presidential campaign’s ability to obtain donations and recruit volunteers was easier. Donors are usually more motivated to pay for a candidate who could become president in the space of a few weeks. The situation is different for a newly formed party whose political achievements (and hence the donations’ pay-off) will probably remain uncertain for years. However, the party will try experiment with more creative sources of fundraising that can generate a fixed monthly income or lump-sum funds during election campaigns.}

Strong Egypt has branches in almost all of Egypt’s governorates. The largest branches are those in Cairo, Giza, Gharbiya, Beheira, Daqahliya, Asyut, Suhag and Beni Suef.\footnote{Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.} However, Strong Egypt still needs a lot of time, probably more than one year, to build its organization: headquarters, funding, branches, secretariats, higher councils and successive internal elections and caucuses. Party elections are already underway with a considerable degree of discipline and efficiency.\footnote{Ossama Delham, interview with author, February 5, 2013.} Strong Egypt particularly sought an exponential growth in representation among university students, and their results in the latest 2013 University Students’ Union Elections were reportedly encouraging.\footnote{Al-Dosoky 2013.} But the party still suffers from a lack of funding. The prospects of businessmen sponsoring the party financially were discouraging, and hence opposed by the party leaders. They limited themselves to the low ceiling of subscription fees, donations and voluntary contributions. It might be electorally unrewarding, but Strong Egypt’s leaders believe the resultant social capital is a key issue to be reckoned with.

\textit{Political and electoral strategies}  
\textit{Constituency, grassroots and popular party bases before and after the revolution}

Contrary to widely held perceptions, and according to information disclosed by the party’s executive leaders, Strong Egypt’s ex-MB members constitute a minority among the party’s grassroots, as compared to the leadership, which has a large ex-MB presence.\footnote{Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.} It is understandable that ex-MB members are wanted in the party’s leadership, thanks to previous organizational and political experiences and the novelty of the party experience, which has not
yet bred party cadres. However, Strong Egypt’s leadership has only a few ex-Salafist members (for example, Muhammad al-Ba'qir). The majority of the party’s membership and grassroots are depoliticized middle- and lower-middle-class segments who did not have any prior experience with political or religious activism before the revolution. Demographics are also worthy of note. Strong Egypt is very youthful party: about 72% of its members are below 30 years old. As for the ex-MB members among the Strong Egypt leadership, importantly, some of these are MB outcasts on ideological, doctrinal and political bases in the aftermath of the revolution, such as Osman, Abdel Gawwad, Heikal, Magdy Sa’d and al-Mohandes. However, others, such as Hassan al-Beshbeeshi and Mustafa Kamsheesh, who together constitute more than a third of the party’s leadership, had no serious issues with the MB’s political outlook, but deserted the group due to organizational misunderstandings and complaints about their superiors’ administrative misgivings. This variegated composition of Strong Egypt between ex-MB and non-MB members, and within the ex-MB members between outcasts on ideological and political bases versus outcasts on organizational bases, sheds light on the complexities of decision-making and policy formulation within the party.

One can discern from Strong Egypt’s workings that their target group is the ‘centrist mainstream’ of Egypt, which is equally committed to Egyptian patriotism and to moderate Islamic culture and

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45 According to Abdel Gawwad, they represent about 10% of the party’s rankings, mostly concentrated in the political bureau and general secretariat but to a much lesser degree in the governorates’ secretariat. According to al-Mohandes, they count for more than half of the general secretariat.


47 This group, in addition to al-Tayar al-Misri group, largely detested the MB’s post-revolution politics, particularly regarding the decision that only the FJP would represent the MB members politically, and MB opportunism during the revolutionary encounters with the SCAF in the violent Maspero, Muhammad Mahmoud and al-Qasr al-’Aini street battles that took place between September and December 2011. Others left the MB later, among whom al-Mohandes, who disagreed with the MB management of student activism in Azhar University (where he was student activity supervisor) and resigned from the group in January 2012 after futile attempts at ‘reform from within.’ Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.

48 When asked about Strong Egypt’s identity, Hassan al-Beshbeeshi replied ‘A party whose president is Aboul Fotouh, his political bureau head is Hassan al-Beshbeeshi and his deputy is Mustafa Kamsheesh, what you think its identity will look like?’ Islam Lotfy, interview with author, January 24, 2013.

49 Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013. Fekry Muhammad estimates that they make up a much larger proportion. He believes they constitute the majority of ex-MB members in the leadership.

50 Ibid. Muhammad Othman downplays the relevance of the MB background of Strong Egypt members because of the age factor (the youthful character of the ex-MB members in the party renders their MB legacy rather shallow). However, he believes the party needs a new vice-president who does not have any MB experience to make it more balanced. This issue was not raised internally but he believes it is fairly acceptable if the right candidate is found.
values. Similarly important, the party addressed the interests of a wide conglomerate of middle- and lower-class people who would be interested in social justice and sustainable development. The two million votes the Aboul Fotouh campaign gained attest to an existent popular constituency which is not secularist per se and which is comfortable with an Islamist candidate, provided he is for revolutionary and democratic change and not a member of an exclusive authoritarian group like the MB, or an extremist one like the Salafists. Strong Egypt’s constituency is thus socially conservative but pro-revolutionary and democratic transformation politically speaking. To this end, different policy tools are to be elaborated in the party’s platform (an extension of Aboul Fotouh’s campaign), including restructuring the tax system (towards progressive taxation and taxes on capitalist profits), new fiscal and monetary policies, and labour-oriented public policies. However, party leaders admit that the party still suffers from inadequate communication with the rural regions and urban informal areas regarding the dissemination of its distinctive democratic discourse in a lucid and understandable fashion.

However, importantly, whether that demand for pro-democratic revolutionary change is upheld by the party’s constituency in a uniform way, and whether this demand for revolutionary democratic politics can override its middle-class social conservatism and religious sensibilities in case of clash, is yet to be tested. Signals in this regard are not that reassuring. Many Strong Egypt members were reluctant to heed their more revolutionary colleagues’ call to side with the ‘secularist’ National Salvation Front (NSF)-led opposition against MB-led authoritarianism. It is also unclear whether the SEP can woo its middle-class membership into supporting radical labour protest politics.

Strong Egypt developed a multi-stage strategy of political action as devised by the strategic planning committee in the aftermath of the presidential elections, as follows.

51 The renowned intellectual and historian Tariq al-Bishri provided a blueprint of this concept in his works. For an updated exposition of this concept see Al-Bishri 2011.
52 It is interesting to juxtapose Strong Egypt and the predominantly urban poor target groups of the Nasserite Popular Current (led by the ex-presidential candidate and political maverick Hamdeen Sabahi) and the upper-middle-class audience of al-Dostour Party led by the Nobel laureate and political leader Mohamed ElBaradei.
53 For instance, Strong Egypt strongly opposed the constitution’s articles on the authorities and prerogatives of the military institution, but failed to communicate with the broader population on the gravity of this point. Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.
54 This uncertainty was highlighted by Osama Delham, one of the party leaders. Ossama Delham, interview with author, February 5, 2013.
1. The first stage is a six-month formative phase. Finalization of the transitional period and geographical outreach to rural and urban regions are the main objectives during the formative phase. Organizational and institutional build-up is a priority for the party.

2. Stage 1. is to be followed by a two-year buildup phase. During the second stage, the party will not be targeting a parliamentary majority nor a mobilizing capacity in the streets. Quality not quantity and brains instead of muscles shall be the objective. In other words, recruiting highly qualified political and parliamentary cadres and furnishing political resources will top the party’s agenda during this phase. Elections provide opportunities for popular outreach, cadre recruitment and segmentation of party discourse according to target groups. Participating in a national unity coalition government is an unlikely option, considering the party’s lack of cadres capable of state management and governmental policy-making during this stage. Besides, ‘we are not going to back-up the MB in power’. Instead, the party intends to focus more on redressing its cadre deficit and building its ‘technical bureau’ of specialized expertise. This should be the first step towards the construction of the party’s shadow government and shadow cabinet. Nineteen political, economic and social fields are on schedule. Priority will be assigned to education, public health, security and welfare. During this stage, the party hopes it can add more Christian and female members to the party, whose numbers are very limited so far.

As for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2013, Strong Egypt leaders prefer a coalition with revolutionary civil parties in the NSF such as al-Dostour, the Egyptian Social-Democratic Party, and the Popular Socialist Alliance. They believe that, notwithstanding the possible loss of some of the Islamist vote this way, they might gain the revolutionary vote in compensation.

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55 Most of the party leaders interviewed projected a 5–7% share for the party in the upcoming parliament.
57 Ibid.
58 Party leaders attribute this to the uncertainty of the current transitional party structures and the nation-wide political turmoil. However, the party plans to have more Women and Christians among its membership. Target party membership percentages for women and Copts are 20% and 1% respectively by next year. Ossama Delham, interview with author, February 5, 2013.
59 Some of the Islamist power base of Strong Egypt, in protest at the party’s standpoint on Morsi’s decrees in November 2012, withheld its funds to Strong Egypt and began to support al-Wasat Party instead. Al-Wasat,
However, this option might be practically unfeasible, as it depends on the NSF’s overall decision whether to boycott the elections, field a single electoral list under the Front’s banner, or give its member parties the freedom to tailor their separate electoral strategies. Also, the Egypt Party, led by the famous neo-preacher Amr Khaled, asked Strong Egypt for an electoral coalition.\textsuperscript{60} This prospect depends on whether Strong Egypt can swallow the existence of many ex-NDP and old regime figures in the Egypt Party, let alone the controversial character of Amr Khaled himself, who apparently could not fulfill the requirements of a successful transition from proselytizing to politics. In addition, one can argue that the coalition with the conservative \textit{al-Wasat} Party is obviously imprudent. Strong Egypt categorizes itself in opposition to the MB government and builds its electoral campaign on critique of the constitution and the need to amend it. \textit{Al-Wasat} Party runs on completely different lines and its main fight is with the NSF, not the MB government. Accordingly, some of the Strong Egypt leaders speculate that Strong Egypt will most likely field an independent electoral list in some governorates while supporting the revolutionary candidates fielded by the NSF, if the Front does not boycott the elections, in other districts.\textsuperscript{61}

3. Stage 2 will finally be succeeded by an eight-year stage of political expansion and ascent, which should foster the party’s capacity to come to power by the end of that stage.\textsuperscript{62} During the third stage, the party can adopt a meticulous strategy of political alliances that is guided by two key principles: 1. The rejection of any cooperation with old regime political and social forces, and 2. The refusal of any alliance based on negation, i.e. anti-Islamist or anti-secularist alliances. The party can act as power broker between contending coalitions, and a mediator between different revolutionary political forces in parliament and the broader political sphere. The main declared thrust during the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{60}Amr Khaled’s party incessantly asks Strong Egypt to join together the NSF, but Strong Egypt adamantly opposed the idea. Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{61}The SEP is planning to field 31 electoral lists (three candidates each) in the Delta governorates of Beheira, Gharbiya, Qalyubiya, Daqahliya and Kafr al-Shaykh), in addition to Asyut. The target is to have at least 30 seats in the upcoming parliament. That would be more than satisfying, given the fact that the party’s organization and structure is still in its infancy.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{62}Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.}
third stage is to transmute its ‘centrist mainstream’ base of supporters into the most competent electoral power-base.

Too ambitious? One cannot but question if this strategy might over-extend the party’s true capacities. Limited financial resources is a concern worth mentioning. But, no less importantly, a strategic project requires a hospitable climate, in terms of political stability, to acculturate the people and educate them politically on the party’s strategy. In addition, Strong Egypt, and others parties in this respect, have no chance of outbidding the MB if they play the same game of charity-based politics that the MB excelled in. Hopes reside rather in developmental and vernacular politics, i.e. labour and peasant activism, public awareness on rights, agrarian cooperatives, and municipal politics. Apparently, Strong Egypt leaders are aware of that. But performance is yet to be seen.

*Strong Egypt’s standpoint on the MB, the Salafists, secularist forces, al-Wasat and al-Tayyar al-Masri*

Strong Egypt, small and newly emerging as it is, constitutes an alternative to the MB due to behavioural attitudes on the ground. Rejecting MB politics while maintain a non-secularist and religiously correct social and moral outlook posits Strong Egypt as a potential alternative that can woo the hearts and/or the minds of the MB and moderate Islamist grassroots and religious general public, who might mistrust the MB and Salafist politics but are equally appalled by the anti-Islamism of the NSF. Strong Egypt’s potential danger is understood by the MB. According to Strong Egypt leaders, there is strong evidence on the ground that the MB seeks to marginalize the party, especially since the stand-off on Morsi’s decrees and the constitution drafting crisis.  

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63 The MB still opts for charity-based politics because it is easier and more familiar. They escape the more consuming terrains of developmental politics and engagement with governmental and municipal politics. Besides, charity-based politics is eventually unrewarding because it taints charity with political opportunism, and hence rendering it incredible and eventually unpopular. It creates enmities among the people as it is unsatisfying for everybody. For example, the typical MB tactic of providing subsidized consumer goods at the local level is very likely to make the local shopkeepers and traders unhappy. Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.

64 Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.
A key problematic for the SEP is its wasatiya (centrism). Central to the party’s discourse and behaviour is the evasion of the Islamist–secular polarization that has dominated post-revolution Egyptian politics since the 19 March referendum. However, it is hard to tell where centrism ends and colourless and faceless inaction begins. Many detractors blame Strong Egypt for its less-than-expected reaction to the MB regime’s authoritarianism, and reluctance to take sides. Neutralism is unattainable in a revolutionary setting when preferences are strong and juxtaposed. In other words, despite Strong Egypt’s critical discourse on the MB, as critics argue, in moments of crisis and intensifying MB authoritarianism, Strong Egypt’s reaction is muted and unexpectedly quiet. A lot of blaming the victim and viewing the secularist opposition and the Islamist regime as equally culpable is abundant as well. Many leaders in Strong Egypt, for their part, believe such charges are ill-founded. According to Abdel-Gawwad, the secretary general of the party, Strong Egypt denounces pointless polarization, but nevertheless still maintains clear for-and-against standpoints on a case-by-case basis. For example, according to Muhammad Othman, during the constitutional declaration crisis in November 2012, Strong Egypt was hardly neutral. Although the party refused to side with any of the two poles (the MB-led Islamist bloc versus the NSF-led secularist bloc), it offered a detailed initiative to resolve the conflict and practically implement the democratic and revolutionary demands of the Front.

In the words of Muhammad Othman, ‘Strong Egypt opted for the most difficult and unrewarding option, but nevertheless the most principled one’. In other words, Strong Egypt retained its willingness to participate in collective action with fellow revolutionary movements,

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65 ‘The majority within the party, though not a crushing majority, clearly disfavours any call for regime overthrow or participating with the NSF in its current formation’. Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.
66 Strong Egypt opposed Morsi’s decrees and the constitutional declaration once it was declared on 22 November 2012. The SEP organized several mass demonstrations in defiance of the decrees in the Presidential Palace vicinity on 28 November, in Tahrir Square on 29 November, and organized a mass rally at Cairo University on 23 November.
67 ‘We couldn’t join the National Salvation Front because it includes many old regime and conservative figures. And we are in any case opposed to the MB government and presidential institution … So we preferred not to join either side. But, alas, we offered our initiative to the presidency as an exit strategy to rescind the constitutional declaration that was rejected on our part because of its undemocratic substance.’ Ahmed Abdel Gawwad, interview with author, January 16, 2013.
68 ‘Siding with the MB would undoubtedly have been beneficial in terms of seats in the Shura Council and Cabinet and helped in the upcoming elections. On the other hand, siding with the NSF could have thrown us into the arms of the big opposition front and hence concealed our true distinguishable colours in a climate of polarization that hates grey standpoints no matter how sophisticated, composed and well-intentioned they are … Nevertheless, we preferred the sophisticated and centrist position, knowing in advance it has few consumers in such a climate of polarization. But we persevered to maintain the party’s structure and secure its independent line as our present and future policy option.’ Muhammad Othman, interview with author, January 24, 2013.
albeit outside the NSF frame. Evidently, Strong Egypt coordinated with revolutionary parties in the NSF like *al-Dostour*, the Popular Alliance, Popular Current and Egyptian Social-Democratic Parties in monitoring the referendum on the constitution on 18 December 2012. Strong Egypt also retained its differences with the MB after the constitution was finally passed, most importantly on laws that will regulate the upcoming parliamentary elections.

However, Othman conceded some of the critics’ charges. According to Othman, the special composition of the party (divided between Islamist centrists and radical revolutionaries, ex-MB members who had left the MB politically but still keep social and personal ties to the MB, in addition to the religiously devout members who would despise the old regime figures’ existence in the NSF), its recent entry in the political sphere, members with untried political loyalties, the lack of internally consensual political standpoints on several issues, and its newly-established party structures render Strong Egypt’s reactions to political events ‘lagging behind the other opposition parties in timing’ for fear of divisiveness and fragmentation. Final decision-making is subject to a lot of internal lobbying and compromise to keep the heterogeneous composition of the party intact.

As for the other centrist Islamist parties, according to Strong Egypt leaders, real distinction is in decisions, behaviour and practice instead of platforms that are hardly differentiated.

*Al-Wasat* Party is arguably more of an ‘Islamist Berlusconi-style’ party, i.e. advocating neo-liberal economic policies and business interests. In addition to the party’s platform that champions free-market policies and non-intervention and scarcely gives any attention to questions of welfare, its leadership profile, business associates and campaigning processes

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69 Ibid.
70 According to al-Mohandes, the more revolutionary group within the party leadership like him, Osman and others made extreme efforts to sell their principled and political rejection of the draft constitution within the party circles. And it paid off. An ad hoc committee visited fourteen governorates and directly engaged with party members there to raise the anti-constitution argument and justify it. The final outcome was positive. In an internal opinion poll, almost 72% of the party members agreed to say ‘No’ to the constitution. Muhammad al-Mohandes, interview with author, February 4, 2013.
72 A typical representative of *al-Wasat* Party’s political line is Muhammad Selim al-‘Awwa, a renowned lawyer and Islamist intellectual who developed very close relationships with state institutions (including security and military institutions under Mubarak) and regional interests in the Gulf states. Al-‘Awwa’s free market tendencies and his unmistakable authoritarianism manifest themselves occasionally.
manifest more authoritarian tendencies, and a pro-MB and strong business influence in the party. Unlike Strong Egypt, *al-Wasat* is not interested in founding a new political class. Furthermore, *al-Wasat* Party backed the MB in its intense duel with the NSF during the crises of the constitutional declaration and the referendum on the constitution in November and December 2012. Unlike Strong Egypt, *al-Wasat* Party has been reluctant to keep a recognizable distance from the MB regime.

Strong Egypt’s platform, in juxtaposition to these Islamist center-right politics and more in opposition to the MB ruling regime, is more preoccupied with questions of income redistribution and egalitarianism. Strong Egypt’s political bureau has denounced the IMF loans and the associated adjustment programme as ‘undermining Egypt’s national independence and imposing unbearable economic burdens on the impoverished classes and fixed-income Egyptians’.

*Al-Tayyar al-Masri* Party converges with Strong Egypt in its approach to Islamic centrism. Islam Lotfy, the acting president of the party under construction, does not subscribe to the Islamist label. He prefers to categorize *al-Tayyar al-Masri* as a conservative centrist party or a post-ideological party that promotes democracy, liberties, social justice, national independence, social solidarity and individual human rights. The personal religious behaviour of party members does not label them as Islamists. ‘As a matter of fact, there is no Islamist project in Egypt any longer.’ He expanded further on this by saying that Islam, as a religious and cultural tradition, is inclusive of many values and principles. However, being cut off from reality renders adherents to Islam in Egypt incapable of formulating coherent and detailed projects that connect Islamic theory to reality within a comprehensive framework based on an elaborate philosophy and approach to politics, detailed methods of political and social action, and comprehensive public policy alternatives. Lotfy concurs with many observers that the MB is currently being

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73 *Al-Wasat* Party representatives in the Constituent Assembly lobbied actively for a presidential system. They were also ardent supporters and apologists of SCAF politics during the transitional period between February 2011 and June 2012.  
74 Many businessmen, who cannot penetrate the closed circles of the MB, would find a refuge in *al-Wasat* Party.  
75 Apparently, this policy paid dividends in the form of many shares in the political system, such as two cabinet ministers in the caretaker government under president Morsi and seats in the Constituent Assembly and Shura Council.  
77 In Islam Lotfy’s view, Hassan al-Banna’s original Islamist project was distorted by Sayyid Qutb, and then completely eclipsed by the later generations from the 1970s onwards. ‘Currently, the Islamist project is a label for mass deception and political blackmail.’ Ibid.
held hostage to Salafist theology and superficial rhetoric. The MB’s greatest accomplishment is an electoral project, nothing more. But, there is hardly any form of state-making, intellectual or cultural or even political project in the MB arsenal. Even synthetic efforts are lacking on the part of the MB. Lotfy also believes the other non-MB Islamist actors fare little better. Salafists are ultra-conservative and similarly have no project at all. As for the Islamic Wasatiya School, it serves as a point of inspiration and framework of reference, but again it has not furnished any state-making projects. Islamism is now a bankrupt hypothesis. Interestingly, though he had no illusions about MB politics, Lotfy chose to stay within the ranks of the group before the 2011 revolution. He explained this by asserting that the MB was not just about politics. Similarly, it acted as a social habitus and a forum for religious and spiritual activities. Even more so in the aftermath of the revolution, Lotfy and his fellows initially preferred to stay within the group, while repositioning themselves within it. In Lotfy’s words:

I never had any fantasies about ‘reform from within’ … But, instead, I believed the MB should, and can, persist as a preaching, missionary and civilizational movement. To this effort, I was more than willing to contribute … I believed the MB should not be a party in political conflict and controlled by a closed group, but rather a reference point for the whole nation. In a nutshell, I wanted to keep my social, religious and spiritual activities within the MB as usual. As for politics, I completely dismissed the MB’s counter-revolutionary tactics and collaboration with SCAF between February and July 2011, when I was fired. No less horrendous was the approved notion that MB members must only do politics according to the MB leaders’ prescriptions, inducing FJP membership and activism (dependent on the group) and falling in line with the MB leaders on electoral and political processes. I thought, and instead of working hard to establish my own independent political project, I can do politics in partnership with other Muslim Brothers who share my viewpoints. The situation was never clearer to me. If the MB leaders were to submit to this [opening the door to political pluralism within the confines of the group and/or securing real FJP independence), then that would have been ideal and encouragement to stay on board. But if not, then they

78 Ibid.
should be held responsible for the consequences. The second option was always easier for them. And fifteen of us were fired in the end.\(^7^9\)

Interestingly, according to Muhammad al-Qassass, another *al-Tayyar al-Masri* leader and Lotfy’s cohort, the MB leaders would have preferred them to resign or leave rather than face contentious confrontation and subsequent dismissal. Actually, the MB encouraged some of their break-away members to found small Islamist parties to give the semblance of democracy and pluralism in the political sphere. In reality though, these parties served as MB auxiliaries.\(^8^0\) Khairat al-Shater, upon his release from prison at the end of February 2011, fought arduously to insulate internal MB politics from the logic of the revolution. All the MB revolutionary youth who rose to stardom and public fame during the revolution even though they were not among the upper echelons of the group, were to be subdued, neutralized and liquidated if necessary.\(^8^1\)

*Al-Tayyar al-Masri* is now extremely impotent. About two thousand members fill the ranks of the party – which is still under construction – in twelve governorates.\(^8^2\) Few members and lack of funding are obvious weaknesses. Financial inadequacy was self-evident during the 2011 parliamentary elections, when the party fielded about nineteen candidates on the lists of the ‘The Revolution Continues’ coalition. Lotfy believes the success rate was zero due to the lack of financial resources and weak preparation as a consequence of the suspension of the election campaigns due to the Muhammad Mahmoud street battles in November 2011.\(^8^3\) Importantly, member recruitment is selective for fear of MB infiltration, a policy concurrent with the party’s lack of social media capacities. According to Lotfy, the party is hardly an ex-MB one as the number of ex-MB members in the party does not exceed 5%; another 20% of members come from other political orientations, while the rest were non-politicized after the revolution.\(^8^4\)

\(^7^9\) Ibid.
\(^8^0\) For example, the Civilization Party, founded by ex-MB member Hatem ‘Azzam. Muhammad al-Qassass, interview with author, February 1, 2013.
\(^8^1\) Islam Lotfy, interview with author, January 24, 2013.
\(^8^2\) The list includes Cairo, Alexandria, Red Sea, Sharqiya, Munufiya, Gharbiya, Suez and Giza.
\(^8^3\) Best performances by *al-Tayyar al-Masri* candidates were Islam Lotfy in al-Haram district in Giza Governorate, where he finished third on the individual tally behind MB-backed Muhammad Abdel Mone’m al-Sawi and the Salafist candidate. In addition, al-Qassass finished third after the Egyptian Bloc and Wafd Party lists in Heliopolis.
\(^8^4\) Islam Lotfy, interview with author, January 24, 2013.
Al-Tayyar al-Masri has an ambitious plan in its party platform for a popular workshop system to manage the country’s affairs.\textsuperscript{85} However, this was practically unfeasible for an infant and organizationally incomplete party.

What of Strong Egypt–al-Tayyar al-Masri relationships? Many Strong Egypt leaders began their post-revolutionary political career with al-Tayyar al-Masri before shifting to focus on the Aboul Fotouh campaign.\textsuperscript{86} Should al-Tayyar al-Masri and Strong Egypt join forces once again at some point in the future to strengthen the revolutionary youthful faction in Strong Egypt against its more conservative compatriots? Leaders from both sides believe this is unlikely in the near future. Al-Tayyar al-Masri is still hostage to its understanding of itself as a youthful party. Besides, al-Tayyar al-Masri has been skeptical of the hegemonic role played by Aboul Fotouh in Strong Egypt, and the party’s legitimacy.\textsuperscript{87}

Al-Tayyar al-Masri could not see Aboul Fotouh simply as a party leader who is embroiled in partisan conflicts and politics. Instead, al-Tayyar al-Masri suggested a larger role for the man, i.e. to act as a point of reference for the political community and as a symbol of the Moderate Islamic orientation who can push for political consensus and conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{88} Moreover, many problems between the two sides became cumulative over time, including miscommunication and the unequal balance of power in favour of Strong Egypt and the resultant psychological ramifications.\textsuperscript{89} Ideologically, al-Tayyar al-Masri leaders do not take Strong Egypt’s self-depiction as a ‘centre-left’ party too seriously:

Strong Egypt includes many Comprador bourgeois elements. Furthermore, Aboul Fotouh once said in a public meeting that Strong Egypt is the modern version of the MB.

And I exclaimed, asking him, “If this is the case, then why should we take the copy
instead of the original?” Besides, Strong Egypt is doomed with internal rifts between its different groups. Groups include ‘MB sleeper cells’, leftist groups and ex-MB members who don’t disagree with MB politics and approaches.

One can argue that *al-Tayyar al-Masri*’s organizational incapacity might send them down the road of political opportunism à la *al-Wasat* Party. Islam Lotfy shuns this notion. He asserts that accepting the nomination of two *al-Tayyar al-Masri* members (Abdel Rahman Haridi and Ahmed Osama) to the Shura Council was a very controversial decision that only passed after three days of voting rounds:

> We are against the existent polarization but we don’t demur at taking political standpoints and adopting clear biases. We are definitely in opposition. Nonetheless, on the question of participation within the current political process, a practical viewpoint prevailed. Realistically, the constitution is ratified. And despite our No vote, we have to deal with its consequences. It is better to be present, as opposition, in the Shura Council. Our two members were particularly active during the electoral law deliberations, and they engineering the collective withdrawal from the council’s sessions in defiance of the FJP’s intransigence. No less importantly, we have prepared the article that strips old regime figures of their political rights. However, the MB, later on, reduced the qualifications for the political ban and edited it to be less restrictive than the original article we drafted.

For the time being, *al-Tayyar al-Masri* is working on structuring itself, acquiring official status, and trying gain a foothold in the municipal, legislative and executive authorities.

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90 The leftist groups coalesced around some renowned leftist intellectuals and activists such as Rabab al-Mahdi and others.
91 Muhammad Affan, interview with author, March 10, 2013.
92 Noticeably, two members from *al-Tayyar al-Masri* Party (Abdel Rahman Haridi and Ahmed Osama) have been selected by Morsi as members of his appointed Shura Council.
94 Muhammad al-Qassass, interview with author, February 1, 2013.
Conclusions

One can argue that the SEP, the most promising case study of Egyptian Islamist democrats, has proven its efficiency in pressuring the MB to moderate its discourse and henceforth counterbalance the pressures exerted by the conservative Salafists to the MB’s right. So far, the party has demonstrated reverberations of something different. However, if Strong Egypt is looking to challenge the centrist and predominant position of the MB in Egyptian politics and pose as progressive Islamists or Post-Islamists, it still has a long way to go, ideologically, politically and institutionally, before it is able to organize itself effectively, and solicit popular support among a considerable number of blocs, both stable and floating. Islamist democrats who jumped off the MB bandwagon decided to take different courses. In contrast to al-Wasat Party’s elitist business-oriented outlook, which left them as politically conservative and economically liberal ‘moderate Islamists’, Strong Egypt and al-Tayyar al-Masri are situating themselves on the terrain of progressive Islamist politics. Adopting more centre-leftist positions and placing their bets on long-run political institutionalization and accumulation among the youthful grassroots, albeit with varying results, Strong Egypt and al-Tayyar al-Masri are displaying undeniably genuine features. However, key challenges include the heterogeneous vision of party founders; limited coping mechanisms with regard to rapid changes in the political atmosphere; ambivalence on state-religion relations and party standpoint vis-à-vis MB politics, and overlapping revolutionary and religious bids, role-played by personality factors, particularly in the case of Strong Egypt and Aboul Fotouh, in addition to the weak political awareness of many effective members. Finally, what is also badly needed is the creation of an electoral constituency that can employ a progressive understanding of Islamic culture to shore up the cause of political and socio-economic revolutionary change. The SEP has to continue to dance with all these shortcomings and deficiencies before ascertaining what is in store for the future of this supposedly novel type of Islamist politics in Egypt.
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