

Sufism, Politics, and the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Sufi individuals and groups in the politics of the Middle East and North Africa during and following the Arab Spring. While some have suggested that Sufis are distant from politics, this paper looks at events in Syria and Egypt, and how Sufis have been active in playing a political role in terms of calls for the dismissal of authoritarian leaders, as well as in the post-regime politics of the states. In the case of Syria, Muhammad al-Yaqoubi has taken a key role in advocating the removal of authoritarian regimes in the name of a democratic state. Similar calls have taken place in Egypt; in this case, Sufi groups have begun to form political parties for representation out of concern for the increase in political influence by the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as Salafi Muslim organizations.

Introduction

The protests during the Arab Spring by citizens throughout the Middle East and North Africa have brought hope to people not only throughout the region, but also the world. Many took, and are taking to the streets to voice their frustration with the continued human-rights abuses by authoritarian leaders, showing the power of the individual voice. In Tunisia, the first protests of the Arab Spring took place in late December 2010, ending with the resignation of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Shortly

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after, we saw Egyptians organize to speak out against the government of Hosni Mubarak – who, on February 11, 2011, due to political pressure from Egyptians, also stepped down from power. But along with these cases, we are still finding protesters challenging various authoritarian governments in the region. And within the successful revolutions of countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen – as well as the death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and continued actions in states such as Bahrain – we are noticing different actors such as secularists, Islamists, student groups, unions, and religious minority groups operating in the “new” political system, whether it is in the formation of a government or in the context of working toward establishing human rights.

The following are some of the main questions that I address in this article:

1. What has been the role of Sufi groups in the politics of the Arab Spring?
2. What have been the historical, as well as the present-day Sufi attitudes toward political participation?
3. Currently, are we finding a similar pattern in regard to the level of political participation?
4. Are we finding consistent positions within the different current Sufi groups and leaders?
5. As events continue to unfold, will such approaches to politics continue? And will such actions remain constant?

I examine the specific actions of Sufi Muslims in the politics of Syria and Egypt in relation to the Arab Spring, and I will begin by briefly discussing the term *Sufism*. Next, I will examine the perception of Sufis as “non-political” participants. I will then reflect on the role of Sufis throughout the protests, both during and after. I maintain that in Syria and Egypt, Sufis have been politically active throughout this period for two primary reasons: to challenge the authoritarian regime (as demonstrated in the case of Syria) and to counter what they see as an Islamist threat¹ (as in the case of Egypt). I will end with a summary of the main points.

Sufism

In terms of attempting to define Sufism, many have equated Sufi Islam with “mystical Islam,” although Paul Heck reminds us that “it is not right to call all Sufism mysticism, even though the mystical experience constitutes one important aspect of Sufism.”² Similarly, in explaining exactly what Sufism is, Neil Douglas-Klotz begins by discussing what Sufism is “not—not a religion, not a philosophy, not even a mysticism.”³ He goes on to say that

“it’s best to call Sufism a way of experiencing reality as love itself.”⁴ William Chittick says that

Sufism is the most universal manifestation of the inner dimension of Islam; it is the way by which man transcends his own individual self and reaches God. It provides within the forms of the Islamic revelation the means for an intense spiritual life directed towards the transformation of man’s being and the attainment of the spiritual virtues; ultimately it leads to the vision of God.⁵

The Sufis are concerned with increasing their closeness to God – and through this process, emphasizing the notion of love for the Divine by attempting to eliminate all barriers or “boundaries” between them and God.⁶ Heck explains that what is often emphasized in Sufi Islam is that “Sufism concerns itself with the relation of the soul to the other (i.e. nonmaterial) world. As such, it is the spirituality of Islam. . . .”⁷ Sufis are individuals who are said to give up their selves in order to reach God.⁸ However, the term *Sufism* is highly complex, and because of the numerous variations associated with this term (beliefs, approaches toward society, practices in attempts at reaching God, etc.), numerous differences exist. As Heck explains, while “Sufism concerns itself with the relation of the soul to the other (i.e. nonmaterial world),” this “spirituality” can be mediated through multiple channels – for example, through saints and devotion to saints, living and deceased, a means of spiritual communion and regeneration still popular today as witnessed in the national pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi masters and through reading texts and the communal study of texts.⁹ Even in terms of pinpointing Sufism geographically, Sufism is not limited to one area in the world, and has taken different shapes where its teachings exist.¹⁰

Sufism is said to have been in existence since the origins of Islam, although James Fadiman and Robert Frager suggest that Sufism’s message and ideas have been known even longer.¹¹ Within the initial stages of Sufism, certain characteristics began to develop. Specifically, some Sufis advocated an ascetic lifestyle, in which they became detached from worldly issues. This act was seen as removing attention from outward issues to instead focus on one’s relationship with God.¹² And thus, while some may have suggested that Sufism varied greatly from other notions of Islam – in terms of discussing specific early Sufi groups, Sufis did not reject the outward forms of worship that are prescribed for Muslims, but also focused on inner forms of worship and the spiritual attachment to the Divine.¹³ Again, it was not the goal of those who believed in the ideas often associated with Sufism to break away from Islam; in fact, “they were content to live and work within [this] framework.”¹⁴ In regards to this relationship of Sufism and Islam, S. Shaikh and Scott Kugle explain that:

One particular image invoked by traditional Muslim scholarship describes Islam as a walnut. The practical, ritual and legal dimensions are akin to the outer shell within which one finds the animating spiritual core or the Sufi path signified by the inner kernel; whereas the oil permeating all parts of the walnut is the all-encompassing nature of Ultimate Reality. In the same way that the shell provides protection to the kernel, the legal and obligatory rituals provide the form within which the spiritual realities are allowed to ripen. Simultaneously, the kernel gives life to the shell, without which it would be an empty form, barren and purposeless. The image conveys the notion of the integral nature of Sufism to Islam.¹⁵

As Heck explains, while Sharī‘ah has been important in the practice of Sufism, many Sufis have attempted to go further to find this “divine reality (*haqiqā*) that was not apparent, but hidden, and yet necessary to know as standard against which the various movements of the soul were to be judged as godly or ungodly.”¹⁶

Scholars suggest that the name *Sufi* was given on account of the clothing – namely wool clothing worn by those following this spiritual path.¹⁷ Other terms that were often attached to Sufis were *dervish* or *fakir* – a term that was often used in relation to both Muslim and non-Muslim (often Hindu) ascetics, which meant a “poor person.”¹⁸ Many considered the Sufis living only for God and nothing else to be pursuing a “solitary life” similar to monks of the Catholic faith.¹⁹

Sufism, Politics, and the Arab Spring

One of the major generalizations that many have attempted to equate with Sufism is a “detachment” from politics. While Sufism is focused on notions of “character formation (*akhlaq*) as the fruit of refinement of one’s soul,”²⁰ Sufis have also taken different positions in relation to politics, with some having been engaged in politics.²¹ In terms of Sufism, a long history shows that a number of Sufis have not only been political, but in many cases Sufis were key actors in the politics of various countries. For example, throughout Egypt’s political history, we find that Sufis were often courted by ruling political leaders, who often attempted to gain political support from the Sufis. Adam Morrow and Khaled al-Omrani cite Abdel Menaan Mounib of Al-Dustour, who said that state leaders attempted to bring Sufis to support the leaders, often attempting to do by “co-opt[ing] the Sufis.”²² However, we should not understand the relationship as one merely of leaders attempting to influence Sufis – since Sufi orders have also been key actors in the anti-colonial movements in North Africa,²³ and specifically in

cases such as the Sudan, where the Madahiyya order was key in the fight against the Ottoman Empire within this Egypt and Britain;²⁴ in Morocco,²⁵ where Nasiriyya Sufi orders had an influential role in trade, along with Sufi groups fighting against outside forces in Morocco²⁶; in Libya, with the anti-colonial effort of the Sanussi movement²⁷; and Algeria, with Abdel Qadir and the Qadiriyya movement fighting French colonialism.²⁸

Syria

Paul Pinto explains that Sufis have a long history in Syria, and in particular, have had many interactions with the political leadership – with this relationship between Sufis and the state including “both collaboration and resistance to the state . . . as political strategies among the Sufi communities. . . .”²⁹ For example:

the collaboration is exemplified in the “official Islam” preached by the Naqshbandiyya Kuftariyya, and resistance by the engagement of branches of the Shadhiliyya in the armed struggle that the Islamic opposition launched against the Ba’th regime from 1979 to 1982. Therefore, the question is not if Sufism is inherently acquiescent or rebellious toward the state but rather what are the social and political conditions for each one of these articulations with the political authority.³⁰

Looking at the mid-twentieth century, when Sufis had more separation from state control, they were able to be key “centers of resistance to the authoritarian regime that was installed after the conquest of power by the Ba’th party in 1969.”³¹ However, this relationship changed after the fighting between the state and many Islamic groups in Hama in 1982, where “the conflict ended with the military defeat of the ‘Islamic Front’, along with the government forces killing thousands of civilians.”³² From that point, the government allowed some groups greater freedom in exchange for political support, which included in some cases “the exchange of favors and information.”³³ Many Sufi influences were included in the government’s role of establishing an “official Islam.”³⁴ For example, the government relied on religious figures such as Ahmad Kuftaru, the “Mufti of Syria . . . who helped the state to consolidate its control over the religious establishment while capitalizing upon his partnership with the regime to expand his Kuftariyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya order as a national and transnational Sufi movement.”³⁵ In fact, this relationship benefited the Kuftariyya, as they were able to “maintain and expand the order.”³⁶ However, it is incorrect to suggest that the state has had full control over religion, as many religious leaders are still influential in Syrian society.³⁷

As mentioned, many situations exist where Sufi leaders and individuals have voiced a political message throughout different stages and contexts

within the Arab Spring. In terms of recent actions by Sufi leaders in Syria, Mohammad al-Yaqoubi – an influential Sufi leader in Syria, who was removed from his position at the al-Hasan mosque in Damascus because of his comments against the government³⁸ – has continued to be an outspoken critique of the actions under the government of Bashar al-Assad of Syria.³⁹ He has called for individuals to speak up against the government’s human rights abuses.

In addition, al-Yaqoubi has argued that a new government is needed.⁴⁰ In an interview with Al-Jazeera on July 16, 2011, when asked whether Shari‘ah would be a part of the new government, al-Yaqoubi responded by saying:

No, definitely not. That was excluded. It was an idea proposed by some of the opposition leaders, but now it was excluded. I think the main job of the conference is to save the country, to prepare for the next phase.

In the same interview, he explained that the goal of the different political groups was to establish a Syria built on “justice.”⁴¹ In the interview, he continued to emphasize the role of the demonstrators in Syria in speaking out against the atrocities committed by the state:

the regime lost its legitimacy from the very first moment when it started shooting its own people in the streets, and this has been confirmed now with the masses going on the streets, with these mass demonstrations, I believe, and also, more people speaking up when they have an opportunity and expressing their opinions. . . .⁴²

Al-Yaqoubi continued to express the fact that the goal of a meeting between anti-al-Assad government individuals was to see a “new Syria” that was planned as a “democratic” and “civil state that guarantees justice, democracy, and liberty to every citizen in the country.”

In fact, Sufis, among many other groups, have played a role in discussions regarding the future of Syria. Thus, while it is evident that Sufi leaders are speaking out against the authoritarian governments – and thus, taking a very active role in politics – the messages by many at this time are for the promotion of a democratic political system. In an August 12, 2011 interview with the BBC, al-Yaqoubi argued that “pressure” was needed by the world toward Syria, and that this would provide support for those who were speaking out against al-Assad domestically.⁴³ As a matter of fact, al-Yaqoubi has expressed that the opposition to the government wants to ensure that the abhorrent objectives and actions by the government end.⁴⁴

Therefore, we see that Sufi leaders are quite involved in politics in Syria. Again, while an interest may have existed before in terms of Sufis

participating in politics, the al-Assad regime has had a strong hold on limiting opposition in the political sphere. But having carried out a number of human rights violations in the recent killings of civilians – many individuals, including religious and Sufi leaders, are becoming involved politically to speak out against the government.

Egypt

Along with Syria, a discussion regarding the role of Sufism and Sufi involvement is also taking place in the current politics of Egypt. Sufism has a strong presence in Egypt. Jonathan Brown explains that Sufism should be viewed as one of the more popular approaches to Islam in Egypt – and “the default setting of Muslim religious life in Egypt.”⁴⁵ It is said that seventy-seven Sufi orders exist, with over ten million adherents in these orders,⁴⁶ with much as 20 percent of the population being influenced by Sufism.⁴⁷ Explaining the influence of Sufism in Egypt, Brown says:

Egypt’s Islamic religious establishment is strongly Sufi in character. Adherence to a Sufi order has long been standard for both professors and students in the al-Azhar mosque and university system. Although al-Azhar is not monolithic, its identity has been strongly associated with Sufism. The current Shaykh al-Azhar (rector of the school), Ahmed al-Tayyeb, is a hereditary Sufi shaykh from Upper Egypt who has recently expressed his support for the formation of a world Sufi league; the current Grand Mufti of Egypt and senior al-Azhar scholar Ali Gomaa is also a highly respected Sufi master.⁴⁸

Thus, not only has Sufism been influential in Egyptian society, but Sufi groups have also been active in politics. But while the attention has been on the role of Sufi groups in the post-Mubarak politics of Egypt, Sufis have also been very active in the political realm of Egypt during various parts of the twentieth century. For example, one case of Sufi support for state leaders can be seen during the time of Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, when he “was received with much fanfare by the heads of Sufi orders at Cairo Airport after he signed the Camp David Peace Accords with the Jewish state in 1979.”⁴⁹ In 2008, Sufi leaders were participants in conferences where the theme was “Sufi Perspective on World Peace and Responsibility” (the title for the conference in Egypt).⁵⁰

And since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, various participants – including Sufis – have been active in attempting to set up the political system in post-Mubarak Egypt. In terms of the politics of Sufis, one of the major political organizations is the Supreme Sufi Council, which is “composed of 10 elected members from among the Sheikhs of the different tarikas plus 5 appointed members representing Al-Azhar, the Ministry of Religious En-

dowments, Local Administration, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Culture.”⁵¹ Within the Sufi orders, two of the larger orders – namely, the Rifa’i order – have decided to enter politics by organizing political parties.⁵² The Rifa’i order has established Sout al-Horeyya (The Voice of Freedom Party), whereas the Azmeyya order have established “Tahrir Masr (The Liberation of Egypt Party),”⁵³ and initially joined the Egypt Block coalition that was composed of a number of parties – and is currently made up of the Al-Ketla al-Masriyaa (Free Egyptian’s Party), The Social Democrat Party, and al-Tagammu (National Progressive Unionist Party).⁵⁴

In terms of the party, The Egyptian Liberation Party’s political positions include:

- supporting a civil state that . . . respects equal citizenship, human rights, pluralism, and fundamental freedoms
- adhering to the principles of Islamic law as the main source of legislation and spiritual values, while also respecting the special personal status laws of other monotheistic religions
- rejecting all forms of violence and terrorism and extremism in thought.

Some of their foreign policy positions include “maintaining Egypt’s national security by securing the borders of Egypt and the Nile as a primary water source . . . and supporting full cooperation with all peoples, civil society organizations and international institutions.”⁵⁵

They also advocate a number of socioeconomic policies that include:

- establishing a free market economy with a social dimension
- supporting the right to health care, education, employment, and housing
- spreading a culture of peace and respect in Egypt
- increasing the role that Sufis have in the Egyptian state and society
- opposing attacks on places of worship including Sufi shrines and Coptic Churches.⁵⁶

But while Sufi political parties have been established, the idea of being involved in politics has not been accepted by all Sufis. For example, Roger Baumann explains that Sheikh Kassaby, who is “the Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Orders in Egypt,” suggested that Sufis should emphasize religious, and not political matters. He stressed that the goal of Sufis is to not to become involved in the political process.⁵⁷ In fact, Kassaby is not the only one to feel this way. Sheikh Mohammad El-Shahawy of the Shahawy order similarly felt that Sufis forming political parties is not the best approach.⁵⁸ This division among Sufis regarding political participation is not

new. For example, there were discussions by some Sufis – and in particular, the leadership of the Al-Sharnoubiya order – in 2010 about forming a political party. But while this was the case, “the heads of 14 other orders . . . rejected the proposal, refusing to break with the Sufis ostensible disdain for political participation.”⁵⁹

The reasons for political participation in Egypt seem to vary. One of the factors for this increased political activity among Sufis is that they, along with many other groups, were limited in political action during the regime of Mubarak. For example, during that time, “Sufism was targeted by Mubarak’s state for repression and aggressive co-option. The state took over appointment of its top *sheikhs* (religious scholars)⁶⁰ and *murshids* (guides), banned certain religious practices and policed or canceled rituals and celebrations (*moulids*) with large working-class constituents.”⁶¹

Furthermore, Ammar Ali Hassan explains that “the regime had insisted on using Sufis as important social assets for the benefit of the ruling National Democratic Party. The regime’s position deprived Sufis of the opportunity to establish the kinds of political organizations that could represent them. . . .”⁶²

But while many Sufis in Egypt have been hesitant to become involved in politics, one of the main reasons why Sufis are becoming more active in politics is due to the concerns some have of other Islamist and Salafi groups effecting Sufi organizations.⁶³ Ibrahim Zahran, one of the founders and key members of the Egyptian Liberation Party,⁶⁴ indicated that the party was born out of the conflict between Sufis and other Islamic parties, when he said: “There is no doubt that the coming Islamic flood frightens them, as does any clear political movement that represents a departure from the conduct of Egyptian Sufis who have tended to comply with the will of political leaders for a very long time.”⁶⁵ Sheikh Alaaeddin Abul-Azayem, the leader of the Azmeyya, admitted that he was not initially supportive of a Sufi party, but later felt differently, saying that “observing the Egyptian media’s sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood and the so-called Salafis, I realized that Sufism can be lost in the middle, so we decided that it was necessary to have a political party of our own that can represent us.”⁶⁶ In an interview in *Al-Masri Al-Youm*, Abul-Azayem said that “Salafis hold whoever does not subscribe to their ideas as a nonbeliever. For them, Sufis, Shia and unveiled women are nonbelievers.” He went on to say that that there was thus “the need for a moral party that would make people feel safe.”⁶⁷ He has expressed concern that if the Salafi groups gain power, that they might get rid of Sufi orders and shut down the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders. The Azmeyya have existed in Egypt since the mid-1800s –

and according to Rabha Allam, have been quite vocal against the recent government, with Abul-Azaem in particular having spoken on political issues, such as commenting on Mubarak's approach toward Israel.⁶⁸

One of the major Islamist organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood, is seen as "Egypt's most cohesive political movement, with an unparalleled ability to mobilize its followers. . . ."⁶⁹ But along with the Muslim Brotherhood, we see the rising influence of the Salafis. In fact, Larbi Sadiki contends that "the battle lines are already drawn between the liberal and secular forces on one side and the Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafists) on the other."⁷⁰ Sadiki explains the influence, power, and interest of these two groups:

the Salafis probably outnumber the [Muslim Brotherhood] in terms of popular reach. They have been functioning underground and the Alexandria-based so-called "Tanzeem 2" (apparatus 2, on the right side of political Islam's spectrum) has been lying low but not idle. Today they want a place in post-Mubarak Egypt and have either formed political parties (e.g. Al-Adl, Al-Nour) or have parties under construction, as it were.⁷¹

He goes on:

what they lack now is the civic continuity, visibility and political know-how of the [Muslim Brotherhood]. The [Muslim Brotherhood] is weighty today because it has invested so much capital in struggles against the state, competition for power in local and parliamentary elections, and networked widely, nationally and globally. . . .⁷²

Many Sufis have been outspoken about the threat they feel from the Salafi groups. After the fall of Mubarak, "many Islamist and Salafi political forces have attacked several Sufi mausoleums . . . and charge that Sufi rites and practices, especially gender-mixing, are un-Islamic."⁷³ Sufi leaders claim that at least twenty mosques were said to have been attacked up until mid-April 2011.⁷⁴ Furthermore, "the Salafi attacks [have also] target[ed] Sufis, Christians, some cafes and markets which sell alcohol."⁷⁵ It has also been said that "some religious conservatives also dislike Sufi moulids – festivals celebrating the birthdays of saints that have become carnival-like events popular even among non-Sufis in Egypt."⁷⁶ In response to these attacks, some Sufis "have described themselves as "soldiers of God" responsible for the defen[s]e of shrines and tombs."⁷⁷

In a response to some of the concerns Sufis have toward Salafi groups, "on March 29, several hundred Sufi disciples organized a march from Hussein Mosque, near al-Azhar in Cairo, down to Tahrir Square. . . . They demanded that the army protect Sufis from Salafi attack and shrine demolitions." However, due to differences among Sufi leaders, the protest was

ended. Another Sufi protest took place on April 15, 2011 “from the mosque of Al-Sayyid Ahmad Al-Badawi to the main square in the city of Tanta to protest the increasing militancy of right-wing Salafi organizations.”⁷⁸

The Sufis, in combination with other participants such as the Coptic Christians, put together an event entitled “In Love of Revolutionary Egypt,” in which the goal was to emphasize pluralism and democracy.⁷⁹ The concern by many is the attempt by conservatives to implement laws in the political state that may threaten the survival of Sufis,⁸⁰ while some have also taken issue with Salafi protests.⁸¹ Regarding the concern about Salafi groups and politics, Alaaeddin Abul-Azeem argued that “if the Salafists or Muslim Brotherhood rise to power, they could well cancel the Sufi sheikhdom, so there has to be a party of Sufis.”⁸² Furthermore, others have been critical of the Muslim Brotherhood statement “Islam is the solution.”⁸³

But despite their criticism of the Freedom and Justice Party and the Al-Nour Party, the Egyptian Liberation Party (along with a number of other parties that were initially part of the Egypt Bloc) removed itself from the political coalition. Many of the parties resigned “mostly due to disputes regarding party representation on the electoral lists and concerns about the inclusion of former [National Democratic Party] members in the Bloc lists.”⁸⁴ In the 2012 parliamentary elections that took place in January and February, out of the 180 total elected seats, the Freedom and Justice Party (the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood) won 105 seats, and the Salafi Al-Nour Party won 45 seats, compared to the Egypt Bloc which won 8 seats.⁸⁵ In terms of overall seats, The Freedom and Justice Party has 216 seats in the government, while the Al-Nour (and others within their alliance) has a total of 125 seats.⁸⁶ The victory of the Freedom and Justice Party, as well as significant representation by the Al-Nour Party, have allowed them significant access in terms of representation in the writing of the Egyptian constitution. Recently, Coptic and liberal-secular representatives left the meetings where the constitution was being written, feeling that the process was being controlled by the Islamist groups.⁸⁷

In addition to parliamentary success, and significant representation in the writing of the constitution, the Muslim Brotherhood has decided, despite some division within the organization to run a candidate for the presidential elections in May. In relation to this, different Sufi groups are also discussing which candidate to support in the upcoming elections. But despite some concerns about the Muslim Brotherhoods’ increasing influence, Sufi groups themselves are not in agreement on choosing a candidate. For example, the leadership of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, Mohamed Alaa Eddin Abul Azayem, has said that the different Sufi groups will come

together and agree upon one candidate. *Al-Masry al-Youm* reports from an interview with Azayem that “extremist and secularist candidates as well as those linked to the regime of toppled President Hosni Mubarak will be automatically excluded.”⁸⁸ Some members that are not going to receive the support of the Sufi Council include: Islamic preacher Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, former Muslim Brotherhood member Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, the Brotherhood’s recently declared candidate Khairat al-Shater, former intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, and former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq.⁸⁹ However, the Sufi Egyptian Liberation Party has decided to select a candidate themselves, namely Ghad al-Thawra Party Chairman Ayman Nour,⁹⁰ thus suggesting a unified Sufi backed candidate would not exist.

Conclusion

I have shown the role of Sufi leaders and Sufi organizations in the context of the politics during and following the Arab Spring, as well as examples of the active political role that Sufis have taken in Syria and Egypt. But we should not assume that these are the only situations during the Arab Spring when Sufi leaders are taking active roles in speaking up politically. For example, Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, a leading Sufi of the Alawiya Order in Algeria, made a number of statements in September 2011 regarding the role of Sufis and Sufi Islam in the politics of Algeria, as well as throughout other areas of the Middle East and North Africa. He has advocated the protection of rights for individuals, and stated that if the political leaders do not provide these rights, protests will challenge their regimes.⁹¹

Along with the role of Sufi leaders speaking on political matters, even potential political leaders are looking at the Sufis for possible support. For example, “the potential candidates for the Egyptian presidency now pay special visits to Sufi elders seeking their endorsement. The Nasserite Party announced an ‘election agreement’ with a number of Sufi orders. . . .”⁹² In addition, we have seen the formation of “the Coalition of Egyptian Sufis,” a group with significant youth influence, whose aim is “to work against the deteriorating conditions within the Sufi orders, and against the ways in which the orders are being targeted by other Islamic organizations.”⁹³ Thus, the Sufi involvement in the post-Mubarak is quite evident, both in terms of direct and indirect electoral action.⁹⁴

In relation to various Sufi groups, it seems that they have continued to be interested in and involved in the political process. In terms of their primary reasons for political involvement, this differs, depending on the specific case and conditions that exist. In the case of Syria, it seems that the primary reason for political action seems to be removing al-Assad from government. In Egypt, the Sufi groups, like many other organizations, are

attempting to have a role in the electoral process after Mubarak. Due to the fragility of the political system – with the fall of Mubarak and the establishment of elections and the writing of the constitution – Sufi groups in Egypt, and other groups such as different liberal-secular parties, seem to be concerned about their limited voice in government compared to the Islamist groups such as the Freedom and Justice and the Al-Nour Party, who seem to want to place much more emphasis on Islam in government. Furthermore, the Sufi groups are also worried about how they believe that such Islamists may challenge Sufi groups' practice of Islam. It seems that with the fall of various authoritarian leaders – and the opening up of a civil society in terms of forming associations – that Sufis, along with many other groups, will become much more involved in politics. Therefore, whether one is looking at Egypt, Syria, or other parts of the Middle East and North Africa where Sufi groups are present, Sufi groups have become involved in the political system for two main reasons: it seems that the Sufi groups have taken issue with the actions of authoritarian regimes during the revolutions, and that Sufi groups have been concerned about political threats in the new political systems – and in the case of Egypt also, the concerns about the increasing government power of Islamist groups.

Thus, it seems that Sufi groups will continue to be engaged in the political system for both reasons – to challenge authoritarian leaders and also to limit the influence of groups, which they see as threatening to their organizations. Again, currently Sufis in Egypt, among other groups, have more ability to form parties and to operate as political organizations. While there may be some that will continue to turn away from becoming involved in politics, it seems that many Sufi leaders have been very willing to engage in electoral politics in the new post-authoritarian regimes. It seems that a number of leaders are concerned that not engaging in politics may have a negative effect on their organizations' abilities to exist in the same manner; particularly in the case of Egypt, as we have seen, some have expressed concern about increasing the power of the Freedom and Justice and Al-Nour parties. Thus, continued political action, wherever possible and strategically beneficial, may be expected.

However, the following is important: in comparison to the Freedom and Justice and Al-Nour parties, Sufi groups, along with secular parties, performed poorly in the recent Egyptian elections. Because both the Freedom and Justice and Al-Nour parties have high representation in government and in writing the constitution, many not in political power are concerned about not having their opinions heard. Thus, it may be interesting to see what position Sufi leaders take: will they continue to operate politically

in a system that now allows party formation or will some move away from politics – recognizing the difficulty in electoral success due to high support in Egypt for the Muslim Brotherhood?

Notes

1. *Political Islam (or Islamism)* is a complex term and differs depending on organizations, ideologies, political, and socioeconomic factors, among other factors. A characteristic of Political Islam is often the idea of an increased role of Islam in society and politics that may or may not involve action in an electoral system. A concern by Sufi groups has been that Islamist groups who come to power will attempt to implement ideas of Islam that will limit their religious practices. For a detailed discussion of political Islam, see John L. Esposito, “Claiming the Center: Political Islam in Transition,” *Harvard International Review* 19, no. 2: 1–11 and Yahya Sadowski, “Political Islam: Asking the Wrong Questions?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 215–40.
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