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## **► To cite this version:**

Clément Steuer, Sara Tonsy. Bridging the gap: The ‘revolutionary’ strategy of the Strong Egypt Party as a new attempt towards overcoming the secular/Islamist cleavage. *Mediterranean Politics*, In press, 10.1080/13629395.2022.2124739 . hal-03799561

**HAL Id: hal-03799561**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03799561>**

Submitted on 6 Oct 2022

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## **Bridging the Gap**

### **The “revolutionary” strategy of the Strong Egypt Party as a new attempt towards overcoming the secular/Islamist cleavage**

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Word count: 8,936 words

## **Bridging the Gap**

### **The “revolutionary” strategy of the Strong Egypt Party as a new attempt towards overcoming the secular/Islamist cleavage**

The 2011 revolution provided the Egyptian “third way” between Islamism and secularism with an opportunity to enter the political scene. Following the 2012 presidential election, this current was divided into a *wasaty* trend following a “possibilist” strategy within the Mursī administration, and another trend gathered around the figure of ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Abūl-Futūh and following a “revolutionary” strategy with the aim to overcome the secular/Islamist cleavage by mobilizing revolutionaries from both sides against the remnants of Mubārak’s regime. This article shows how the difference between these two trends – both born from the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood – is rooted in a generational divide. While the *wasaty* leaders left the Islamist organization in the mid-1990s, when their project was about to enter official politics, the younger generation did so only after the departure of Mubārak, with the objective to pursue the “revolution’s goals”.

Keywords: Egypt; Abūl-Futūh; Islamism; secularism; social cleavages

The 2008 financial crisis and its socio-economic consequences destabilized most of the political systems, and especially the party subsystems, all around the Mediterranean region. Two trends are at play here: the mobilization of youth (Ben-Hassine 2019), whose political grievances are linked to the development of economic precarity (Paciello & Pioppi 2021, Sika 2021), and the increasing polarization of party systems along socio-economic, but also cultural lines of cleavage<sup>1</sup> (Vaquer 2015, Bosco & Verney 2020, Vachudova 2021). As a result, many governmental parties (especially social-democrat and conservative ones) collapsed to be replaced by “populist” left-wing

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1 Following Rokkan & Lipset (1967) we consider a *social cleavage* to be a long-lasting political division rooted in the social structure of a given society.

or right-wing parties.

South and east of the Mediterranean Sea, this crisis also affected the Islamist organizations, especially the so-called “Muslim Democratic Parties” (Yildirim 2016) advocating a “third way” between secularism and the building of an Islamist state. Yet, during the Arab Spring, these parties were appearing as the more viable alternative to the crumbling autocracies due to their ability to gain support from small and medium enterprises and petty bourgeoisie, and their will to fight off crony capitalism in favour of a competitive liberalization (*ibid.*). They were sharing a common foe with the mobilized youth: the corrupt elite supporting the authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, one decade later, the once champion of this political trend, the Turkish AKP, has turned into a tool of authoritarianism, the Moroccan PJD electorally collapsed in September 2021, and the Tunisian Ennahdha has been expelled from the official arena following the July 25, 2021 coup, after a decade of electoral erosion and growing allegations of corruption.

One of the causes of this failure could be the strength of the secular/Islamist cleavage in those societies (Rougier & Bayoumi 2016; Van Hamme, Goeury & Ben Rebah 2020). The strength of this polarization has presumably played a major role in the failure of the democratization attempts in Egypt, and an important one in Libya (Cross & Sorens 2016). It also created a favourable ground for the authoritarian turn in Turkey (Ayan Musil 2015) and even the one in Tunisia (Ozen, Bennett & Karakoç 2022). Another cause resides in the inability of the Islamists to answer the demands of the mobilized youth, which transforms them into a target for large factions of the protest movements (Moudouros 2014, Yardimci-Geyikci 2014, Holdo 2017, Berman 2019).

Here, Egypt’s case study is particularly interesting for understanding these trends due to the ability of its revolutionary youth to be represented in the political field

(Steuer 2021), and the pluralization of its Islamist politics, where a “third way” split from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as early as in 1996. Indeed, before 2011, this Egyptian “centrist” trend had particularly drawn the attention of scholars. It developed institutionally, firstly as an intellectual current identified as *wasatiyya* (“centrism”) (Baker 1997; Polka 2003; Hamzawi 2004; Høigilt 2010; Steuer 2017), and secondly as a political project around the attempts to establish the Wasat Party after 1996 (Ramīh 1997; Stacher 2002; Wickham 2004; Norton 2005; Utvik 2005; Hatina 2005; Yokota 2007; Steuer 2012).

The 2011 revolution had provided this current with an opportunity to enter the political scene, with the legal recognition of the Wasat Party a few days after the fall of Mubārak. Concurrently, new political parties have been established since then, and tried to occupy the same political space – at the centre of the secularism/Islamism cleavage. This is the case of the Egyptian Current Party (ECP), founded in 2011, and the Strong Egypt Party (SEP), established in 2012 following the presidential campaign of ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Abūl-Futūh, who ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in the election with 17.47% of the electors (more than 4,000,000 votes). These two parties merged in 2014, keeping the name of the Strong Egypt Party.

This party has been analysed either as an Islamist party (El Sherif 2016), or as part of the youth revolutionary movement (Abdalla 2016). This dual aspect is crucial because it distinguishes the SEP from the Wasat Party. Indeed, when the former opposed the Islamist-oriented 2012 constitution and called on people to join the demonstrations of June 30, 2013 asking for the demission of President Mursī, the latter stood with the MB from Summer 2012 to Summer 2014 (that is to say, during Mursī’s stay in power, and the following year, when it was a member of the “Coalition for Legitimacy”), took part in the drafting of the 2012 constitution, and campaigned for its

approval (figure 1). Yet, both parties (and the ECP as well) were born from the same reformist trend within the MB (Wickham 2013), and from several splinter groups breaking from the parent organization in 1996 and 2011. Abūl-Futūh himself had been the figurehead of this reformist trend among the MB during almost three decades, and his political trajectory shares a lot of commonalities with the ones of the Wasat's founders since the 1970s. The division among the former reformist MB following the 2012 presidential elections has never been addressed by the literature. Yet, this phenomenon questions the claim of both parties to being positioned at the centre of the Islamist/secular cleavage.

The main argument of this article is that this difference of strategy reflects a generational divide cutting across the centrist political family (and all the Egyptian political families) following the 2011 revolution. The Wasat is dominated by an older generation desirous of participating in official politics while following a "possibilist" strategy, and the SEP should be analysed as one of the political parties founded in 2011-2012 by the "revolutionary youth" from all over the political spectrum. The article is based on fieldwork carried out in 2011-2013, during which several interviews were realized with Wasat members and other Islamists, and on online interviews conducted in 2020-2021 with former members of the ECP and the SEP.

Due to the fact that the Wasat had already been studied before, and our more recent materials relate to the ECP and the SEP, the article is structured around the latter parties and their figurehead, 'Abd al-Mun'im Abūl-Futūh. After a presentation of the main argument and our empirics, we analyse the place of Abūl-Futūh within the Islamist family, and then his place within the revolutionary camp, before showing how the strategy he chose to follow in 2011-2013 can be labelled as "revolutionary".

### **The main argument: A generational divide cutting across the centrist family**

Both the Wasat and the ECP (then the SEP) were born from the Islamist side of the religious cleavage, namely from internal contradictions within the MB. They left the parent organization with a shared desire to create political parties autonomous from religious grassroots organizations and charity networks.

A difference in the social composition of the leadership can be noted: while the SEP has been described as a “petty bourgeoisie” party (Husayn 2018: 159-160), the Wasat is more “business-oriented” (El Sherif 2016: 326, 329). This also translates into their economic programs, with the Wasat being more neo-liberal, and the SEP (and the ECP) leaning toward social-democracy. This aspect has been used by some interviewees to explain the difference between the Wasat on the one hand, and the SEP and the ECP on the other<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, due to the structuring of the Egyptian party system (figures 2 and 3), this difference of positioning along the workers/owners cleavage does not explain the different post-2011 trajectories of these parties. The generational revolutionary/counter-revolutionary divide<sup>3</sup> is at the heart of the strategy of the ECP and the SEP, not the left/right orientation of social and economic policies<sup>4</sup>.

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2 Interview with a responsible of Abūl-Futūh’s campaign (Online: November 2020).

3 We use the term *divide* following Bartolini (2011) to indicate “something less” than a full cleavage. The “revolutionary youth” existed as a structured group sharing common values that created a sense of collective identity. Moreover, it was shaping the electoral behaviour of its members. Nevertheless, it lacked in longevity, as generations are, by definition, unable to survive the individuals which composed them.

4 Moreover, the Building and Development Party (Salafi) had a more social program as well, but nevertheless supported Mursī’s administration. It was argued that even the Freedom and Justice Party’s program was more social than the Wasat’s, as stated during our interview with a member of Abūl-Futūh’s staff (Cairo: June 22, 2011).

When using the term “generation,” we do not refer to a demographic cohort, but to the sociological phenomenon described for the first time by Mannheim (1952). According to this seminal work, a generation is a group of people who are all influenced by a specific historical event of their youth and who share a feeling of belonging to the same socio-historical context. This notion is particularly useful when studying generations of activists. Thus, in Egypt, the “1970s generation” (Shorbagy 2007) was marked by the student movement of the 1970s and its repression by Sādāt’s regime. The founders of the Wasat belong to this generation, while the leaders of the ECP and the SEP (except for Abūl-Futūh) are members of a younger generation marked by the protest movements of the 2000s and their culmination in the 2011 revolution (Tohamy 2017), which was usually referred to as the “revolutionary youth.”

Thus, the division among Egyptian “centrist” parties can be explained mainly by their positioning regarding the generational divide (figure 2). This divide, opposing the “revolutionary youth” to the “remnants of the former regime,” was very pregnant in the nascent Egyptian political scene of the years 2011-2012, where it represented the second structuring issue after the Islamist/secular cleavage (Steuer 2021). In this historical context, the word “revolutionary” referred mainly to the “revolutionary youth” (*shabāb al-thawra*), a social group which existed through grassroots organizations; among them the most important were the April 6 Movement and the Federation of the Revolutionary Youth. Politically, it found its expression in several small political parties created in 2011 (and some bigger ones founded in 2012), in the “Revolution Continues” coalition during the parliamentary elections of 2011-2012 and in the campaigns of Muhammad al-Barāda‘ī (liberal), Khālīd ‘Ālī (socialist), Hamdīn Sabbāhī (Nasserist) and Abūl-Futūh during the presidential election of 2012. Thus, the generational divide was cutting across all the political families.



The “revolutionary youth” were distinguishing themselves from the older generations at two levels: their methods of action, and their vision for the democratic transition. Regarding the methods, they were advocating a “revolutionary repertoire” (Abdalla 2016) which was brought to the front scene during the Arab uprising and combining the pacific occupation of symbolic spaces with horizontal forms of organization (Chalcraft 2012) while relying on social networks to share information and spread calls to action. Regarding the desired reforms, they were assuming that the most pressing issue that the 2011 uprising pointed to was the need to dismantle of the authoritarian and clientelist structures inherited from Mubārak’s regime. For them, it was vital and urgent to reform the security apparatus to remove its control over political life and put it under the citizens’ scrutiny. They were also asking for the exclusion of former members of the hegemonic party from the political life. Despite a broad and vague agreement among them about the necessity to handle social issues, political reforms were taking precedence over social justice in their discourses and political programs<sup>5</sup>.

Due to their recruitment of new members from among the “revolutionary youth,” the ECP and the SEP have chosen – and remained faithful to – a “revolutionary” strategy, trying to bring together Islamist and secular political parties against a common enemy represented by the forces of the former regime. This strategy translated naturally into their methods of action and the hierarchy of political reforms they desired for the transition period. If the Wasat was tempted by this strategy in the aftermath of the revolution, the election of Muhammad Mursī in June 2012 furnished this party with an opportunity to participate in the government. From there, it entered a different path, which we could label as a “possibilist”<sup>6</sup> strategy, which is defined as a will to seize any opportunity to make possible the partial realisation of one’s political

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5 See the analysis of the “Revolution Continues” coalition’s manifesto in Steuer (2021).

program. This strategy led the Wasat to eventually show solidarity with the Islamist camp in a context of growing antagonism from the secular oppositions. Indeed, socialists, liberals and nationalists united their forces with counterrevolutionaries to overthrow Muhammad Mursī in July 2013. In this context, the “revolutionary” strategy led the SEP to become more and more isolated on the Egyptian political scene, to the point that it has been targeted by repression since the beginning of 2018.

### **Materials and methodology**

This article is built on two sets of materials. The first one was constituted by a fieldwork realized in 2011-2013, during the last democratic experience in Egypt. Infield observations were made especially during electoral times (in Cairo, Suez, and Tanta). In-depth interviews were also conducted with eleven different members of the Wasat Party and other Islamist groups. The interviewees were three top leaders of the Wasat, one leader of the Freedom and Justice Party, one leader of the Labour Party, a close collaborator of Abūl-Futūh (a few days after his exclusion from the MB), a Wasat representative in the Parliament, a candidate of the Wasat in Suez and three young members of this party (two in Cairo and one in Tanta). Six of the interviewees were born in the 1950s, one in the 1960s, one in the 1970s, and three in the 1980s. A second set of nine interviews was realized from October 2020 to March 2021. Due to the pandemic situation, these interviews were conducted online. The interviewees were various top figures from Abūl-Futūh’s presidential campaign. Five of them were also founding members of the ECP or the SEP. Out of these nine interviewees, five were former MB, two used to be sympathizers of the organization, and two never had

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6 We use this word as an analogy with a faction of the French socialist movement led by Paul Brousse, which was called the “possibilists”. As reformists, the possibilists opposed the Marxist vision of Jules Guesde (Stafford 1971).

relations with the Brotherhood. Four were born in the 1970s, four in the 1980s, and one in the 1990s. In accordance with the ethics of social science regarding private data protection<sup>7</sup>, we decided not to disclose further information that could possibly reveal the identities of our interviewees.

### **The positioning of Abūl-Futūh with regard to the Islamist camp**

#### ***The pluralization of the Islamist politics in 2011***

The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) was created on June 6, 2011 by the MB to represent it in the political field. During its three years of existence, the FJP remained under the strict control of its parent organization (Vannetzel 2017). The Nour Party, which is an emanation of a grassroots preaching organization founded in the late 1970s in Alexandria, the “Salafi Call”, was founded on June 12, 2011. Other Salafi parties quickly followed, such as the Authenticity Party, which was founded by “Cairo’s Salafis” (Lacroix 2012; Arafat 2013) and the Building and Development Party (BDP), created by the formerly terrorist organization the “Islamic Group” in June 2011.

If the Salafi parties are generally considered as “more Islamist” than the MB, this organization also had to face a “more centrist” competition born from its own ranks, namely from its reformist wing. This wing has been scrutinized by many scholars during the past four decades, and its history is well known (El-Sayyid 1994; Wickham 1997; Abdo 2000; Murphy 2002; Al-Awadi 2014). The leaders of this trend started their activist life outside of the MB during the 1970s, when they were students and members of the “Islamic Groups”, an informal network of Islamist student activists who were closer in their worldview to the Salafis than to the MB (Mahmoud 2010: 31–3)<sup>8</sup>. The

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7 [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants\\_manual/hi/ethics/h2020\\_hi\\_ethics-data-protection\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/ethics/h2020_hi_ethics-data-protection_en.pdf) : 6–10.

8 Some of them eventually became the founders of the Salafi Call in Alexandria.

Islamic Groups conquered the majority in the Student Unions of many universities, and eventually at the national level as well. At the end of the 1970s, their members had to face repression, including sojourns in prison. Some of them decided to reject violence and joined the MB in the beginning of the 1980s<sup>9</sup>.

Due to their past as student activists, many of them took an active part in professional unions of middle-class professions (physicians, engineers, lawyers, pharmacists, journalists), and conquered the majority in many of them. But the Brotherhood was closely controlled by conservative activists, who relied on religious, charitable, or purely bureaucratic resources, and the representatives of the 1970s generation had no chance to climb the ranks of the organization. They started to develop reformist views, thinking that politics should be a specialized activity detached from the religious and charity fields. The division between reformists and conservatives reached its peak in 1996 with the creation of the Wasat Party. Two ideas were at the heart of its creation: the separation of preaching and politics, and the recognition of equal rights for all citizens without gender-based or religious differentiation. Its founders fought legal battles until February 2011, when the Wasat finally gained official recognition. Meanwhile, many reformists (such as ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Abūl-Futūh and ‘Isām al-‘Aryān) remained loyal to the MB, and continued to try to change it from the inside. In the 2008-2009 period, the election of the Guidance Office, as well as the nomination of a new Supreme Guide, Muhammad Badī‘, in 2010, reinforced the old guard, but it was openly contested by reformists (Wickham 2013: 127–32).

On February 19, 2011, the administrative court eventually accepted the official recognition of the Wasat Party. Two days later, the Supreme Guide Muhammad Badī‘

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9 Some others created the Islamic Group (*al-gamā‘a al-islāmiyya*), which entered a path of violent struggle against the state until the mid-1990s, when its leaders – defeated and imprisoned – renounced violence and expressed their desire to found a legal political party.

delegated Muhammad al-Katātnī – a loyal member of the MB’s apparatus – to supervise the creation of the FJP, a “civil party with an Islamic frame of reference”. In so doing, the MB embraced, at least superficially, the core principles of the Wasat Party: acceptance of the law and of the national framework, separation of religion and politics, and equal citizenship. On April 30, the MB’s Consultative Council approved the formation of the FJP and elected its leadership: Muhammad Mursī as president, ‘Isām al-‘Aryān as vice-president, and al-Katātnī as secretary-general. While dominated by conservatives (Mursī and Katātnī), this composition was also intended to satisfy the reformist trend represented by al-‘Aryān. Not only did the leaders of the organization choose those of the party (Al-Awadi 2014: 238–9), but also the autonomy of the FJP would be mainly theoretical since it “would consult [the leadership of the MB] on important party decisions” (Wickham 2013: 176)<sup>10</sup>.

Many members of the reformist trend expressed their frustration regarding the lack of autonomy of the newly created political party. Abūl-Futūh himself opposed the creation of the FJP. In his view, the MB should focus on its preaching activities, and let its members join any party of their choice on an individual basis (Tadros 2012: 75). For their part, younger reformists were claiming that the leadership of the FJP should have been chosen by its own members (Wickham 2013: 174–6). In response to the criticism of the reformist trend, the leadership of the organization hardened its position. In March 2011, the Supreme Guide Muhammad Badī‘ forbade MB to join any party except the forthcoming FJP, leading to many defections among the ranks of reformists and youth leaders during the following months.

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10 In an interview just after the official inception of the FJP, one of its leaders argued that the subordination of the party to the parent organization was a necessity for the time being (Cairo: May 2, 2011).

### ***Abūl-Futūh's political trajectory until 2012***

The former members of the SEP and the ECP whom we have interviewed often contrasted Abūl-Futūh to the leaders of the MB and their authoritarian practices. During his undergraduate years, when he was a member of the Islamic Groups, he paved his way into politics one step at a time by becoming the president of the Cairo University Student Union in the late 1970s (Tamām 2012). Some mild examples of his charisma could be seen and heard in his public debate with President Anwar al-Sādāt, and later the numerous occasions when he went against the MB's leadership's orders publicly.

Abūl-Futūh went up the ranks of the Brotherhood until he became a Guidance Office member (1987-2009) but he was often considered to not have had the same education or "cultivation" as other members<sup>11</sup>. In the 2000s, the multiplication of conflicts with the leadership of the organization increased his popularity among the youngest reformists. The element of *shūrā*<sup>12</sup> ["consultation", meaning here participation of the rank and file in the decision-making process], though central in the Brotherhood's discourse, going back all the way to its founder Hasān al-Bannā, was seldom practiced (Kandil 2014; Vannetzel 2020). "We were saying that this is unfair (...) the people should vote for the leader of the party [the FJP],"<sup>13</sup> stated one of our interviewees, arguing that this was discussed with Abūl-Futūh because the youngest Brotherhood reformists were outraged that the FJP was not following basic democratic procedures. It contrasted with Abūl-Futūh's conviction that without *shūrā* the outcomes only revolve

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11 The term "cultivation" as used by Hazem Kandil (2014).

12 *Shūrā* is an Arabic term used to refer to the act of consulting or consultation prior to decision making. The term is considered part of Muslim convictions as it is used and evoked repeatedly in the Quran, making the practices of *shūrā* an act closer to worship.

13 Interview with a responsible of Abūl-Futūh's campaign (Online: October 2020).

around a single persona<sup>14</sup>. His practice of *shūrā* included mobilization around and by him based on both inclusion and innovation.

In May 2011, Abūl-Futūh made public his will to run in the presidential elections as an independent. On June 19, he was expelled from the MB by the Consultative Council. Two days later, on June 21, 2011, reformist youths created the ECP. In July, they were expelled from the MB. The ECP's founders were a group of young MB who had previously taken part in the establishment of the Federation of the Revolutionary Youth together with young liberals, socialists, and Nasserists, all of them having been involved in the January 25 revolution. Like Abūl-Futūh, but two decades later, they had been involved in the Student Union of their universities. After that, they climbed the ranks of the MB up to its executive committees, where they specialized in the supervision of student activism (Husayn 2018: 121-146). Many of them took part in Abūl-Futūh's campaign in 2012.

The parliamentary elections of 2011-2012 presented a clear Islamist landscape (figure 3): an "Islamic coalition" was bringing together three Salafi parties (the Nour Party, the Authenticity Party, and the BDP); the "Democratic Coalition" was dominated by the FJP, but also contained small political parties from different political backgrounds in an attempt to appear as a coalition of national unity; the Wasat was running independently; and the ECP was part of a coalition (the Revolution Continues) with secular revolutionary youth organizations (among them the Federation of the Revolutionary Youth, and also the party of the Popular Socialist Alliance and the liberal Freedom Party). During the presidential elections, which followed a few months later, the cards were reshuffled: most of these organizations (the Nour Party, the BDP, the

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14 Interview with a responsible of Abūl-Futūh's campaign (Cairo: 2015).

Wasat and the ECP) supported the Abūl-Futūh candidacy, while the FJP and the Authenticity Party endorsed the candidacy of Muhammad Mursī (figure 1).

### **The place of Abūl-Futūh within the revolutionary camp**

#### ***Abūl-Futūh's presidential campaign***

The 2012 presidential campaign of Abūl-Futūh has been considered a milestone in the path towards the construction of the SEP. It deepened even further his ideological and organizational rupture with the MB's leadership, bringing him closer to the ideas and methods of other "revolutionary" organizations and political parties.

The organization of the 2012 presidential campaign showed a high degree of political professionalism and specialization. This professionalism included the inclusion of various tendencies within the campaign and an effective communication with other candidates. "He [Abūl-Futūh] is not *tanzīmī* (organizational)," stated one of our interviewees when describing Abūl-Futūh's leadership of the campaign as compared to that of the MB. While the latter has a rigid internal hierarchy, discourages initiatives from its members, silences or excludes dissident voices, and acts in secrecy, Abūl-Futūh's campaign was characterized by encouraging the participation of his followers, the integration of different political currents, and transparency. This organizational rupture with the MB's practices was facilitated by the personal distaste of Abūl-Futūh for hierarchical control. Consequently, he stayed distant from the organization of the campaign – and later of the SEP – and left a lot of freedom of initiative to his followers. All the interviewees who took part in this campaign declared that Abūl-Futūh delegated the organizers of the campaign, informed them about all the details and reviewed his public interventions with them because he was advised not to improvise and was held



“accountable” when he did.<sup>15</sup> Abūl-Futūh’s revolutionary or “rebellious” past appealed to the youth. This made him an exemplary mobilization figure both during and after his time in the MB.

There are other traits of Abūl-Futūh that appeal to the youth. References to the use of *shūrā* were repeatedly made by all the interviewees when they were asked about Abūl-Futūh’s leadership style within the campaign, and later in the SEP. The idea of *shūrā* as inherited in Abūl-Futūh’s leadership style and convictions as a politician also goes back to his encounters within the MB’s Guidance Office. These encounters, as recounted in other previous conversations with ex-MB shortly after the 2011 uprising, mostly revolved around Abūl-Futūh wanting to have a more inclusive decision-making procedure which would consider other ideas than those circulating among the Guidance Office’s members. However, these attempts by Abūl-Futūh to have the MB practice *shūrā* failed. The non-hierarchization of Abūl-Futūh’s campaign, as compared to that of the MB, characterizes his political presence and constituted an important motive of mobilization for his followers. Abūl-Futūh’s supporters represent a rupture with the tradition of “listen and obey”. Most of the interviewees who later became part of Abūl-Futūh’s campaign stated that at various times since 2008 they had stopped participating in most of the MB’s meetings except for those of the ‘*usra*<sup>16</sup> and/or had a systematic form of conflict with the leaders and the Guidance Office’s practices.

In addition, the positioning of Abūl-Futūh, who was hostile toward the military regime as well as toward the MB’s leadership, put his campaign within the revolutionary camp. Indeed, since the Muhammad Mahmūd events<sup>17</sup>, many revolutionary youths were perceiving the MB as part of the counterrevolutionary forces

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15 Interview with a responsible of Abūl-Futūh’s campaign (Online: October 2020).

16 Literally meaning “family”, but in the Brotherhood’s vocabulary, this term refers to the sections of the organization.

beside the military regime which was managing the transition. In their view, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) favoured the scenario of a quick transition that was supposed to benefit the MB, and that would explain why the Islamist organization refused to support the claim of the secular opposition asking for the stepping down of the SCAF, and the constitution of a broad transitory government that would include civilian representatives of the main Egyptian political forces. By going on Tahrīr Square during these events, and showing support for the demonstrators' claims, Abūl-Futūh strengthened his revolutionary credentials.

### ***The legacy of Abūl-Futūh's campaign: the Strong Egypt Party***

After Mursī's coming to power on June 30, 2012, Abūl-Futūh started to refer to the "Strong Egypt current"<sup>18</sup> to designate those who were part of his presidential campaign, members of the SEP and his other followers. The SEP was founded to perpetuate Abūl-Futūh's 2012 electoral campaign. From its inception, it was looking to transcend the Islamism/secularism cleavage (Husayn 2018: 148–9). The SEP succeeded in attracting members from outside the Islamic family, such as former members of al-Barāda'ī's campaign, the April 6 Movement, the Justice Party and the Ghad Party. Nevertheless, its constituent core was gathering former members of the MB and activists formerly close to this movement (Husayn 2018: 154-5). Many leaders of the SEP and of the ECP were from the generation of the "revolutionary youth". This

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17 On November 19, 2011, violent clashes erupted between demonstrators and the police at the entrance of Cairo's Muhammad Mahmūd Street, which leads from Tahrīr Square to the building of the Ministry of Interior. The fights lasted for days and resulted in several dozens of casualties. Demonstrators were asking for the stepping down of the SCAF, and the creation of a "Public Salvation Committee" – which would include civilian political forces beside representatives of the army – managing the transitory period.

18 "Live with Dr. Abdel Moneim Abul-Futuh the Ex-presidential Candidate." *Al Jazeera Mubasher*, February 11, 2018. <https://youtu.be/ag7QbqQ5pVM>

particularity in the generational composition of their leadership is a common point shared with the Dostor Party (liberal) and the Popular Current (Nasserist), both of which were established at the same time as the SEP in the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election. Also, it sets the SEP and the ECP apart from other Islamist parties which are led by members of older generations born in the 1950s; this is the case of the FJP, but also of most of the Salafi parties and the Wasat Party.

In 2018, a few days before he was arrested, Abūl-Futūh gave an interview to *Al-Jazeera* where he declared that Mursī had “failed in directing the different files of the state.”<sup>19</sup> However, our interviews contained various narratives, from Mursī’s alleged fallacies to the existence of deep state conspiracies aimed at undermining him. One of the interviewees described Mursī as having no authority as president to the extent that “they [the deep state] cut the water in the [Presidential] Palace.”<sup>20</sup> This assertion did not change the interviewees’ stance regarding Mursī or the MB in June 2013, namely on the eve of his overthrow. All the interviewed members participated in the June 30, 2013, demonstrations against Mursī. Nevertheless, Abūl-Futūh warned against accepting the situation of the coup of July 3 as he described it, in which the then Minister of Defence ‘Abd al-Fattāh al-Sīsī dismissed Muhammad Mursī.

This refusal of the *fait accompli* should be linked to Abūl-Futūh’s insistence on peacefulness (*silmiyya*), which was also one of the mottoes of the 2011 demonstrators. “I am warning against the use of violence,”<sup>21</sup> stated Abūl-Futūh, arguing that despite the illegitimacy of the coup the response should not be with violence. This is another difference from the MB, who were divided after 2013 into groups resorting to violence and others calling for negotiations. Another point that shows Abūl-Futūh’s insistence on

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19 Interview with a responsible of Abūl-Futūh’s campaign (Online: November 2020).

20 Interview with a responsible of the SEP (Online: December 2020).

21 “Live with Dr. Abdel Moneim Abūl-Futūh.” *op. cit.*

peace and what he referred to as a form of patient change, is his willingness to participate in discussions with the interim president, ‘Adlī Mansūr (July 2013 – June 2014).

A constitutional referendum was held in January 2014. The SEP started to campaign in favour of the ‘No’ vote, but with its activists being subjected to repression, it suspended the campaign, and called for a boycott of the election. After that, the activity of the party was reduced to the bare minimum, and eventually froze after the 2018 presidential election. At that time, the party members and Abūl-Futūh decided to boycott the said election (the re-election of President Sīsī). Abūl-Futūh wrote a common declaration with the socialist Khālīd ‘Ālī, a lawyer, human rights activist, and briefly a 2018 presidential candidate who withdrew his candidacy after being put under pressure and threatened with the exposure of his personal life<sup>22</sup>. Abūl-Futūh was arrested in February 2018, a few weeks before the election and just after the broadcast of a televised interview realized in London with the Qatari news channel *al-Jazeera*, during which he was very critical toward the regime. Muhammad al-Qassās, Abūl-Futūh’s deputy and a founding member of the SEP, had been arrested a few days earlier. Both have been put on the terrorist list and remain in pre-trial detention, with Abūl-Futūh in solitary confinement since his arrest.

In 2022, leaked videos of Abūl-Futūh appeared in the third season of the television series *al-Ikhtiyār (The Choice)*. Abūl-Futūh’s footage shows that he has been in rupture with the MB for a long time. His lawyer Khālīd Ālī pushed forward a request in court demanding Abūl-Futūh’s release, as the videos show that he does not belong to the MB or any other Islamist current for that matter.

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22 Khālīd ‘Ālī is also Abūl-Futūh’s lawyer, representing him in front of the Egyptian judiciary.

## The “revolutionary” strategy as an attempt to bridge the Islamist/secular gap

### *The positioning of Abūl-Futūh on the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary divide*

In March 2011, all the Islamist currents agreed to support the constitutional referendum organized by the SCAF (figure 1). Many of our interviewees explained this position by stating that there was a will to accept a short-term period of transition in order to prevent a longer period of time under a military regime<sup>23</sup>. But the truth is that the National Democratic Party of Husnī Mubārak – which was dissolved only in April 2011 – also called for a ‘Yes’ vote. On the opposite side, the secular opposition parties were advocating a longer road map with a redaction of a consensual constitution preceding the election. This strategy was called *al-dustūr awlān* (“the Constitution first”). The SEP did not exist at that time, but Abūl-Futūh – then still a member of the MB – called for a ‘Yes’ vote after a long hesitation. He was arguing that despite his preference for *al-dustūr awlān*, he ultimately favoured a concrete road map over a jump into the void<sup>24</sup>.

The “revolutionary” strategy of this current started with the parliamentary elections of 2011-2012, when the ECP joined secular political forces in the “The Revolution Continues” coalition. From its inception in May 2011, the ECP set for itself the following goals: to “complete the revolution” (*istikmāl masār al-thawra*), to express the views of the Federation of the Revolutionary Youth in the political field, and to transcend the religious/secular polarization. In the view of its founders, the creation of

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23 Interview with a responsible of the Wasat Party (Cairo: April 21, 2011); interview with a responsible of the Labour Party (Cairo: April 23, 2011); interview with a young Wasat activist (Cairo: May 3, 2011); interview with a young Wasat executive (Cairo: May 9, 2011).

24 Interview with a member of Abūl-Futūh’s staff (Cairo: June 22, 2011).

an Islamist party would deepen this divide, and endanger the unity experienced on Tahrīr Square during the January revolution (Husayn 2018: 136-7).

During the 2012 presidential election, the Abūl-Futūh campaign was based on a “revolutionary” strategy aiming at gathering together secular and Islamist forces against the old regime. He was starting his meetings with a recollection of the revolutionary events, including in this litany of martyrs the killing of several Christian demonstrators in front of the state television building in October 2011<sup>25</sup>. This strategy succeeded only partially. While only secular individuals and very small secular organizations (such as the Justice Party) joined his campaign<sup>26</sup>, most of the secular revolutionary forces were drawn toward Hamdīn Sabbāhī’s campaign. Besides this, while almost all the non-Brotherhood Islamist forces stood with Abūl-Futūh, their goals only partially aligned with his: the intra-Islamist competition was pushing them to support a candidate opposed to that of the MB. In consequence, it was not surprising to see the Nour Party and the BDP participating in Mursī’s administration after the elections. Conversely, members of the ECP – who participated massively in the Abūl-Futūh campaign, including at the highest levels – remained faithful to the revolutionary strategy, to the point that they merged with the SEP in 2014.

An example of the continuation of the revolutionary strategy under Mursī’s rule is the opposition of the SEP to the 2012 Constitution, which was drafted by the Islamist majority and refused by the secular opposition. The SEP listed ten reasons justifying this refusal<sup>27</sup>, among them the insufficiency of economic and social rights, the lack of guarantees against discrimination, the power given to the president, the lack of

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25 Personal observation (Suez: December 18, 2011).

26 *Mada Masr* (August 18, 2011): <https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2020/08/18/feature/>

[/سياسة/أبو-الفتوح-بين-عزلتين](#)

27 *Al-Masry Al-Yawm* (October 21, 2012):

<https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/226380>

subordination of the military forces to the elected civilian institutions, and the non-explicit forbidding of torture. All these reasons showed a will to position the party against all the reminiscences of the old regime in the new Constitution, and none of them are specifically Islamist.

Actually, one of these reasons was even coming from the secular side of the religious cleavage, since the SEP opposed the Islamic University of Al-Azhar's control of the law in relation to the *sharī'a*. Nevertheless, the SEP did not make its own all the criticisms coming from the secular opposition. Namely, it did not explicitly reject article 219. For the secular opposition, this article was a *casus belli* because it aiming at an effective translation of the *sharī'a* into the Egyptian positive law. By not explicitly criticizing it, the SEP remains faithful to the line of Abūl-Futūh's 2012 campaign: refusing to choose between the Islamist and the secular, but firmly opposing any vestige of the old regime, such as the autonomy of the military, the use of torture, the presidential regime, and the lack of social justice. This anchors the SEP on the revolutionary side of the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary divide and echoes the "The Revolution Continues" manifesto of the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections (see Steuer 2021).

### ***The division of the Egyptian "centrist" organizations***

The Wasat also took part in Abūl-Futūh's presidential campaign, but its leaders moved on, and participated in the Mursī administration. Yet, many young revolutionaries joined the Wasat in 2011 and were active in its committee for youth. Some of them were thinking of themselves as part of the "revolutionary youth", and as mobilized against the remnants of the old regime – in a revolutionary process which had just begun with the fall of Mubārak – and were advocating a support for the candidacy of the

liberal revolutionary figure al-Barāda'ī's<sup>28</sup>. At that time, the interviewed members of the Wasat – younger<sup>29</sup> and older<sup>30</sup> ones alike – were spontaneously giving as the main reason for their choice to join this party the fact that it was trying to make a balance between the secular and Islamist camps. Actually, the party draws its name from this will to occupy the *center* (Ar. *wasat*) of the Egyptian political field, which is divided between Islamists and secularists. In 2012, it even withdrew its support for the candidacy of its intellectual mentor, Muhammad Salīm Al-‘Awwā – who was deemed too favourable to the SCAF – and decided after an internal vote to support Abūl-Futūh instead<sup>31</sup>.

The support of the Wasat Party for the Mursī administration is rooted in the will of its founders to “become politicians” (Stacher 2002: 422). After Mursī's victory, they seized the opportunity to participate in the government, arguing that they would have done the same in case of a victory of al-Barāda'ī or Sabbāhī<sup>32</sup>. Leaders of the Wasat interviewed in June 2013 compared the Abūl-Futūh campaign to a *mouled* (religious festivities commemorating the death of a saint) and quoted an Egyptian saying: “A *mouled* cannot last all your life”<sup>33</sup>. This metaphor illustrates how the positioning of the SEP appeared obsolete in their eyes at that time: for them, the revolutionary camp defeated the counterrevolutionary forces in the ballot box during the run-off of the presidential elections in June 2012, and the time had come to participate into the writing of the Constitution and the elaboration of public policies. In their opinion, the SEP was

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28 Interview with a young Wasat executive (Cairo: May 9, 2011). At that time, the ECP was also discussing this possibility, as appears in our interview with a member of Abūl-Futūh's staff (Cairo: June 22, 2011).

29 Interview with a young member of the Wasat Party (Tanta: January 8, 2012).

30 Interview with a candidate of the Wasat Party (Suez: December 18, 2011).

31 Interview with two leaders of the Wasat Party (Cairo: June 2, 2013).

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*



at that time perpetuating a strategy of the past, trying to unite Islamist and secular forces against an enemy that the Wasat leaders were (wrongly) assuming defeated.

At the same time, they were not perceiving themselves as part of the Islamist side of the religious/secular cleavage. They were very critical toward the MB and were estimating that their own political line was clear, and that the MB were doing zigzags and crossing the Wasat's line from time to time. They were also claiming that they did not ask to participate in the government, but that some of their members had been called to do so by Mursī and that the party did not oppose their nomination to ministerial posts<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, they were perceiving their own political action as being crucial within the Mursī administration, as they played a major role in the redaction of the 2012 Constitution and were a major force of proposal in the Consultative Assembly (the Higher Chamber of the Parliament)<sup>35</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Although the Arab Spring was at first perceived as a long-awaited opportunity for the “centrist” Islamist movements in the Arab world, their organizations have eventually become victims of their difficulty in positioning themselves in a time of growing polarization, not only between the Islamist and secular camps, but also between the aspirations for change of the young generation and the desire of the businessmen and entrepreneurs' components of their electorate to create more connexions with the state administration. The highly fragmented Egyptian political landscape constitutes a good case study for apprehending these dynamics due to the variety of “centrist” and “youth revolutionary” organizations represented on this political scene during the aborted transition of 2011-2013.

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34 *Ibid.*

35 Interview with a Wasat representative in the Parliament (Cairo: June 3, 2013).

The SEP and the ECP represent a new attempt at bridging the gap between the Islamist and secular camps in Egypt when they are compared to an older political party holding similar views, namely the Wasat. The Wasat's founders left the MB in the mid-1990s, at a time when the state repression targeting the professional organizations of the educated middle class closed a space where they were able to participate in politics. Consequently, their party was born from their desire to become politicians. On the opposite side, the founders of the ECP left the MB in 2011 in the pursuit of the realization of the "revolution's goals". With this origin, they were leaning heavily toward the revolutionary side of the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary divide. Abūl-Futūh was expelled from the MB at the same time as the younger activists who took part in the establishment of the ECP. He then became the figurehead of the aspirations of this younger generation of ex-reformist MB. His electoral campaign of 2012 was the culmination of the "revolutionary" strategy designed by the ECP's leader to overcome the secular/Islamist divide.

The 2011 revolution has indeed constituted a founding moment in the political life of many young people. Consequently, they were drawn to position themselves on the divide opposing revolutionary forces to the old regime without much regard for their political affiliation, namely whether they were Islamists, leftists, liberals, or nationalists. During the parliamentary elections, the "the Revolution Continues" coalition embodied the political expression of these youths from different political backgrounds. In 2012, the campaigns of Abūl-Futūh and Sabbahī (and of al-Barāda'ī before his withdrawal) channelled most of these youths' activities, which crystallized immediately after the election in the Popular Current, the Dostor party and the SEP.

Conversely, the opportunity to participate in the Mursī administration anchored the Wasat leaders – whose main interest from the beginning was to take part in the

political life – in the Islamist camp. Then, the Wasat Party ended up on the Islamist side of the cleavage facing the secular camp even though this situation has never been wanted – or endorsed – by most of the leaders and members of this party. It was only during the Summer of 2014 – after one year of state repression – that the Wasat Party renounced its alliance with the MB. Nevertheless, it has never come back into the Egyptian political life, and some of its leaders are still imprisoned.

As for the SEP, its refusal to choose between the secular and Islamist camps led to its isolation in the post-2014 Egyptian political landscape. Its will to maintain a revolutionary position has turned it into an easy target for being labelled “Islamist”. Then it became a victim of state repression, and its activity is frozen today, while some of its leaders – namely Muhammad al-Qassās and ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Abūl-Futūh – have been in jail since February 2018.

In this regard, both the “possibilist” and the “revolutionary” strategy ended with the same disappointing results, illustrating the difficulties inherent to the will to maintain a centrist position at a time of strong polarization. A question remains open for the future: will this common failure of both strategies open the way to a reunion of the two halves of the Egyptian “centrist” current, or will the scars of their respective attitudes under Mursī’s rule prove to be long-lasting?

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Figure 1. The contrasted evolutions of the parties born from the Egyptian MB after 2011.

Figure 2. Positioning of the main political parties and personalities mentioned in this article within the Egyptian party system.

Figure 3. Places of the main Egyptian Islamist parties within the different coalitions competing in the 2011–12 parliamentary elections.