Sufism and Politics in Contemporary Egypt: A Study of Sufi Political Engagement in the Pre and Post-revolutionary Reality of January 2011

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Abstract
Experts on Sufi movements relegate a rather significant and critical role for Sufism in the formation of redefined political forces on the new post-Arab Spring political map. This is particularly true for one of the most vibrant Sufi capitals of the Muslim world, Egypt, holding a record sum of more than 10 million Sufi members. In spite of this, however, one year after the Revolution in Egypt, political developments exhibited a pattern of failure of Sufis gaining political ground in the post-Mubarak political arena. This paper discusses contentions and problematic issues Sufis faced with respect to politics in Egypt, with particular focus given to their political experience in Egypt. This study seeks to explore the Sufi experience throughout the process of political struggle, while examining their contributions to the November 2011 elections in an attempt to unveil the factors culminating in their political setback in spite of their massive membership base, and the official favored support of the state, both on the local and international fronts. The study concludes that the nature of the Sufi practice itself contributed to a restraining of their political presence, in addition to their lack of political awareness, poor organization and populism, all of which acted critically toward creating a failed political journey for the Sufi orders in modern Egypt.

Keywords
Sufi orders, Arab Spring, Political Islam, Egyptian Revolution, Sufi movements

Introduction
Sufism has deeply penetrated the multifaceted historical development of Egypt, and thoroughly permeates the myriad skeins of its rich socio-cultural and religious fabric. Sufi institutions and orders are considered among the most significant foundations, on whose basis much of...
the religious tradition and establishments arose in both medieval and contemporary Egypt. In current times, Sufi institutions are seen as a major foundation upon which Egyptian society is built, particularly in light of its widespread reach, and with respect to its role in shaping the religious and traditional character of Egyptians. This form of far-flung growth allowed the Sufis to forge a significant political force throughout the history of Egypt. With the emergence of political Islam in Egypt in the 20th century however, and more specifically with the ascension of political Islam to power in the post-Mubarak era, reliance on the Sufis played a critical role set to strike a balance between religious forces and also to dampen the intensity and dominance of political Islam in Egypt.

It may be argued that Sufi orders in Egypt are capable of redefining the political map that has been overwhelmingly dominated by Islamic political movements following both parliamentary and presidential elections in November 2011 and May 2012, respectively. The Sufis derive their electoral strength from the nature of their Sufi organizations, where the position and sacrosanctity accorded to the spiritual master (Shaykh) plays an undeniably crucial role in directing the disciples’ socio-cultural, political and religious views and inclinations. The Sufi spiritual master, generally known as the ‘Shaykh’, derives such authority from the nature of the Sufi teachings themselves, which are keen on disciplining followers and adapting them to the end that they are compliant with the vision of the Shaykh to the point of complete and abject submission. For this reason perhaps, the political decisions of the Shaykhs are consistently reflected in their disciples’ behaviors, political culture and political decisions. It is therefore worthy of attention to note the unifying frame of reference among the Sufis, which would seem to closely resemble the Shi’ite model of authority-building. The assumption was that if only the Sufi orders would mobilize the masses of their popular base in support of their political aspirations, then the newly minted political group would present a formidable rival to both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafiyah alike. Emerging as a serious competitor vying for political power to counter-balance the existing Islamic political groups appears to have been the motive for the alliance of liberals represented in the Hizb Al-Masryin Al-Ahrar, (The Party of Free Egyptians), al-Kotla Al-Masriya (The Mass of Egypt), Tahaluf Althawra (the Alliance of the Revolution) and the Nassiri Party.

Due to a series of factors that have undermined and enfeebled the struggle against rival Islamic political movements, the Sufis’ political performance in Egypt’s recent elections, however, does not reflect their lofty and much vaunted, anticipated expectations. The rise and development of Sufi movements in of itself speaks partially of an intellectual opposition to the very ideals of Islamic political movements. The position of Sufism in Egypt and its unconditional alliance with the regime throughout the 20th century only deepened the schism between itself and the rest of the Muslim political movements, which were time and time again oppressed and abused by the regime. In this regard, this internally negative position, in effect, sparked Sufi political aspirations following long periods of inactivity, isolation and protection of the regime. Following the Egyptian Revolution of February 2011, the political experience of the Sufis was able to overcome a number of obstacles and challenges but also failed on numerous other fronts. This in turn limited its political efficacy and reduced the size of its influence and footprint, while understandably disappointing many of its disciples, adherents and supporters. As such, one must question the political worth of the Sufi orders in Egypt. Besides, what brought about the failure of the Sufi movements in gaining any position of strength either in the pre- or post-revolution stages? What are the dimensions of the Sufi political performance that have affected its position and contribution to the Egyptian political scene? In this research we will examine some of those problems and challenges that led to a weakening of Sufi politics and eventually a political decline of Sufi orders in the Egyptian political arena.
The rise of Sufism in Egypt

Egypt has for a number of historical and cultural circumstances served as a safe haven for Sufis across the Muslim world. Current official statistics record a number of 77 Sufi orders registered with the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders, totaling more than 15 million Sufi disciples (Baumann, 2011). Those Sufi orders manage a number of social and cultural institutions and endowed assets by means of which they consolidate and control various religious activities and functions in Egypt. Expansion of Sufi masses dates back to the middle of the third century, owing credit to the leading role of the Sufi pioneer Dhul-Nun al-Misri (d.859), who was influential in settling the Sufi practice in Egypt. Abu Bakr al-Zaqqaq (d.903) and Abu al-Hasnaban Benan al-Hammal also represented key Sufi figures in this movement (d.928) (Al-Naggar, 1987: 43). As a collective, the institutional phenomenon of Sufism was a little late in rising. Maqrizi (1997: 134), for instance, draws attention to the rise of collective Sufism in Egypt in 1173, which coincided with the reign of Salahuddin al-Ayyubi (d.1193), who used Sufism as an intellectual tool in his political campaign against the Fatimids. In fact, Salahuddin promoted both Ash‘arismand Sufism to fill the intellectual and spiritual vacuum in Egyptian life left in the wake of the Fatimid Dynasty’s decline and their intellectual stagnation (‘Ammar, 2009: 54).

The situation of several shrines of Sufi masters in Egypt, however, also played a significant role in settling the Sufi practice into the fabric of social acceptance, with the credence of historical continuity, and a sentimental claim to the land. The notion of Shrines and their sacrosanct position in Sufi thought is intimately associated with the thought and sainthood of the master (Shaykh) or spiritual pole (qutb) in Sufi teachings, and represents one of the foundations of the Sufi experience, (Heck, 2007: 149). The phenomenon of the shrine traces its origins back to some form of sacred authority in Sufism, which expresses itself as an extension to the guidance of the Prophet. As such, both Sufi Masters and their disciples inherit their sacrosanctity via their predecessors, which they retain even past their deaths through the visiting of their graves and the prayers held there. Sufis use a large number of religious traditions to justify the need for drawing nearer to God through visiting the graves of the pious and praying for them. It was through this idea that Sufi shrines came to represent a central hub for Sufis, and a means for rejuvenating Sufis’ commitment and will, and an avenue for recruitment (Lapidus, 2002: 210).

Following the state’s official recognition of Sufism and its adoption as an authoritative strategy for political and public life, Egypt turned into a highly attractive destination for Sufi masters who were interested in establishing Sufi schools and orders, prominent among whom include Abu al-Fath al-Wasiti (d.1234), who left Iraq for Alexandria and promoted the Rifa‘i Sufi order (Bayyumi, 1992: 143). Similarly, Ahmad al-Badawi (d.1276), a Sufi Master from Morocco, arrived in Egypt in 1236, and established the Ahmadiyyah Sufi Order in Tanta (Al-Naggar, 1987: 53). Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d.1258) left Tunisia in 1244 with his students and disciples and settled down in Alexandria where he established the Shadhili Sufi Order (Mahmud, 1999: 44).

In Desouk, Shaykh Ibrahim al-Desouk (d.1277) established the Desouki Sufi Order. This was followed by consecutive waves of Sufism up until the eighth century when Sufism became an integral character of the religious life in Egypt. Of the 77 Sufi orders, a relatively small number of Sufi authorities controlled such a large number of disciples and as such exercised considerable influence over socio-political life in Egypt. This included the Qadiriyyah Sufi Order of the early Sufi Master ‘Abdul-Qadir al-Jaylani (d. 1166) along with the Naqshabandiyah and al-Nuriyyah orders.

The Suhrawardiyya Sufi Order also enjoys influential popularity in Egypt, while the Ahmadiyya Order of Ahmad al-Badawi is considered the most effective and prevalent order in the spiritual life
of Egyptians. What likely led to this prominence is the presence of the popular Shrine of its Master in Tanta (Fawzi, 2007: 17). The Suhrawardi Order gave birth to other Sufi orders, such as al-Shanawiyah of Muhammad al-Shanawi (d. 2008), Mashyakhat Mashaykh al-Turug al-Sufiyyah, and the position of the Chairman of the Sufi Council as well as the Desouki Order of El-Desouki (d. 1278). The Shadhili Order also enjoys a notable position among the Sufis Orders in Egypt (De Jong, 2000: 238–239) and favorable status in the Sufi hierarchy in Egypt.

The powerful influence of Sufi orders in Egypt’s suburbs is probably the result of its active network of names of orders, with Sufi masters and saints living in rural areas and villages. The Shadhili Sufi Order, for instance, is more powerful in upper Egypt, particularly in the provinces of Qena and Aswan. The Ahmadiyya Order is popular in the rural villages of Tanta state, while the Rifa‘i Order is popular in the villages of Esna, Arment and Luxor (Bayyumi, 2009: 112). With this, it may become clear that the strong Sufi presence is obviously more extensive in upper Egypt in view of the fact that many Sufi leaders and founders of prominent Sufi orders like al-Wasiti, al-Badawi, al-Shadhili and al-Desouki lived and died in upper Egypt. One should not ignore the impact of the sense of family and tribe in maintaining the strength of Sufi orders. The practice of loyalty of Muslim youth to their elderly, along with the loyalty of notable families to the tribe, has strengthened Sufi order cohesion significantly (‘Ammar, 2009: 125). It appears that the long practice of Sufism in many segments of Muslim societies has evolved from a religious exercise into a social activity, reflecting a rather integral character of social life in Egypt, as seen with the influence of a number of Sufi institutions in Egypt, particularly in regions and areas where the role and contribution of the state is either negligible or absent.

**Sufism and politics**

A historical overview of the relationship associating Sufism, politics and society raises a number of critical problems related to the Sufi experience itself, among which is whether Sufism can be described as a personal commitment dealing solely with the inner being, aiming to reconnect humanity with God and purify the soul from the ills of the material world (Heck, 2010: 14) or, rather, is it a personal movement of change and development seeking to change humanity for the sake of changing social reality (Ladjal et al., 2012: 116). In between these two lines revolves the entirety of conflict and reactionism to Sufism, whether born of Sufi orders and their disciples themselves, or their rivals, including Muslim political movements and western researchers. In view of this introduction, we may observe the following patterns or trends.

**Trend of politically charged dynamism**

Attempts by Sufi orders to cope with modern changes and engage in general social work occur while simultaneously preparing and mobilizing leaders for the forefront of political struggle. This in turn leads Sufi orders to acquire the role of active catalysts, as opposed to reactionary forces, thereby attracting numerous political figures. This pattern finds credence in historical evidence, as shown in the sizable number of Sufi personalities, such as ‘Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak (d.797), Shaykh Shamil in Dagestan (d.1871), al-Amir ‘AbdulQadir, the Master of the Qadirriyah Sufi Order in Algeria, (d.1882) and ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, the leader of the Sanusi Order in Libya (d.1931). Modern history is also replete with similar examples, as in the case of the Nur Movement, the Naqshabandi order in Turkey, the rise of Najm al-Din Arbakan and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Also notable are the contributions made by the Muridiyyah and Tijaniyyah Sufi Orders in West Africa, most particularly in Senegal (Rudiger, 2007: 33).
Trend of politically confined regression

The socio-religious culture created as a by-product of Sufi order teachings reflects a preoccupation with base folklore, outer festivities and adherence to a traditional religious outlook without any degree of positive or concrete contribution to politics. Exception is given, however, to a measure of insignificant maneuvering occurring in the limited political capabilities allotted by political authorities. This model finds support with instances of many Sufi orders during and after the colonial occupation of Egypt, and continues to occur today in countries such as Algeria, Syria, Iraq and other Muslim countries (Ladjal et al., 2012: 116). This pattern, however, lacks the social dynamism and political experience required for any self-determination, effectively leaving it incapable of turning attention to macro-societal concerns and problems. Accordingly, political authorities tamper and interfere with the internal details of the orders to maintain conformity and compliance to their visions and political agenda. As such, most Sufis are found somewhere along a wide-range spectrum, ranging between the first and the second patterns.

Trend of introspective isolationism

A collective, reactionary attitude permeates the Sufi orders’ conscious fabric, distancing Sufism from politics, and instead focusing attention and efforts on the purely fundamental objective of Sufism; namely the purification of the soul and the strengthening of Muslim’s spiritual relationship with God in preparation for the life to come, with little attention given to the changing world of politics, as tumultuous as it may be (Moubarak, 1975: 114). This trend was manifested in the pioneering Sufi Masters of both the past and present, as commonly asserted: ‘Political shrewdness is to leave politics’. Ibn al-Farid (d.1235), the poet of divine love, accurately exemplifies this trend and was known for strange tales and incidents in his dealings with political authority and matters. The Malamatiyya Sufi Order adopted his pattern as well, and thus decided to abstain from politics and political movement, and to instead draw the attention of the disciples on individual salvation (Al-‘Afifi, 1975: 11). Presently speaking, this trend is seen in the practice and approach of many contemporary Sufi orders in Morocco, Cyprus, Yemen, Malaysia and some other countries.

Politicalized Sufism

Since their emergence in Egypt, the Sufis have never been far removed from politics. Salahuddin’s earlier endorsement was essentially carried out for immediate short-term political interests. Many Sufis joined in the resistance against the Crusades, and helped Muslim leaders in manifesting control over social unrest; most prominent with Abul-Hasan al-Shadhili (Mahmud, 1999: 48). It appears, however, that the relationship the Sufis shared with the powers that be and their accompanying political elites was often based on the principle of mutual exchange of interests (Morrow and al-Omran, 2010). In recent times, however, the mark of Sufis’ political participation appears to be more obscure. More often than not, government authorities used Sufis and Sufi institutions to secure political positions and interests, particularly in their struggle against political rivals and opponents. With the rise of the modern nation state, however, Sufism moved toward a state-accepted legal organization (Nabulsi, 1994), leading to the birth of new Sufi titles such as the Carpet of Shaykh al-Bakri (al-sajjadah al-bakriyah).

From the 18th century onwards, the government adopted a new organizing system toward the Sufis, leading the Ottoman governor to oversee the appointment of these Sufi positions, namely the al-Saji/dad al-Bakriya. In 1781 Muhammad Efandi al-Bakri was the first to be officially appointed to this position (Hefny, 1997: 122). During the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha, a legal decree was
issued regarding the appointment of general supervisors of all Sufi orders, Zawiyas and Mosques with spiritual shrines, granting the appointee the legal authority to oversee the development of the curriculum implemented therein. The Mashyakha of al-Sajjadah constituted the first official framework to represent the Sufis’ masters and leaders and hence acquired a critically significant position in the political hierarchy of the country (De Jong, 2000: 12). What transpired, however, was the confusion between the tasks of the Mashyakha al-Sajjadah al-Bakriyyah and those of the Mashyakha of the Sufi Council. With the government appointment of Ali al-Bakri in 1854 over the Mashyakha of the Sufi Council and his assignment as successor to Bani al-Siddik, the Mashyakha al-Bakriyyah began to speak on behalf of all Sufi orders, Sufi worship places (takaya), shrines and zawiyas in Egypt (Al-Bakri, 1905: 374). Mashyakha al-Sajjadah al-Bakriyyah and the Mashyakha of the Sufi Council officially became united under one leadership. So it became the sole representative of the Sufi orders from the time of Sai’d Pasha. Before that the two bodies were always led by different leaders.

In their campaign against Egypt in 1798 AD, the French sought the approval of Sufi institutions through the appointment of Khalil al-Bakari, the then Master of al-Sajjadah al-Bakriyah and the head of the Ashraf group (naqib al-ashraf), a member in the council set by Napoléon Bonaparte. With the French withdrawal from Egypt in 1801 AD, the Ottoman governor Mohammad Pasha Khesro began meddling in the affairs of the Sufis in Egypt (De Jong, 2000: 65). Similarly, with the British occupation of Egypt, Britain’s chief representative Lord Cromer also sought to induce Sufi movements to align with the British in their handling of Egypt’s national movements. For example, in his annual report, Lord Cromer describes the Sufis as wise and mature Muslims, and in his attempt to deter the dominance and public representation of the Azhar, Cromer devised the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders (Bayyumi, 1992: 122).

Toward the middle of the 20th century, Sufi orders in Egypt grew larger in the number of their following. With the beginning of the revolution on 23 July 1952, there were approximately three million Egyptians Sufi subscribers to 60 Sufi orders (Bayyumi, 1992: 177). The new regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser successfully gained the Sufis’ unconditional support and blessing on most issues, whether political, economic or social, both at the domestic and international levels. The government of Abdel Nasser managed to manipulate and bring the Sufis to bear against the Muslim Brotherhood, as evidenced in support of the Mashyakha of Sufi orders with Abdel Nasser against the Muslim Brotherhood. Another example is shown in the declaration made by the then leader of Sufi orders Muhammad ‘Alwan in 1965 on the occasion of the birth anniversary of al-Rifa‘i, in which he boldly expresses the disagreement of the Sufis with the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ahram, 1965). The government also used Sufi institutions to win the affection of other Arab nations. Another relevant example is the public statement made by the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders in which it condemned the conspiracies led by the King of Saudi Arabia, Faisal bin Abdul Aziz (d.1975), the Shah of Iran (d.1980), the King Hussein of Jordan (d.1999) and Habib Bourguiba (d.2000), the then the President of Tunisia (Al-Ahram, 1967a). In another statement, the Council expresses support of Abdel Nasser’s decisions to withdraw international forces from Sinai during May 1967 (Al-Ahram, 1967b). In December 1967, and in the aftermath of the defeat of 5 June 1967, an official Sufi march walked in support of Abdel Nasser (Bayyumi, 2009: 56).

The intermarriage between the government of Egypt and the Sufis increased during the rule of Anwar Sadat (d.1981). Sadat dubbed himself the Believing President (al-ra‘is al-mumin), and took great pains and care to appear as a pious Muslim who observed prayer, often with prayer beads in his hands. He gathered around him the religious scholars from the Azhar and participated in the religious celebrations held on the occasion of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (‘Ammar, 2009: 79). His government issued Law no. 118 of 1976 to restructure the regulatory framework of Sufi orders
and the Council of Sufi Orders, while the post of the Supreme leader of Sufi Orders was appointed to chair the institution of Sufism directly attached to the office of the President. The regime of Hosni Mubarak also benefited from the Sufis by way of renewing Sufi allegiance to the President. The master of the Al-‘Azmiyya Sufi Order gave allegiance to Mubarak for a period extending up to 2100 (Subhi, 2008). The government in turn extended their support to the Sufi orders, where in 1976 they issued a decree to better regulate the Sufi orders while granting power to the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders in regards to licensing the celebration of the birth of the Prophet, gatherings of religious remembrance, protocols for Sufi marches and celebrations on religious seasons and occasions (Law no. 118 of 1976: 43) often attended by high-ranking representatives of the President, notable government officials and the police.

**Sufis and political rivalry**

Since its first official endorsement during the time of Salahuddin, political leaders employed Sufism as a tool of conflict. It was quite ordinary for the Sufis to side with political authorities that granted them support in return. It was during the time of Salahuddin that the Sufis fought against the Shi‘ites, following which they stood against the scholars of the Azhar under Ottoman, French and English rule in an attempt to bend and sway the influence of Azhar. In the 20th century, however, and following the Revolution in 1952, the Sufis stood with ruling authorities in their opposition to rising Muslim political movements (Maged, 2008). This led to increased tension and hostility between the Sufis and political movements in Egypt, reflecting an intellectual insurgency against the dominantly passive intellectual framework endorsed by Sufism.

In Egypt the position of the Islamic movements vis-à-vis the Sufis generally adopted two courses. The first was manifested in the neutral position of the Azhar, whose scholars adhered to and endorsed a number of active Sufi orders in Egypt. The current Shaykh of Azhar (Ahmed el-Tayeb) himself was a leader of the *Ahmadiyyah Khalutiyah* Sufi Order in the district of Aswan, in Southern Egypt (Al-Azhar, 2010). This implies that the relationship of the Azhar with Sufi institutions was favorable, especially when the Azhar was officially placed under the control of the government in 1961, by means of legal Act no. 103. In contrast, the reactions of political Islam to the Sufis reflected a wide range of disagreement and controversy. The relationship of the Muslim brotherhood with Sufism was characterized by a sort of push and pull. This relationship was friendly, especially in the 1920s, as Hasan al-Banna – the founder of the Organization of the Muslim Brethren – was himself a disciple in the Husafi Sufi Order (Ziyad, 2001: 23). However, al-Banna’s founding of the brotherhood was seen by his master Muhammad ‘Abdul-Wahhab al-Husafi as a departure from the order, leading to his excommunication and hostility toward him and his movement (Ziyad, 2001). This very relationship also witnessed many crises, when the Muslim brotherhood gained rapidly growing power, and as such societal influence, particularly when al-Banna spelled out his social reform program, the scope of which included the Sufi orders, while criticizing much of their misconduct with the intent to reform. The group of *Shabab Muhammad*, as an example, took upon themselves an attack on these orders, calling the Sufis to return to orthodoxy, and demolishing some of their shrines (Munib, 2007: 154).

From this turning point, a new state of tensions arose between these two parties. However, a number of other factors contributed to this situation: (1) the reformative nature of the Muslim brotherhood in view of its extension of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani’s thoughts. The movement was primarily established for the reform of culture, thought and society, which in one form or another posed a threat to the authority held by Sufis and Sufi orders. (2) The organizational structure of the Muslim brotherhood consisted of a guide and followers, and a hierarchy, which closely resembled
if not complied with the Sufi structure that respectively consisted of a Master and disciples. This may have led to a state of paranoia and fear of the Brotherhood by the Sufi orders, namely for the reason that the Brotherhood possessed an intellectual and social structure able to capitalize on public sentiment, which directly challenged the authority and control of the Sufis. (3) The prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood as an institutional organization with its social and financial initiatives and the mass spread of its ideology, particularly when the structure of the Sufi practice in Egypt took on social programs reminiscent of the Brotherhood’s activities (Janin, 2012: 70).

On the official level, however, the Muslim Brotherhood acknowledges and accepts the Sufi movements in Egypt. Many of its followers are actively involved in different Sufi orders. Since the early establishment of the Jam‘iyyat al-Hidaya al-Islamiyyah (Society of Islamic Guidance) by Mohammed al-Khidr Hussein (d.1958), the traditional Salafis adhered to Al-Jam‘iyyah al-Shar‘iyyah (The Islamic Society for cooperation among workers according to the Qur’an and the Sunnah), founded and spearheaded by Mahmud Khitab al-Subki in 1912 (Munib, 2007: 33). Their tolerant and accommodating stand toward Sufi movements was probably based on the fact that the latter showed no interest in politics. It could also have been the result of the assimilation of members of the Muslim Brotherhood into Sufi movements that developed cordial relations amongst them (Munib, 2007: 35).

In contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood andal-Jam‘iyyah al-Shar‘iyyah, the Qutbist (followers of Sayyed Qutb), Jama‘at al-Jihad (Group of Jihad) and al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah (The Islamic Group) showed hostility toward Sufi movements. In 1997, these groups underwent major intellectual revisions, leading to their support of the government in most of its actions and decisions, particularly when the Mubarak Regime critically weakened their position following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. These groups, however, declared outright hostility upon the Sufis, especially following the January 25 Revolution, and their decision to establish the Party of Building and Development (hizb al-bina’ wa al-tanmiyyah). In early August 2011, a series of clashes erupted among the masters of Sufis Orders and other religious groups, resulting in a great deal of mistrust and accusation of seeking foreign support to serve internal interests (Brown, 2011: 13).

The Salafi movements were headed in 1926 by Jama‘at Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah of Mohamed Hamid al-Fiqqi, who was familiar with al-Jam‘iyyah al-Shar‘iyyah. Until today, many Azhar scholars have been enrolled in this society. The Ansar al-Sunnah runs many branches in most districts of Egypt (Tanriverdi, 2011). The Ansar was heavily infiltrated by members of intellectually oriented Salafism (al-salafiyah al-‘ilmiyah) and the movement-driven Salafism (al-salafiyah al-harakiyyah), who are generally viewed as an extension of the Wahhabi Movement in Saudi Arabia, the strictest opponent of Sufis. The Ansar’s core strength, however, is found in their charitable foundations, educational institutions, libraries and mosques. Moreover, the Ansar enjoys large popular support as reflected in the recent polls (November 2011) with the Al-Nur and Al-Fadila Parties winning a 30-percent hold in parliament (Tanriverdi, 2011). Close to the Ansar stands the Salafiyyah al-Taqlidiyah al-Jadidah (the new conventional Salafis), which first appeared in the mid-1970s in the form of study circles. Some estimate the supporting number of this group in the range of 150,000 followers. This group has had no political representation except following the January 25 revolution, after which its union with the Ansar group was fully consolidated. The Jama‘at al-Da‘wah wa al-Tabligh ([Islamic] propagation group), however, is the largest religious group with an estimated number of 250,000 followers. This group was first introduced to Egypt through Ibrahim ‘Izzat, whose Salafi inclination affected the nature of the movement, which dissociates itself from politics (Munib, 2007: 87). Due to the Salafi background of the group, the group is rather found to be hostile toward Sufi movements, which they view as a deviation from religious orthodoxy (Tanriverdi, 2011).
Sufis’ political position prior to the revolution of January 2011

Following the political coup of 1952 in Egypt, the Sufis presented no threat to the ruling authorities. In fact, the regime used religious and theological justifications to generally manipulate the presence of the Sufis toward propagating its domestic and international policies (Munib, 2007: 78). The institution of Azhar was still struggling to maintain its credibility and autonomy. Despite the favorable stand of the Sufis toward the regimes of Abdel Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, the regime never entertained the idea of a definitive state–Sufi political engagement. At best, the support of the Sufis can be capitalized as a religious, social and public asset serving the interests of the ruling National Democratic Party at the time. This caused Sufis to lose all serious political privileges through which they could effectively express their opinions on political and social issues, and to further expand their zone of impact on development. The Sufis welcomed political interference and as such influence of government executive power in their organizational structures through the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders, which consisted of representatives from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Information, Culture, Local Development, Endowments and the Azhar (Baumann, 2011).

Furthermore, the Sufis defended the unwavering efforts of the regime that set out to curb the influence of political Islam. Such an initiative united the Egyptian authorities and the West, whereupon the Sufis choose not to decline any proposal that may cause or drag them into a direct clash with political Islam. For instance, when the Supreme Leader of the Sufi Orders, Shaykh ‘Abdul Hadi al-Qassabi, as represented in the Al-Ahram institution, agreed with the government to counter the rising challenges of both the Salafi and the Muslim Brotherhood (Nihal, 2011), the Secretary of the American Embassy in Egypt met with a number of Sufi leaders (Mashayikhs) during August 2011. In that meeting in the headquarters of the Al-‘Azmiyya Sufi order in the area of Sayyidah Zaynab, representatives of the Government Security Affairs and other participants addressed the spread of Sufism among Muslims in the United States and the support of Sufi orders in Egypt.

In the same meeting, sixteen Sufi leaders headed by Shaykh ‘Ala’ Abu al-‘Aza’im agreed to develop a joint action plan so as to unite their efforts and support Sufism both domestically and externally (Antar, 2010). Abu al-‘Aza’im was appointed as the coordinator between the Sufi leaders in Egypt and the government of the United States. It was on this occasion that Shaykh Muhammad A. al-Charnubi said that the representative of the government of the US urged participants to continue meetings and coordination among the two parties while considering Sufi Islam as the favored, moderate and acceptable model of Islam in the US (Nihal, 2011). It is worth mentioning that among many US diplomats, the former US Ambassador Francis J Ricciardone was the most keen on attending Sufi gatherings, and was a regular participant in the popular celebrations of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, such as that of Sayyidah Zaynab and Sayyid al-Badawi, and moreover used to attend the remembrance and recitations of Sufi leaders (‘Ammar, 2007: 63).

Nonetheless, in spite of the intimately favorable relationship between the Sufis and politicians in Egypt, the regime of Hosni Mubarak appointed key figures from the ruling party to leadership positions in the Supreme Council for the Sufi Orders, in the same way it appointed ‘Abdul Hadi al-Qassabi, a leader of a minor Sufi order, as Supreme Leader (shaykh al-masha’ikh) of the Sufi orders and a member of the office of the ruling party. Through those appointments, Mubarak manipulated political power to override legal regulatory laws according to which appointment normally would have been held. Mubarak’s illegal actions affected the favorable relationship between Sufi orders and the regime, and furthermore led some Sufi masters to establish the Sufi Reform Front in response to the appointment of ‘Abdel Hadi al-Qassabi as Supreme Leader (‘Ammar, 2011). Practice previously dictated that the oldest members of the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders were elected by leaders of Sufi orders to take up
the position of Supreme Leader. The government, however, neglected this tradition in an attempt to wrest power from prominent Sufi leaders, and by such means establish government control. The Sufi Reform Front filed legal suits challenging the appointment of al-Qassabi, while submitting official complaints to relevant authorities in which they plainly rejected his illegal appointment (Al-Qumash, 2011b). The response of the judiciary, however, was delayed and shown to be rather manipulative, resulting in increased tension and anger among members of Sufi orders. This also led Shaykh ‘Ala Abi al-‘Aza’im, the then leader of the ‘Azmiyyah Sufi Order, to threaten the government to run in the election against Fathi Surur, the Chair of the then-dissolved parliament following the events of the revolution in the district of Sayyidah Zaynab (Al-Mahdi, 2010).

According to modern Egyptian history, however, no serious clash of any kind has been ever recorded between the Sufi orders and the political authority, whether under the monarchy or British occupation, or under the revolutionary regime of 1952. Rather, all historical evidences show that the Sufi orders walked in line with authority, or were used as tools of political or economic control (Bayyumi, 2009: 86). The forms of conflict that emerged, however, between the Nasiri regime and the Damrdashiya or Baktashiya Sufi orders were in fact not made in opposition to the policies of the regime of the Free Officers, but rather set to fulfill their revenge against it, as they were in line and defense of the monarchical regime while the Officers had gone against it, in support of Abdel Nasser’s regime (Waugh, 2008: 103).

Sufis’ political position in the post-revolution stage

The Sufis showed signs of confusion and uncertainty during the revolution. Their decisions generally tended to be reactionary in principle, and lacked any concrete plan of action. Their participation in the public demonstrations in Tahrir Square on the 18th day was far from strongly visible in the same way youth movements were in, for instance, the Movement of the 6 April, and not in the same force as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis, who in emerged strongly in spite of joining the public protests very late. The poor reaction of the Sufis was perhaps the result of their poor experience in politics and organization, their fluid assimilation in society’s popular culture and also their inability to set any distinct political presence (‘Ammar, 2011). Their position was further consolidated by their failure to take any decisive stand toward the regime’s politics and their unwavering efforts to maintain a close association with it until the last moment of its fall. The fall of the Egyptian regime represented a turning point in the political position of Sufis (Morrow and Al-Qmrani, 2010).

As a result of the political major changes, on 15 February 2011, the leader of the Al-‘Azmiyya Sufi Order, Shaykh Abu al-‘Aza’im, who had previously vehemently defended the regime of Egypt, held a press conference in which he attacked the regime and criticized it for problems of underdevelopment in Egypt (Subhi, 2008). Similarly, the Chairman of the International Council of Sufis and the leader of Shahawi Sufi Order, Shaykh Muhammad al-Shahawi, confirmed that most Sufi orders if not all had shifted their political position toward the regime following the Revolution of 25 January (Walid, 2011b). The Sufis not only distanced themselves irreparably from the regime, but under the influence of recent radical political changes in Egypt, embarked on their own political journey as a reaction to the threat posed by the Islamic movements in politics and the public sphere. Seventeen Sufi orders, including the Tijaniyya, al-‘Azmiyya, al-Shabrawiyah and the Ambabiyah, participated in the establishment of a new political party called the Egypt Liberation Party (Walid, 2011b) as a political representative of the members of the al-‘Azmiyyah Sufi Order and others Sufi orders. Shaykh Tarik al-Rifa’i, the leader of al-Rifa’i Sufi Order, one of the largest Sufi orders in Egypt, also established another political party known as the Voice of Freedom Party (Louai, 2011b).
In addition to their new concrete political engagement, Mustafa Zayd, the Secretary to the Rifa‘i Order of the Sufis, in parallel with the Coalition of the Revolution Youth (i‘tilaf shabab al-thawrah), led the Sufis to the formation of the Coalition of Egyptian Sufis (i‘tilaf al-Sufiyin al-Misriyin). The Coalition of Egyptian Sufis recruited about 10,000 members, exemplifying the core of a Sufi youth revolution rising against the deteriorating conditions within the Sufi orders themselves (Louai, 2011a). Mustafa Zayd explains the reasons for launching the coalition as follows: ‘Over the last few years, leaders of Sufi Orders could neither defend the call of Sufism nor repel the onslaughts against its shrines throughout the years’ (Duua, 2011). The other motive of the coalition according was the pressing need for internal reforms of the Sufi orders. Zayd addressed the leaders of Sufi orders as follows: ‘Raise the flag of Sufism only; let fall all other flags and put away your differences’. In one of his memos to Sufi leaders, He said: ‘If you fail to keep Sufism away from any differences, we will organize a large public demonstration in the courtyard of the Mosque of al-Hussayn through which we will call for changing the regulatory law of Sufi Orders no. 118 of 1976 so as to select the supreme leaders based on the best and most knowledgeable candidate and to prevent succession in Sufis Orders’ (‘Ammar, 2011).

It would seem, however, that the political rise of the Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood was what instigated Sufi movements to opt for political participation and for forming political parties such as the Coalition of Egyptian Sufis. At that time, it likely signified that the Sufis had also moved, not in response to a natural ideological persuasion but as a negative reaction to a complex set of socio-political changes. Their newly established political party was born in rivalry and competition to other Muslim parties in Egypt (Baumann, 2011). The Leader of the al-‘Azmiyyah Order, Shaykh ‘Ala Abu al-‘Aza’im, confirms the background of its political venture as follows: ‘The efforts made by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi groups in politics threaten religious tolerance, and force Sufis to adopt similar course. If the Salafis or the Muslim Brotherhood controls government, they would then abolish the Sufi leadership (al-Mashyakah al-Sufiyyah)’ (Moujahid, 2011).

Both the Egypt Liberation Party and the Voice of Freedom Party participated in the parliamentary elections of November 2011. The Egypt Liberation Party, however, independently submitted 53 candidates, whereas the Voice of Freedom Party joined the liberal party of al-Kutla al-Masriyyah (The Mass of Egypt) with a list of 10 candidates with al-Masriyyin Al-Ahrar al-Liberali (Free Liberal Egyptians) led by a Christian businessperson, Naguib Sawiris. The cooperation among these parties in the organization for election was clear. Issam Muhyiddin, the then Secretary General of the Egyptian Liberation Party, announced that his party would cooperate with the Voice of Freedom Party and would also support the candidate of both parties and members of the Sufi orders in general (Walid, 2011b).

Interestingly enough, later political development showed the clear exclusion of the Sufis from either the Egypt Liberation Party or the Voice of Freedom Party. This led Shaykh Tarik al-Rifa‘i, leader of the al-Rifa‘i Sufi Order, to justify such an exclusion in terms of the concern of the reputation in possible scenarios of electoral loss (Al-Mahdi, 2011). According to Shaykh al-Rifa‘i, a number of Sufi leaders advised him not to participate in the elections; he, however, choose to contest in the region of Imbaba, one of the strongholds of the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood, and to rather set an example of political activism for his followers irrespective of the difficulties and challenges. He, however, withdrew shortly before the election (Al-Mahdi, 2011). Shaykh al-Rifa‘i is also reported to have announced the establishment of a political party for young Sufi disciples of his order, but soon changed his mind in agreement with the decision of a number of Sufi leaders to join with the al-Masryin al-Ahrar Party. On the other hand, Abu al-‘Aza’im, the leader of the ‘Azmiyya Sufi Order, justified his reluctance to run for election with reference to a number of issues such as his connection to his Sufi disciples, the need to clean up his order from the remains of the dissolved National Party and his extensive travels in the Muslim world (Al-Asnawi, 2011).
The Sufis versus liberal politics in Egypt

The stand of proximity of the leaders of Sufi orders in Egypt vis-à-vis liberal political parties appears to be based on the prime belief that liberals are more open and tolerant to differences of opinions. As such, the Sufis forged a coalition with liberals, and coordinated their political programs and strategies accordingly (Fakhry and Hassan, 2011). One of the manifestations of the close alliance between the Sufis and the liberals was manifested in the Friday’s ‘For the love of Egypt’ protest organized by the liberal parties on 12 August 2011, which was attended by 10 political parties and organizations alongside eight Sufi orders in response to the Reunion Friday march called for by the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood on 29 July 2011 (Sadiki, 2011).

Nevertheless, the Sufis’ collective failed to mobilize all their powers and resources and gear them toward the success of this event; following the enthusiasm initially displayed by their majority, a large number of Sufi followers decided to quit this public political event. Consequently, 12 Sufi orders announced their dissociation from Friday’s ‘For the love of Egypt’ (Al-Qumash, 2011a). The Supreme Council for Sufi Orders also decided not to support this event, going against the decision taken by the majority of the Sufis (Al-Bindawi, 2011). Only two or three Sufi orders participated with a humble number of participants in the few hundreds; this further showcased the sense of confusion in the political development of the Sufi movements made manifest (Al-Bindawi, 2011).

The Sufis also supported the liberals’ call to adhere to the course of ‘Constitution First’ as opposed to the course of ‘Elections First’ adopted by most conservative political parties and organizations that considered Islam to be their fundamental ideology. The most influential political participation by Sufis was shown in the elections led under Hizb al-Masryin al-Ahrar (Free Egyptians’ Party). This was shown again in the 2012 presidential election whereby the Sufis threw their complete support behind Mubarak’s remnant candidate, General Ahmad Shafiq. The Sufis reiterated their political position and refusal to support candidates from any Islamic party (Al-Asnawi, 2012).

In the period following the presidential elections and rise of the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate-elect to Presidency, the Sufi movement did not take any significant or palatable move in reaction. Rather, they bided their time, until the beginning of the Liberal campaign of 24 August 2012, which sought to take measures against the Brotherhood’s ‘monopolization’ of politics (Alian, 2012). Abu al-‘Aza’im, and Ibrahim Zahran, the leader of the Sufi Liberation Party, emphasized and stood against the increasing influence of the Brotherhood in state institutions, yet failed to provide any practical alternative (Alian, 2012).

The political dilemma of Sufis in Egypt

News spread of the electoral participation of Sufis, such as the support of some five million Sufis for Egypt’s constitutional amendments, participation of some eight million Sufis in the Friday’s ‘For the love of Egypt’ and some other press statements issued by the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders for media consumption. The reality, however, is far more modest, as notably evinced in their poor political performance in the parliamentary elections of November. A number of factors explain their poor performance. Some of these factors pertain to the very nature of the Sufi experience itself. The Sufi structure, whether administrative or spiritual, produced incompatible political values; some were positive, such as affiliation, stability, tolerance, cooperation and consolidation, while others were by and far negative, such as discouraging the development of a democratic culture. Sufism also promoted values such as coercion, conflict, subjugation, authoritarianism, isolation and submission to the absolute power for the Sufi master (Shaykh).

It appears, however, that the Sufi practice somewhat downplays life’s positive values. The historical association between Sufis and political power in Egypt and in other Muslim countries stands
as strong evidence of their accommodation and assimilation, rather than opposition or criticism. This, in turn, calls for a review of Sufi orders outside the folds of sanctification, as they are close to social phenomenon rather than sacred practice (‘Ammar, 2009: 44). Sufi association with social reforms rather than with religious practices appears to have weakened the political attachment of the Sufis. A Sufi disciple affiliated with a Sufi order (tariqah) must fulfill all of his spiritual and social needs and is permitted to achieve his political or cultural ambitions through other civic institutions. This perhaps explains why many Sufi disciples are also affiliated with secular or socialist parties deprived of any spirit of religious practice. In Sufi orders, the Shaykh’s spiritual authority overwhelmingly dominates all aspects of the order’s life to the point where all ideas of reform are shunned.

Yet to substantiate this view we may draw on the latest campaign of the Sufis for revision and reform of its policies, held as a response to the social media campaign launched by thousands of Sufi youth, representing a wide range of Sufi orders, including the Rifa‘iyyah, the Bayumiyyah, the Burhaniyyah, the Ahmadyyah, al-Mirzaqiyyah, al-Imbabiyyah, Qadiriyyah and Faudhiyyah al-Khalutiyyah Orders, which violated the principle of unconditional obedience of the Shaykh, while demanding selection of Sufi leaders through election, the appointment of the best and most knowledgeable candidate and elimination of succession concerning selection of leaders, in addition to amendments in the Sufi Regulatory Act no. 118 of 1976. In addition, they demanded participation for Sufi youth in decision making and in management of Sufi institutions. As an example for the concern for reform in Sufi orders, a national conference on Sufism was held to explore a path of reform for Sufi thought, and for modernization and revamped organization of Sufi institutions, guiding them to become politically and professionally competent, and hold as much political weight and sway as any other Islamic movement. The conference was held in Cairo under the auspices of the Azhar, the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders and Al-Imam Academy for Research in Sufism and Islamic Heritage on 24–26 September 2011, attracting more than 300 Muslim scholars from 35 countries. The conference was attended by the interim Egyptian President and the Bishop Marcos as a representative of the Pope Shenouda (d. 2012) (Walid, 2011a).

Some other critical factors pertaining to the political experience of Sufis are shown in their lack of experience and political skills, as the Sufis in Egypt have been absent from politics. The results of the lack of training can be seen in the parliamentary elections, as shown in the poll of parliamentary elections held in November 28th 2011. The Sufi orders lacked a clear political vision and cohesive program of reform, whether in regards to their satisfaction with the call for a civil state, their adoption of hostile and competing approaches to other Islamic movements, their public attacks on the Salafi movements without offering any viable alternatives or their adoption of the liberals’ programs, exactly as they had done in previous parliamentary and Presidential elections. The same was repeated in the wake of Morsi’s political victory, where the Sufis were unable to reach a consensus in regards to the Brotherhood’s influence and direction for the state. The leader of the Rifa‘i Sufi order, in addition to Ahmad al-Sawi – a prominent Sufi leader – called for support of Morsi, while the leader of the Hashimi Sufi order, among others, called for participation in the 24 August campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood (Hani, 2012). In sharp contrast, however, one finds that the remaining majority remained silent.

There was also poor coordination in the preparation of the electoral lists and political programs, as shown in the absence of unified leadership able to stand against other political rivals. The weakness of the Sufi was clear, while their violations of the Supreme Council’s instructions were also apparent. Besides this, the Sufi orders failed to unite either under the organization of The Egyptian Liberation Party or in the Voice of Freedom Party for they strictly represented members of al-‘Azmiyyah, Rifai‘iyyah and Shabrawiyyah Orders without attempting to unite other Sufi orders (‘Ammar, 2011). These two parties also failed to form any electoral coalition, thus losing electoral
mass among electoral lists. Even their agreement to nominate one candidate for the Egyptian presidency soon vanished because of disagreements, despite the decision of the Higher Council to fully back Ahmad Shafiq. Their weak political resolve was manifest through the existence of a number of Sufi institutions, including the Coalition of Sufi Youth and their unified electoral lists of the Sufis without further concrete action. The failure of Sufi orders to convince personalities of influential political weight to join their electoral lists, especially among the Ashraf tribes in the region of al-Said who choose to support their relatives and tribal electoral lists, can also be seen as a problem (Al-Asnawi, 2011).

The organizational challenges of Sufis in Egypt

The political performance of the Sufi orders in Egypt clearly shows arbitrary and hasty decisions without thorough analysis of data, which can be explained in a number of factors. There was poor coordination between Sufi headquarters in Cairo and its branches in the different provinces of Egypt, particularly in the nomination process and selection of electoral lists, causing unrest and tension among the Sufi partisans themselves. There also was a sudden decline in political participation of a number of Sufi orders, without due time given to the process of decision making as shown in the disinterest of Sufi leaders to run for posts following the first electoral stage, and prior to the second stage. This further explains the concern of Sufi leaders in regards to their public reputations in possible loss of elections. The drifting behind the campaign of Catch the Defeat, which implies following the people of the former regime and their deprivation from political participation caused Sufi orders embarrassment, as was the case with General Mashhur al-Tahawi and Khalid Abu al-Layl of the Shabrawiyah Sufi Order. Also, there is the case of the abstention of Tarik Rifai, the leader of the Rifai Sufi Order, from nomination as the top candidate in the Egyptian Liberal Party just one day before the election in favor of an independent candidate, Umar al-Shubki, thus deliberately affecting the results of the elections, which was also a significant factor affecting their political performance.

Following the first electoral round, support for the Coalition of Sufi Orders was moved to the mass of al-Kutla al-Misriyyah Liberal Party and to the al-Masriyyin al-Ahrar Party following their support of Sufi nominees. This was probably a result of fear of possible loss in the second and third rounds (Al-Asnawi, 2011). One cannot ignore Sufis’ recommendation of Ahmad Shafiq under the pretext of his family’s Sufi roots despite his role in the government of Mubarak, and in spite of existing national popular political nominees, such as Amr Moussa and Hamdin Sabahi (Al-Asnawi, 2012). The case of Sufi dependency continued to be the norm even following the military coup of 2013, which they strongly supported and further defended its consequences (Rabia, 2013). Other critical reasons include underestimating the impact of externalities on Egypt’s political scene, as shown in a number of Sufi initiatives that point to their poor evaluation of the political game and its impact on the performance of the election in the country, such as seeking external support from unfavorable countries with little or no public sympathy in the Egyptian society, namely the Republic of Iran.

Prior to the election, however, an Egyptian Sufi delegation represented in fourteen Sufi orders visited Iran to seek support in face of the Salafist Movement (Aldin, 2011). The Sufi delegation was warmly welcomed by President Ahmadinejad and his Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi in the House of Imam Ayatollah Khomeini (Mehr News Agency, 2011) despite the Iranian oppression of Sufi movements in Iran (Geoffroy and Gaetani, 2010: 26). This visit only served to taint the Sufis, and further sharpen the attack of the Salafist movements against Sufis, accusing them of being an Iranian tool for spreading Sufism in Egypt. The Iranians of course warmly welcomed Egyptian Sufi leaders in Iran, as prospective allies in Egypt, who may potentially serve their interests in the
future making of Egypt, while in their calculations forging a political opposition to the growing Saudi-backed Salafi movement and further curbing the ambitions of the Saudis.

What made their visit a political blunder, however, were the promises made by Iranian Officials to renovate and restore the shrines of the members of the household of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt) and to also convert them to sacred sites, alongside their promotion of Iran’s tourism to Egypt (Mehr News Agency, 2011). Many religious principles bridge the divide between Sufis and Shi’ites, the most prominent of which is perhaps the love for the family of the Prophet, which is a central theological theme intensely shared by both doctrines. The shrines set for Hussayn, Ruqayya and Zaynab in Cairo represents important features of Sufi thought in the Muslim world, and some of the holiest sites in the Shi’ite doctrine. Historical works point to the intimate relationship shared between Sufis and Shi’ites, particularly from the Fatimid Dynasty onwards, where the Fatimid rulers encouraged the Sufis to settle in Egypt in an effort to use them to convert the Egyptians to Shiism (Al-Wardani, 1993: 39). Furthermore, they both viewed the Salafis as a threat and as such agreed to stand against its spread and popularity.

What further reflects the Sufis’ political inexperience and ineptitude was the support shown by the Sufi delegation for Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, against the revolution. In addition, the Sufis issued in their last manifest a clarification regarding their condition for nominating the presidential candidate, namely the ability of the nominee to rebuild and restore Egyptian–Iranian relations in a very short time in his presidential period (Al-Asnawi, 2012), contrary to the favorable feeling and general current of Egyptians vis-à-vis the opposition in Syria and the discontent and suspicion regarding Iran’s efforts to spread Shiism in Egypt. The openly announced links between Sufi institutions and authorities of the USA was also a major political setback, due to the sensitivity of the position of Egyptians regarding American policies in the Middle East, particularly those pertaining to their full support of the Egyptian regimes against the opposition, and Israel against Palestinians.

**Conclusion**

The political experience of the Sufis in Egypt is by far one of the finest examples showcasing a serious attempt of merging politics with mysticism, which may be explained with respect to a number of factors including the age-old Sufi infiltration into the fabric of society, the long emergence of Sufism in Egypt dating back to Salahuddin (d.1193), and its spread not only in government institutions such as Azhar, but equally among the government’s political rivals including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis and even Jihad movements. Following the revolution of 17 January 2011, however, the Sufis’ political engagement failed to elicit significant public backing in comparison to other Islamic political parties in Egypt. The political humiliation of the Sufis may have been the result of the nature of Sufism in Egypt itself, whereby Sufi practice in effect comprises nothing more than social loyalty divorced of religious persuasions, thus reducing the authority of Sufi orders on their disciples’ political decisions.

Sufi disciples could not resist the temptations of political change found among other political movements far away from their newly formed Sufi political parties. What might further explain such a paradigm shift is the increased political awareness and redefined political culture among Egyptians, providing them with sudden ample space for political expression, and consequently many choices and courses of action. Another cause for the failure of the Sufi orders in the Egyptian political arena was their weak political organization, expressed sometimes by political immaturity, as reflected in their many internal conflicts, and the challenges they endured during the parliamentary elections. It might not be objective, however, to acknowledge any political weight exercised by the Sufis in Egypt as clearly shown in the presidential elections of May 2012, when compared
to their performance in the parliamentary elections. The parliamentary elections of November 2011 in Egypt revealed the true position, size and influence of current political parties in Egypt, giving each its proportionate weight in the presidential election. The Sufi orders appeared to understand this point well, and consequently opted for a lower media profile and a silent tone, at complete odds with their earlier position during the presidential elections. Nonetheless, this would perhaps explain the silence of the Sufis toward the upcoming presidential election of 2014. Consequently, the Sufis in post-Morsi Egypt have returned to their initial positions in the pre-revolution era, during which they were neither faced with threats nor were they challenged by Islamic political movements. The political attitudes of the Sufis in Egypt continue to be passive and compliant with general government policy, similar to the Mubarak era, and those of prior political strongmen, and this again will only minimally further or develop what little political experience they managed to acquire during the period extending between 2011 and 2013, if at all.

**Notes**

1. For more details regarding Sufism adapting to politics and Heck’s writings, see Al-Shahi (1979), St. John Ronald (2008), Bebaissa (1997), Lanm (1990), Andre (1985) and Zaki (1977).

2. Among the many reports and studies pertaining to the secret relations between Iran and Sufi orders in Egypt is the report of the committee of the Assembly of Islamic Research of al-Azhar, issued on 23 March 2007. Also relevant to this matter is the document of *al-Haqiqah al-Dawliya* in the 4 April 2007 issue, which delved into the matter, especially into the coalition of the Barhamiya Sufi orders and the Shi’ite with regards to the influence and control of Mosques in Egypt. In an issue of the ‘al-Siyasa al-Dawliya’ newspaper, released on 19 of March 2012, Abu al-Fadl al-Asnawi extensively details the stands of Muslim political movements vis-à-vis Iran.

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__________ (1967a) April 12.

__________ (1967b) May 27.


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