

## Democratization and Islamic Politics: A Study on the Wasat Party in Egypt

YOKOTA Takayuki\*

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the often contradictory correlation between democratization and Islamic politics in Egypt, focusing on a new Islamic political party, the Wasat Party (Ḥizb al-Wasat).

Theoretically, democratization and Islamic politics are not incompatible if Islamic political organizations can and do operate within a legal and democratic framework. On the other hand, this requires democratic tolerance by governments for Islamic politics, as long as they continue to act within a legal framework. In the Middle East, however, Islamic political parties are often suspected of having undemocratic agendas, and governments have often used this suspicion as a justification to curb democratization. This is also the case with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Jam‘īya al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn) under the Ḥusnī Mubārak regime. Although the Brotherhood is a mainstream Islamic movement in Egypt, operating publicly and enjoying considerable popularity, successive governments have never changed its illegal status for more than half a century. Some of the Brotherhood members decided to form the Wasat Party as its legal political organ in order to break this stalemate.

There have been some studies on the Wasat Party. Stacher [2002] analyzes the “Platform of the Egyptian Wasat Party” [Ḥizb al-Wasat al-Miṣrī 1998] and explains the basic principles of the Wasat Party as follows: democracy, *sharī‘a* (Islamic law), rights of women, and Muslim-Christian relations. Baker [2003] regards the Wasat Party as one of the new Islamist groups that have appeared in contemporary Egypt, and analyzes its ideology accordingly. Wickham [2004] discusses the moderation of Islamic movements in Egypt and the attempt to form the Wasat Party from the perspective of comparative politics. Norton [2005] examines the ideology and activities of the Wasat Party in connection with the Brotherhood’s political activities. As these earlier studies are mainly concerned with the Wasat Party during the 1990s and the early 2000s, I will examine the ideology and activities of the Wasat Party till the rise of the democratization movement in Egypt in around 2005. I will do so on the basis of the Wasat Party’s documents, such as the “Platform of the New Wasat Party” [Ḥizb al-Wasat al-Jadīd 2004]<sup>1)</sup>, and my interviews with its members.

In this article, first, I will provide an overview of the political activities of the Brotherhood during the twentieth century and the formation of the Wasat Party. Second, I will examine the basic principles of the Wasat Party and analyze its platforms. Finally, I will explore “Islamic democracy” or Islamic politics of the Wasat Party in contemporary Egyptian politics.

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\* Research fellow, the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA)

1) This platform has been translated into English [Mady 2006], and I will employ the translation of Mady [2006] when I refer to it in this article. We can also read the platform on the website run by the Wasat Party (<http://www.alwasatparty.com/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=files/Ar-program.htm>).

## I. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Formation of the Wasat Party

### 1. The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Politics in Egypt

The Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood have a long history of competing for the popular support of the Egyptians. The Brotherhood was established by Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-49) in 1928, when Egyptian society was undergoing a transition from a traditional Islamic society to a modern mass society. Based on the masses, the Brotherhood developed its activities in many fields. It succeeded as the first Islamic mass movement in Egypt, and developed as a major political force during the 1940s, leading to a revolutionary era in the early 1950s. Under the leadership of al-Bannā, the objective of the Brotherhood was to implement *sharī'a* and to establish an Islamic state. Further, political activities were regarded as a duty for achieving this objective [al-Bannā 1992: 138]. When the Free Officers assumed power (the July Revolution of 1952), the Brotherhood supported and cooperated with the new regime, until it ended in 1954. When Nasser came to power, he started to crack down on the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was banned, its membership was made illegal, and many members were arrested and even killed in prisons or executed in the 1950s and the 1960s [Husaini 1956; Harris 1964; Mitchell 1969; 'Abd al-Ḥalīm 1979-1985; Lia 1998].

When Sādāt became president after Nasser's death in 1970, he released the members of the Brotherhood from prison and tolerated their reorganization. He did this partly because he needed to counterbalance the political opposition he faced from the left. With political liberalization under Sādāt, and later under President Mubārak after Sādāt's assassination in 1981, the Brotherhood succeeded in reestablishing itself as a major Islamic movement in Egypt. However, new radical groups that were critical of the moderation of the Brotherhood were also formed [Kepel 1985; Baker 1990: 243-270; Sullivan & Abed-Kotob 1999: 41-95].

The General Guide, the highest decision-making position within the Brotherhood, has passed successively from the hands of 'Umar al-Tilimsānī (1973-86), Hāmid Abū Naṣr (1986-96), Muṣṭafā Mashhūr (1996-2002), and Muḥammad al-Ma'mūn al-Hudaybī (2002-04) to Muḥammad Mahdī 'Ākif (2004-). They have attempted to develop the Brotherhood as a formal organization under a prospective democratic system. Although they succeeded in reestablishing the Brotherhood as a part of the political arena in Egypt, the government has never changed the illegal status of the Brotherhood. To this day, the Brotherhood has been obliged to operate as a technically illegal but *de facto* political organization.

The reasons for these restrictions stem from the Brotherhood's capability for mass mobilization. When it was established and developed from the 1920s to the 1940s, it created Islamic politics based on mass mobilization, that is, mass politics where Islamic ideologies, symbols, and slogans are utilized to achieve objectives [Kosugi & Yokota 2003: 41-49]. When Nasser assumed power in 1954, he established a regime with an iron fist, mobilizing the masses under pan-Arab nationalism and Arab socialism [Hinnebusch 1988: 11-39]. It implied a competition between Nasser and the Brotherhood for the popular support of the Egyptians. He soon realized that the Brotherhood was too

strong a competitor and used coercion against it. The Nasserite era, which lasted from 1954 to 1970, was a period of violent oppression against the Brotherhood [Jāmi‘ 2004: 115-128].

On the other hand, Nasser’s successors, Sādāt and Mubārak, moved toward political liberalization [Hinnebusch 1988:159-171; 302-305; Inō 1993: 69-181]. In this tolerant political atmosphere, the Brotherhood reestablished its activities in many fields. As a part of these activities, the Brotherhood resumed its political role in Egypt, and with it, returned Islamic politics to the realm of public life. The Brotherhood developed its activities within the professional syndicates in the 1980s, and controlled the executive boards of many of these syndicates [Norton 2005: 138-140]. The Brotherhood also participated in the parliamentary elections held in 1984 and won eight seats. In 1987, the Brotherhood formed an electoral alliance with the Socialist Labor Party and the Liberal Party, and campaigned with the slogan “Islam is the solution (al-Islām huwa al-Ḥall).” The Brotherhood won 36 seats in the parliament and virtually became the largest opposition party [Fahmy 2002:81-87].

Political liberalization was, however, limited, and the Brotherhood remained illegal. Both the Sādāt and Mubārak regimes are considered by political analysts as being authoritarian, using mass mobilization from above as a major political tool [Hinnebusch 1988; Wickham 2002: 204-213]. The Brotherhood, having revived a mass Islamic movement, must have appeared to the government as a major contender for its mass base. Maintaining the illegal status of the Brotherhood served as a political instrument in the hands of the government to suppress its activities whenever the need for this arose. This, in turn, severely limited the substance of political liberalization and democratization.

## 2. Formation of the Wasat Party

Due to this stalemate, the younger generations of the Brotherhood felt increasingly frustrated. They, the so-called 1970s generation, were very active as members of the Islamic Group (al-Jamā‘a al-Islāmīya) in university campuses during the 1970s. After joining the Brotherhood in the 1980s, they played important roles in many professional syndicates. They included Abū al-‘Alā Māḍī, Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Karīm, and ‘Isām Sulṭān. They began to research the possibility and opportunity of forming a legal political party to break the exiting stalemate in accordance with the instructions of Muḥammad Maḥdī ‘Ākif, who was a member of the Brotherhood’s Guidance Council<sup>2)</sup>. In 1996, Māḍī and his colleagues announced the plan to establish a new party, the Wasat Party, with the intention of making it a political organ of the Brotherhood. However, their attempt resulted in fierce opposition from the leaders, the so-called “old guard,” within the Brotherhood. For example, General Guide Mashhūr and Deputy General Guide al-Ma’mūn al-Hudaybī criticized the Wasat members for not having consulted beforehand with the Guidance Council of the Brotherhood [Rumayḥ n.d: 45, 52]. Al-Ma’mūn al-Hudaybī stated that “the Wasat is not a party of the Brotherhood,” completely refusing the plan of forming the Wasat, and ordered all the Brotherhood members who had joined the Wasat Party as its founding members to return to the Brotherhood [Rumayḥ n.d: 44; Norton 2005:

2) Author’s interview with ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī, advisor to the General Guide of the Brotherhood and professor of Cairo University, in Cairo, March 10, 2004.

151-154]. Māḍī made the following statement to the author: “The pressure from the Brotherhood is more intense than that from the government<sup>3)</sup>.”

As the confrontation between the old guard and Wasat members intensified rapidly, many founding members of the Wasat Party returned to the Brotherhood. As a result, in 1996, the remaining Wasat members decided to submit an application for forming the Wasat Party to the government’s Political Parties Committee (PPC), and 16 Wasat Party members announced their withdrawal from the Brotherhood. In the same year, the PPC rejected Wasat’s application, and the Wasat members immediately filed a suit for the revocation of the PPC’s decision; however, the suit proved to be futile. In 1998, the Wasat members submitted a second application as the Egyptian Wasat Party; however, it was once again rejected by the PPC [Stacher 2002: 422-424; Wickham 2004: 223; Rumayḥ n.d: 37-106]. The last application thus far was made as the New Wasat Party in 2004; however, it was also rejected by the PPC. In spite of having filed these applications, the Wasat Party continues to remain unlicensed. Formally, the PPC rejected these applications because they did not fulfill the criteria under the Political Party Law. However, this mainly appears to be because the government regards the Wasat Party as a political cover for the Brotherhood to become a legal political party, although the Wasat Party denies any relations with the Brotherhood.

On the basis of this situation, we can identify an important implication. The development and expansion of the Brotherhood in the 1980s and the 1990s ushered in the new 1970s generation. This generation brought new ideas. Many of them were active within their university student unions and professional syndicates, and had considerable experience in these activities. Thus, they were rather different from the old guard, who had been imprisoned for a long period during the Nasserite era [Erich 1989: 222; Rumayḥ n.d: 111-113, 169-172]. The generation gap and differences brought about a conflict in policy orientations among the Brotherhood members. The initiative and ideas of Maḍī and his colleagues to create a new political party can be best understood in this context.

## II. Basic Principles of the Wasat Party

### 1. The New *Da‘wa* of the Wasat Party

The Wasat Party split from the Brotherhood and denies any relations with it. Furthermore, the members of the Wasat Party often criticize the old guard of the Brotherhood for being too inflexible in adapting to the current situation<sup>4)</sup>. The Wasat, however, values the thought of Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder-leader of the Brotherhood, and acknowledges itself as a successor to al-Bannā’s *da‘wa* (Islamic call). Māḍī explained the party’s position as follows: “Al-Bannā is a very important person. Islamic movements could develop for the first time under his leadership and could gain experience in many fields. We think Bannā’s thought is important as the starting point of Islamic movements.” Moreover, while answering the author’s question about whether he acknowledged the Wasat as a successor to al-Bannā’s *da‘wa*, Māḍī stated that “The ‘right’ ideas of the Brotherhood never disagree

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3) Author’s interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

4) Author’s interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

with ours. We developed the *da'wa* of the Brotherhood in the right way<sup>5)</sup>.”

Māḍī explained the difference between al-Bannā's *da'wa* and that of the Wasat Party. In his words, “Al-Bannā's *da'wa* is important because it developed Islamic movements in the first half of the twentieth century. But the problem is that al-Bannā's *da'wa* did not develop after his death, especially in political issues. His *da'wa* dealt with both religion and politics. It met the demands of his era. But, of course, the present situation in our society is different from that of al-Bannā's era. It is not suitable for us to directly apply al-Bannā's idea to our society, especially with regard to issues about Christians and political parties. The Wasat Party, therefore, distinguishes politics from religion, and our *da'wa* specializes in politics. Thus, we acknowledge ourselves as a successor of al-Bannā's *da'wa*, especially in the political field<sup>6)</sup>.” According to his explanation, the Wasat Party developed al-Bannā's *da'wa* to respond to the contemporary needs of Egypt, while the Brotherhood maintained it as it was in the first half of the twentieth century.

*Da'wa* specializing in politics clearly appears in the Wasat Party's basic thought, namely, the approval of a multiparty system and its goal to establish a legal political party. Al-Bannā flatly rejected the political party system because he believed that political parties would become the agents of division and disunity among the Islamic *umma* (community) [al-Bannā 1992: 290; Mitchell 1969: 218-220]. On the other hand, the Wasat Party holds that it is necessary to form a legal political party in order to play a role in Egyptian politics. This is because the multiparty system actually works in Egypt, regardless of how one evaluates it. Māḍī argued that “As the ultimate goal of the Wasat is to acquire broad support among all Egyptians and to achieve their welfare, we must overcome our illegal status, form a legal party, and act within the political system<sup>7)</sup>.” Establishing a legal political party can be regarded as a new aspect of the *da'wa*. It can help the Wasat Party to achieve its objective and overcome the limitation of the Brotherhood, which approves of a multiparty system but does not take any concrete action to become a political party.

## 2. “Islam as a Civilization”

The Wasat Party views Islam from two perspectives: “Islam as a religion (*al-Islām al-dīnī* or *al-Islām ka-dīn*)” and “Islam as a civilization (*al-Islām al-ḥaḍārī* or *al-Islām ka-ḥaḍāra*)<sup>8)</sup>.” According to the Wasat Party's view, “Islam as a religion” only comprehends Muslims. It is, so to speak, “Islam in a narrow sense.” On the other hand, “Islam as a civilization” is, so to speak, “Islam in a broad sense”; moreover, it comprehends those who live within the sphere of Islamic civilization. “Islam as a religion” is regarded as an important element of “Islam as a civilization.” Here, “Islam

5) Author's interview with Māḍī in Cairo, March 24, 2003.

6) Author's interview with Māḍī in Cairo, March 24, 2003.

7) Author's interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

8) With regard to “Islam as a civilization,” R. W. Baker points out the influence of the *wasafīya* (centrism) current on the Wasat Party. As he argues, “A hallmark of this intellectual school [the *wasafīya* current] is belief in Islam as a civilization that entails commitment to constructive social action [Baker 2003: 12],” and “The Wasat Party's platform clearly shows how effectively these centrist Islamist intellectuals have conveyed to a new generation their insights on how civilizational Islam could respond to contemporary needs of Egyptians [Baker 2003: 193].” Polka [2003] and Dekmejian [1995: 213-220] also discuss the *wasafīya* current in detail.

as a religion' is the voice of the majority, and it is the true power to maintain 'Islam as a civilization,' which is the voice of the whole and maintains the unity of the whole" [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ 1996: 13-14].

The Wasat Party regards "Islam as a civilization" as one of its most important and fundamental ideas. According to the Party's second platform, "the authority of the civilization of the Arabic and Islamic *umma* is the framework from which we must not deviate and from which all the ideas, programs, and systems are derived" [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Miṣrī 1998: 17]. The Wasat Party also advocates that "Islam as a civilization" not only includes Islamic elements but also Christian ones. According to the Party's third platform, "True self-reform, the founding members hold, is based on culture-specific values which, in Egypt's case, are essentially grounded in the religions to which most Egyptians belong, namely, Islam and Christianity. The founding members believe that a general Islamic framework (*marja'īya al-Islām*) is inclusive of all Egyptians: Islam is not only the religion of Muslims: it is also, for both Muslims and non-Muslims, the cultural framework within which Egypt's creative intellectuals, scientists and leaders have made their contributions, and Arabic, the language of Islam, is the language in which Egyptian religious leaders, whether Muslim or Christian, have preached. Islamic culture is the homeland of all Egyptians, Muslim and non-Muslim" [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 4; Mady 2006:3-4]. The Wasat Party has made the realization of the co-existence of all Egyptians, whether Muslims or Christians, one of its most fundamental ideas. A prominent Christian intellectual Rafīq Ḥabīb, who was one of the most important members of the Wasat Party, argued that "Christianity is a part of Islamic civilization as well as other elements. When we talk about Islamic civilization, it means we talk about the value system. This fundamental value system unifies Christians and Muslims because civilization is not a religious doctrine. All religions have taken shapes to unify religion and civilization. There are Islamic elements and Christian ones in our civilization. We can share the same way of life because all of us belong to the same civilization<sup>9)</sup>."

In view of the Wasat Party's intention to realize the coexistence of Muslims and Christians on the basis of "Islam as a civilization," the issue of implementing *sharī'a* remains problematic. According to the Wasat Party's third platform, "One of the main goals of the New Wasat Party is to apply, through democratic procedures, Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution, which states that the *sharī'a* (Islamic law) is the main source of legislation. In seeking to make the *sharī'a* a part of the very fabric of daily life, the founding members' task is to select interpretations of Islamic law which contribute towards, rather than obstruct, the development of Egyptian society" [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 4; Mady 2006: 4].

The Wasat Party's basic position on this issue is to avoid religious conflict in Egypt and to achieve the integration of and harmony among all Egyptians. Māḍī argued about the implementation of *sharī'a* as follows: "*Sharī'a* is a system of good values or ideas. We must implement *sharī'a* through *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) so that we can realize the welfare (*maṣlaḥa*) of the whole nation. As the values which both Muslims and Christians praise belong to the same civilization,

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9) Ḥabīb's reply by e-mail to the author's question, September 28, 2004.

we can share almost all the values<sup>10)</sup>.” He further explained that “We derive the essence of *sharī‘a* through *ijtihād* in accordance with the changes in the times, and implement it in our society<sup>11)</sup>.” According to the Wasat Party’s third platform, “Citizenship determines the rights and duties of all Egyptians and is the basis of the relations between all Egyptians. There should be no discrimination between citizens on the basis of religion, gender, color, or ethnicity in terms of their rights, including the right to hold public office” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 5; Mady 2006: 7]. The Wasat Party’s concept of *sharī‘a* reveals its basic principle to flexibly implement *sharī‘a* in contemporary Egypt on the basis of “Islam as a civilization.”

### III. Reform Programs of the Wasat Party: The Platform of the New Wasat Party

The Wasat Party submitted applications for approval to the PPC in 1996, 1998, and 2004; however, all of them were rejected. Although it is difficult for us to examine the actual political activities of the Wasat party as a legal entity, it is possible for us to discuss the type of policies the Wasat Party intends to adopt by examining the platforms submitted together with the applications. In this chapter, I will examine the platform of the New Wasat Party submitted in May 2004 in order to explore its political stance and prospective policies.

The preface of the platform states the following: “The current global situation necessitates the formulation of a new, realistic nationalist discourse promoting creative new formulas for the process of reform. This new nationalist discourse should be able not only to resist hegemony, but also to enable a national renaissance,” and requires the whole nation to take actions for the sake of the revival of Egypt [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 3; Mady 2006: 3]. The platform then describes the concrete and feasible reform programs comprising the following six chapters: politics, economy, society, culture and art, ethics (*akhlāq*) in reform policies, and international relations. Here, I will examine the chapters that relate to Islamic politics, namely, politics and ethics in reform policies.

In the first chapter titled “The Political Dimension: On Civil Liberties and Political Reform,” the Wasat Party states that it is the crucial factor for political reform in order to realize civil liberties and political freedom in Egypt. According to the platform, “Wider acknowledgement and respect for civil liberties should be the basis of reform in Egypt and the guarantee for its continuity. Civil liberties are the starting point for a cultural renaissance and the essential precondition for putting into practice *sharī‘a*’s (Islamic law’s) general principles of the sanctity of the human soul and reason, freedom of belief, the sanctity of public and private property and the preservation of human honor and dignity” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 5; Mady 2006: 6]. The platform enumerates 11 political principles as the means to establish civil liberties and realize political reforms. First, the platform states that “the people are the source of all powers,” and then explains important principles: free and fair general elections, equality of the whole nation, political pluralism, the right to establish a political party, freedom of expression, the right to peaceful demonstrations, freedom of belief, a respect for

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10) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

11) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

human dignity and all human rights, and so on [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 5-6; Mady 2006:6-8]. Based on these principles, the platform requires that eight procedures be immediately implemented. Some of them are “the annulment of all special emergency laws,” “a cessation of practices involving the violation of human rights,” and “securing guarantees for free and neutral general elections” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 6-7; Mady 2006:8-9]. These claims clearly show the Wasat Party’s law-abiding political stance, or in Mādī’s words, “the ultimate goal of the Wasat is to acquire broad support among all Egyptians and to achieve their welfare<sup>12)</sup>.” The claims, particularly regarding political party issues, also reflect the current situation of the Wasat Party, whose political activities are limited because of its legal status. Guaranteeing political rights and freedom is preferable in order to promote the Wasat Party’s political activities.

The fifth chapter titled “Ethics in Reform Policies” explains the relations between ethics peculiar to Egypt and reform policies. According to the platform, “ethical reform has to be based upon Islamic principles and values (al-mabādī’ wa al-qiyam al-Islāmīya), which act as a spur to good character and virtuous deeds. Such ethical reform, therefore, includes in its scope the project of restoring a measure of harmony and effectiveness to the prevalent Egyptian value systems, both at the individual and collective level” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 25; Mady 2006: 37]. Needless to say, these “Islamic principles and values” are derived from “Islam as a civilization,” which not only comprehends Muslims but also Christians. “‘Ethical reform’ is the countervailing force with which to stop the ‘social disintegration’ that is manifest in various political, economic, legal, educational and cultural aspects of Egyptian society” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 25; Mady 2006: 37]. It is regarded as indispensable to carrying out reform policies on the basis of ethics that are peculiar to Egyptian society so that national integration and coexistence can be realized. Further, we can also point out the Wasat Party’s attempt to unify Egyptian society with Islamic ethics derived from “Islam as a civilization.”

We can safely state that the Wasat Party views “Islam as a civilization” as the basis and origin of its political activities and reform policies and as an effective prescription to realize the integration of all Egyptian citizens.

#### **IV. The Wasat Party and Islamic Politics**

##### **1. Islamic Democracy of the Wasat Party**

As mentioned above, all the ideas, programs, and systems of the Wasat Party are derived from “Islam as a civilization.” This also applies to the Wasat Party’s Islamic democracy or Islamic politics. Article No. 3 of the Wasat Party’s bylaws stipulates that the party assumes the principle of consultation (*shūrā*) and democratic procedures as duties, and makes them necessary for the revival of Egypt [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ 1996: 103].

Answering a question posed by the author about Islamic democracy, Mādī argued, “We have to establish our own democracy based on Islamic civilization or ‘Islam as a civilization.’”

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12) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.



Every civilization has its own democracy as the circumstances are different. Establishing our own democracy is a ‘human experience’ or the ‘identification of our civilization,’ and Egyptian democracy will be an ‘Islamic democracy,’ which is different from Western democracy. This is the ‘reproduction of democracy.’ For example, India has its own democracy and Japan has its own democracy, too<sup>13)</sup>.” He denied the imitation of Western democracy, and emphasized that the Wasat Party attempted to reproduce democracy by employing the principles of Islamic civilization. This reproduced democracy can be called Islamic democracy, in that it is based on “Islam as a civilization.” Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Karīm also stated that “Each civilization has its own democracy, and Islamic democracy is most appropriate to Egypt. It is, of course, different from the Western one<sup>14)</sup>.”

The idea that Islamic democracy is derived from “Islam as a civilization” implies that Islamic democracy not only comprehends Muslims but also Christians. Islamic democracy reveals the basic ideas of the Wasat Party, namely, to evade interreligious confrontation and discrimination in Egypt, and to attach greater importance to national integration and coexistence. As Mādī argued, “All Egyptians, that is, Muslims and Christians, and men and women, are equal<sup>15)</sup>,” and maintained the equality and freedom of all Egyptians. ‘Abd al-Karīm explained that “Men and women are totally equal. There should be no discriminations between men and women. Women are the source of progress in our society<sup>16)</sup>.” Further, the Wasat Party’s third platform stipulates, “There should be no discrimination between citizens on the basis of religion, gender, color or ethnicity in terms of their rights, including the right to hold public office,” and “Complete equality between men and women in terms of political and civil rights” [Ḥizb al-Wasaṭ al-Jadīd 2004: 5-6; Mady 2006: 7]<sup>17)</sup>. This principle of equality between men and women is reflected in the fact that 40 out of a total of 200 founding members of the “New Wasat Party” are women<sup>18)</sup>.

Hānī Labīb<sup>19)</sup>, a famous Christian intellectual, commented favorably on Islamic democracy. He stated that “The Wasat Party’s democracy guarantees equality under the law and the freedom of thought and belief on the basis of pluralism. It denies any discrimination by religion or gender. There is room for us to accept it<sup>20)</sup>.” Moreover, Rafīq Ḥabīb recognized that the democracy of the Wasat Party was based on Islamic civilization, which Christians share<sup>21)</sup>. In view of these comments, we can observe that the Islamic democracy of the Wasat Party finds some favor among Christians. However, its popular support among Christians is limited, as Mādī recognized: “Our Christian members or supporters are mainly intellectuals residing in urban areas, and it is not so easy to gain

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13) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, April 27, 2004.

14) Author’s interview with ‘Abd al-Karīm in Cairo, March 28, 2004.

15) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

16) Author’s interview with ‘Abd al-Karīm in Cairo, March 28, 2004.

17) Stacher [2002:428-430] explains the Wasat Party’s idea regarding the rights of women in detail.

18) ([http://www.daralhayat.com/arab\\_news/nafrica\\_news/05-2004/20040517-17P01-06.txt/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/05-2004/20040517-17P01-06.txt/story.html))

19) Labīb works at the Association of Education and Development in Upper Egypt (Jam‘īya al-Ṣa‘īd li-l-Tarbiya wa al-Tanmiya), and has published many books about the relations between Christians and Muslims. Although he is a member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), he maintains friendly relations with the Wasat Party members.

20) Author’s interview with Labīb in Cairo, April 20, 2004.

21) Author’s interview with Ḥabīb in Cairo, April 22, 2004.

wide support among the general Christian population<sup>22)</sup>.” In this regard, we can point out the fact that only six of the founding members of the New Wasat Party were Christians<sup>23)</sup>. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Ḥabīb, who was one of the most important members of the Wasat Party, did not participate in the application process for the New Wasat Party in 2004. In recent years, it is often stated that Ḥabīb gradually distanced himself from the Wasat Party. Regarding his attitude toward the Wasat Party, he stated that “This is simply because of private reasons, and it is timely to maintain some distance<sup>24)</sup>.” However, some researchers imply that the reason for Ḥabīb’s attitude is his discontent with the Wasat Party’s strategy and his anxiety about its future<sup>25)</sup>. In any case, it is true that the nonparticipation of this renowned Christian intellectual seems to be a disadvantage for the Wasat Party, which advocates Islamic democracy and national integration.

‘Abd al-Karīm stated that free and fair elections are indispensable to establishing Islamic democracy<sup>26)</sup>. The third platform of the Wasat Party also includes this view as a part of political reforms [Ḥizb al-Wasat al-Jadīd 2004: 6; Mady 2006: 7]. In response to a question posed by the author about whether the Wasat Party would cooperate with other political parties or groups if it participated in parliamentary elections, Māḍī stated, “Our goal is perfect democracy and equality. If other political parties or groups have the same goal as ours, leftists, Nasserists, and Christians can cooperate with us and even join us. We welcome whoever agrees with our ideas<sup>27)</sup>.” Based on his reply, Islamic democracy would enable political groups or parties to overcome political differences and to cooperate with each other provided they shared the same goals.

We can observe that the Islamic politics of the Wasat Party intends to achieve Islamic democracy based on “Islam as a civilization” mainly through political activities, namely, *da’wa* specializing in politics, as a legal party in order to realize the welfare of all Egyptian citizens.

## 2. The Wasat Party’s Activities

As the Wasat Party’s platforms state, the party seeks Islamic democracy. However, the Wasat Party’s political activities are limited because of its legal status. Under such difficult circumstances, there are two important spheres in which the Wasat Party members play an important role.

The first one is as an NGO “Egypt for Culture and Dialogue (Miṣr li-l-Thaqāfa wa al-Ḥiwār).” In April 2000, this NGO was formally licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs on the basis of the Law 153/1999. The president of the NGO is Salīm ‘Awwā, one of the most famous intellectuals of *wasatīya* current, and the Wasat Party members constitute its board of directors [Stacher 2002: 423]. Its activities include holding seminars or symposiums and conducting researches [Wickham 2004: 223]. According to the website of this NGO<sup>28)</sup>, the aim of the establishment is to promote a

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22) Author’s interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

23) ([http://www.daralhayat.com/arab\\_news/nafrica\\_news/05-2004/20040517-17P01-06.txt/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/05-2004/20040517-17P01-06.txt/story.html))

24) Author’s interview with Ḥabīb in Cairo, April 22, 2004.

25) Author’s interview with ‘Abd al-‘Āṭī Muḥammad, editor of the newspaper al-Ahram, in Cairo, April 3, 2004.

26) Author’s interview with ‘Abd al-Karīm in Cairo, March 28, 2004.

27) Author’s interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

28) This site (<http://www.geocities.com/egyptculture/>) is closed as of November 11, 2007. For further information

culture of dialogue among cultures in as many fields as possible through peaceful means. On the website, the NGO also enumerates the following points as necessary requirements to realize its aim: (1) freedom of expression and belief, (2) promoting pluralism and recognizing differences of thought and belief, (3) understanding others and developing positive interrelated influences, (4) research and study of political, historical, economic, social, and cultural elements that contribute to the NGO's aim, and (5) cooperation with other groups and organizations. In these points, we can observe the ideological continuity between this NGO and the Wasat Party, as 'Abd al-Karīm stated, "This NGO is the important practice ground for the Wasat Party's political activities<sup>29)</sup>."

The second one is the Wasat Party members' participation in the pro-democracy movement since 2004, that is, the "Egyptian Movement for Change (al-Ḥaraka al-Miṣrīya min Ajl al-Taghyīr)," which is well known as the "Kifaya Movement (Ḥaraka al-Kifāya)" or simply as "Kifaya." Kifaya was established in September 2004, and its founders came from the far left and the far right, and from among both Muslims and Christians. The main and active founding members belong to the so-called 1970s generation [Shorbagy 2007: 42-44]. They also included the Wasat Party's members [Meital 2005: 267-272; Shorgaby 2007: 46].

In the "Declaration to the Nation" displayed on his website, Kifaya warns about "two grave dangers which beset our nation today," namely, external threats and internal despotism<sup>30)</sup>. Kifaya considers both of these as two sides of the same coin, and believes that the first step for resisting external threats is to promote political reform within Egypt and to shift from despotism to democracy. In order to achieve these goals, Kifaya enumerates the following four measures: (1) breaking the hold of the ruling party (NDP) over power and all its instruments; (2) cessation of the Emergency Law now in effect for a full quarter century; (3) cessation of all laws that constrain public and individual freedoms; and (4) effecting constitutional reform (a) to allow for direct election by citizens of the president and vice president of the Republic from a choice of several candidates, (b) to limit the tenure of the president to a period that does not exceed two terms, (c) to limit the almost absolute sanctions and prerogative currently entrusted to the office of the president of the Republic, (d) to separate the legislative, judicial, and executive powers, and define independent checks and balances for each, (e) to ensure the unsanctioned freedom of association, formation of political parties, and publication of newspapers, (f) to remove the current state of sequestration imposed on syndicates, (g) to conduct fair parliamentary elections under the supervision of the Supreme Judicial Council and State Council at every stage—from citizen registration to the publication of the election results<sup>31)</sup>.

Kifaya clearly displayed its opposition to the Mubārak regime, and began to hold street demonstrations and gatherings since the end of 2004. A large number of people participated in the demonstrations, and marched with the slogan "No to Mubārak (lā li-Mubārak)." The waves of Kifaya's demonstrations became one of the greatest forces to promote pro-democracy movements and democratization in Egypt [Yokota 2006:183-186]. Mādī said that they, the Wasat Party

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on this NGO, see [Miṣr li-l-Thaqāfa wa al-Ḥiwār n.d.].

29) Author's interview with 'Abd al-Karīm in Cairo, March 28, 2004.

30) (<http://harakamasria.org/?q=node/2944>; <http://harakamasria.org/?q=manifesto>)

31) (<http://harakamasria.org/?q=node/2944>; <http://harakamasria.org/?q=manifesto>)

members, believed that Kifaya would act as a positive impetus for democratization in his country, and that Kifaya sought the same goals as the Wasat Party, namely, realizing “true democracy” in Egypt<sup>32)</sup>. As mentioned above, it is the Wasat Party’s aim to promote democratization and to achieve the welfare of all Egyptian citizens. Thus, according to Mādī, it is quite natural for the Wasat Party members to join Kifaya<sup>33)</sup>. In fact, Mādī had himself joined Kifaya as a founding member from the very beginning. He often participated in its demonstrations and gatherings and spoke about the activities and aims of Kifaya during his interview<sup>34)</sup>.

In spite of the difficult circumstances and limitations stemming from its legal status, the Wasat Party continues its activities in Egypt in order to achieve its objectives. Further, it is an active part of pro-democracy movements in Egyptian politics. However, thus far, the government has not granted it a license.

### 3. The Wasat Party vis-à-vis the Brotherhood and the Government

As discussed above, although the Wasat Party has played an important role in Egyptian politics and in the process of democratization in Egypt as a *de facto* political organization, it has never been issued a license. Furthermore, since 1996, the Muslim Brotherhood has also ended relations with it. In this section, with reference to Islamic politics, I will discuss the reason why both the government and the Brotherhood oppose the Wasat Party.

The Muslim Brotherhood has remained illegal since the Nasserite era. Although the Brotherhood succeeded in reviving itself as a *de facto* political force, the government continued to maintain the illegal status of the Brotherhood because of the fear that it might emerge as a new political competitor. Since the 1970s, the Islamic politics of the Brotherhood has been to promote and realize the implementation of *sharī'a* through its various activities in Egypt as a *de facto* political force. The Brotherhood, therefore, has continued to expand its political, social, economic, and cultural activities in Egyptian society; however, it has been unable to officially unify its activities or subordinate organizations under the umbrella of central leadership. This has restricted the activities of the Brotherhood and is causing structural problems for it [Kosugi & Yokota 2003: 58].

In order to overcome the limitation that the Brotherhood faces, the members of the Wasat Party advocated Islamic democracy, which would have the capability of including the entire nation. Moreover, it adopted the new initiative of creating a new legal political party, which would have the capability of overcoming the limitations and problems of the Brotherhood. Their attempt, however, involved certain issues that would arouse strong opposition from the Brotherhood’s old guard. This is because the old guard occupied the upper echelon of the organizational structure, and the Wasat

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32) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 11, 2007.

33) Author’s interview with Mādī in Cairo, September 11, 2007.

34) See, for example, the following newspaper *al-Ahram Weekly*’s articles:  
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/745/eg4.htm>;  
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/745/eg4.htm>;  
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/756/eg10.htm>.

Party members attempted to reform or change the status quo. The Wasat Party members' initiative to establish a new party carried the possibility of diminishing the influence of the old guard based on the existing organizational structure; therefore, in a sense, it was a challenge to the existing leadership of the old guard. Furthermore, if the Wasat Party members had taken the initiative in establishing a new party, the leadership of the old guard would possibly have been weakened. The new 1970s generation might have then reinforced its influence and taken the initiative in changing the organizational structure and even in personnel affairs. It is possible to point out that the fear of losing its leadership was one of the reasons that the old guard rebuffed the Wasat Party.

The Mubārak regime also opposed the Wasat Party. The reason for the government's rejection stemmed from the same fear that it held *vis-à-vis* the Brotherhood. The political system under the Mubārak regime is one where political power is concentrated in the office of the president [Inou 2001: 189]. In other words, the channels of resource mobilization are controlled by Mubārak. It is natural for this authoritarian government to prevent the Brotherhood from gaining a new channel of resource mobilization, namely, legal status as a political party. It is not a good bargain for the government to grant a license to the Wasat Party, which is suspected of being related to the Brotherhood. Some newspapers reported that this suspicion was the true reason for the rejection of the Wasat Party's applications<sup>35)</sup>. From the government's viewpoint, granting a license to the Wasat Party, whose leaders are ex-Brotherhood members, would set an undesirable precedent that might be followed by the Brotherhood. The government, therefore, rejected the Wasat Party's applications irrespective of whether or not it was related to the Brotherhood. Although the Islamic politics of the Wasat Party are different from those of the Brotherhood, and although both the Wasat Party and the Brotherhood deny having any relations with each other, the government believes that both of them have the same roots and are still related to each other.

From the viewpoint of resource mobilization, some researchers point out a problem for the Wasat Party, namely, a lack of channels for mass mobilization. It has succeeded in acquiring the support of intellectuals to some extent; however, thus far, it has failed in establishing a broad base of popular support. For example, Wickham [2002: 219-220] states that "Rebuffed by the regime and the Brotherhood, the Wasat Islamists remain marginal political actors without a mass base"; moreover, referring to the NGO (Egypt for Culture and Dialogue), "By channeling the group's energies into largely intellectual pursuits, the new association has only reinforced its elitist, 'salon' character." As Māḍī argued, "The Wasat Party is a political program, and we do not directly relate to social activities<sup>36)</sup>." At present, unlike the Brotherhood, the Wasat Party does not intend to establish channels for mass mobilization based on social activities. Regarding the mass base of support, the words of Muḥammad al-Sayyid Ḥabīb, the first Deputy General Guide of the Brotherhood, are suggestive. In an article in the newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* on May 21, 2004, he stated, "We do not fear the establishment of the Wasat Party or other parties, because we have a broad base of mass support and are not influenced by other organizations." Further, he welcomed the

35) ([http://www.daralhayat.com/arab\\_news/nafrica\\_news/10-2004/20041002-03p08-03.txt/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/10-2004/20041002-03p08-03.txt/story.html))

36) Author's interview with Māḍī in Cairo, September 12, 2000.

establishment of the New Wasat Party because it would promote the cause of freedom in Egypt<sup>37)</sup>. It is true that the Wasat Party has lacked opportunities to expand and develop its mass base through actual political activities as a party because of its legal status since 1996. However, as discussed above, the Wasat Party members are very active in pro-democracy movements such as Kifaya and play an important role in the process of democratization in Egypt. Furthermore, it seems that the ideology and principles of the Wasat Party's Islamic politics, such as Islamic democracy and "Islam as a civilization," are compatible with the goal of the pro-democracy movements, namely, democratization in Egypt. We could observe that the Wasat Party, which aspires to promote and achieve democratization in Egypt, revealed a new path to make Islamic politics more acceptable or understandable to the masses in society. We could also point out the possibility of the Wasat Party having an opportunity to expand and develop its mass base through political activities with other parties or organizations.

### **Conclusion**

The Muslim Brotherhood contributed to the introduction of Islamic politics in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s when liberal democracy, limited under the British domination, was effective. Further, the Brotherhood contributed to its revival in the late 1970s when political liberalization was started. Both the Sādāt and Mubārak regimes tolerated the Brotherhood as a de facto political force; however, from the Nasserite era onward, they have never changed its illegal status. This is because the Brotherhood has strong capabilities of mass mobilization and, therefore, posed a serious challenge to successive governments. By maintaining its illegal status, the government empowered itself to control the Brotherhood. On the other hand, this restricts the government's attempts for political liberalization and democratization and undermines their democratic legitimacy.

The Brotherhood's legal status limits its activities in Egypt. The rising new 1970s generation within the Brotherhood felt frustrated with the restricted circumstances and the leadership of the old guard. Therefore, Mādī and his colleagues started the new initiative to establish a legal party as a political organ of the Brotherhood. As discussed above, the core elements of the Wasat Party's Islamic politics, such as Islamic democracy, "Islam as a civilization," and religious coexistence, appear to be serious and feasible. In my opinion, the Wasat Party has the potential to become a democratic Islamic political party with some degree of popularity in Egypt. It appears that both the central leadership of the Brotherhood and the government rejected its applications owing to this possibility. The fact that the Wasat Party members along with other intellectuals or activists play an important and prominent role in the pro-democracy movements reveals the affinity of the Wasat Party's Islamic politics for democratization in Egypt.

Maintaining the illegal status of the Brotherhood and rejecting the Wasat Party could constitute two major obstacles to the process of democratization in Egypt. Based on my examination, it appears that the government's suspicion that the Wasat Party has relations with the Brotherhood is

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37) (<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issue=9306&article=235141>)

unsubstantiated. If we follow the government's logic of political liberalization and democratization as well as its anxiety over the Brotherhood as a potential competitor, it is more practical to grant a license to the Wasat Party so that it acquires the Brotherhood's popularity. At the same time, the government's democratization policies will advance.

If the government does not favor any expansion of Islamic politics because it can create real competitors—irrespective of whether they are the Brotherhood, Wasat Party, or any other Islamic party—we can understand the present position of the government *vis-à-vis* the Brotherhood and the Wasat Party. This, however, perpetuates the fundamental dilemma of political liberalization and democratization. This is because in the last three or four decades, the Islamic revival in Egypt made it impossible to expand political liberalization and democratization without integrating Islamic politics to a significant degree. How the democratization of Egyptian politics can develop beyond this dilemma remains to be seen.

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