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We are all *Wasatiyyun:* The Shifting Sands of Center Positioning in Egypt's Early Post-Revolutionary Party Politics

Abstract: This article focuses on a common rhetorical referent in Egyptian public imagery and parlance–that of *wasat* (center) and its derivatives *wasati/wasatiyya* (centrist/centrism)–and discusses how it has been appropriated and molded in the sphere of party politics. Inductive in approach, it examines the rhetorical appropriations of the center ground by party officials, revealing not only its popularity as a marker of (ideological) self-positioning but its malleability and contextuality. The article concludes that in Egyptian party politics the center positioning of parties cannot be gauged exclusively from the study of party manifestos and/or expert surveys, but ought to include contextual analysis of how this and other ideological markers are appropriated and given meaning in elite rhetoric.

***Keywords**: Egypt, political parties, centrism, political rhetoric*

Introduction

In Egypt, the term *wasat* (center)[1]–and its derivatives *wasati/wasatiyya* (centrist/centrism)–have historically occupied a significant place in public imagery and parlance, being widely evoked as a virtue and hallmark of self-identification by ordinary citizens, religious dignitaries, party officials, and ruling elites. Surprisingly, however, despite its salience in public imagery, there is a dearth of research on the usage(s) and meaning(s) of the terms *wasat/wasati/wasatiyya* in the societal and political spheres. Indeed, a number of recent analyses into Islamic centrism and its infusion into the domain of (post-)Islamist organizational politics apart,[2] little is known about how the center has been evoked and understood more widely in Egyptian public discourse beyond its religious connotation(s). Focusing on the realm of party politics, we seek to address this gap in the literature by exploring how–at the level of rhetoric–party officials from across the Egyptian political spectrum have deployed notions of the center. What are the meaning(s) they have ascribed to the center and a centrist disposition? In how far do these meanings resonate with notions of Islamic centrism and/or with some of the broader center evocations prevalent in (Western) taxonomies on party ideologies and positioning? And what factors, if any, shape the meanings party officials accord to the center ground?

Addressing these questions, we contend that extant taxonomies of Egyptian party ideologies and positioning, as proposed for example by Jacopo Carbonari, Mazen Hassan and

[1] Alongside 'center', the term is variably translated as middle, intermediate, moderate, ordinary or fair. See H. Wehr (1979) *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag), p. 1066.

[2] See e.g. A. El Sherif (2016) The Strong Egypt Party: Representing a Progressive/Democratic Islamist Party?, *Contemporary Islam*, 10(3), pp. 311-331; J. Høigilt (2010) Rhetoric and Ideology in Egypt's Wasaṭiyya Movement, *Arabica*, 2(3), pp. 251-266; C. R. Wickham (2004) The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party, *Comparative Politics*, 36(2), pp. 205-228; S. Polka (2003) The Centrist Stream in Egypt and its Role in the Public Discourse Surrounding the Shaping of the Country's Cultural Identity, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 39(3), pp. 39-64.

Daniel Tavana fail to capture the *rhetorical* malleability and contextuality of the center ground.[3] Consequently, we suggest that any comprehensive exploration of the Egyptian party spectrum–and the dynamic positioning of political parties within it–ought to be broadened in scope beyond the longitudinal study of party programmes/manifestos to an analysis of the processes of meaning-making of ideological markers such as the left, right or center. In fact, we hold that, wherever the programmatic contours of political parties remain vague and/or resonate little with the electorate–as was the case in 2011-12 Egypt[4]–it is likely that rhetorical references to ideological markers, and the meaning(s) afforded them, remain characterized by fluidity, change, and contention. In these contexts, the meanings of political terms such as left, right or center cannot, and should not, be assumed as given or fixed, but ought to be themselves the subject of scholarly scrutiny.

To substantiate the above propositions, this article draws on, and examines, primary data grounded in an innovative research design involving two rounds of interviews conducted with the same set of party officials at distinct (yet sufficiently proximate) junctures during the tumultuous June to November 2013 period;[5] a first conducted during the final days of Mohamed Morsi's rule in mid-June, and a second five months later during the short-lived interim

[3] J. Carbonari (2012) Map of Egyptian Political Parties. First Phase of Parliamentary Elections (28 November 2011), *European Parliament Publication,* pp. 1-8; M. Hassan (2012) The Map of Egypt's Political Parties for the 2011 Elections, *Doha Institute*, 12 January; D. L. Tavana (2011) Party Proliferation and Electoral Transition in Post-Mubarak Egypt, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16(4), pp. 555-571.

[4] In the immediate post-uprising era political parties remained plagued by numerous internal deficiencies, including most notably a lack in nationwide organisational structures, financial resource and detailed political programmes. In his analysis of the 2011-12 parliamentary election campaign Hassan, for instance, draws particular attention to the widespread lack of party programmatic clarity, asserting that 'in general terms, these manifestos addressed Egypt's most pressing problems like unemployment, education and healthcare with extremely general phrases and promises of increased spending without specifying how the suggested measures will be financed' See M. Hassan (2013) Elections of the People's Assembly, Egypt 2011/12, *Electoral Studies*, 32, p. 372. For Virginie Collombier the absence of differentiated party manifestos at the time was the combined result of a realisation by party leaders that 'most citizens are still expecting services from their representatives, and that affiliations and reputation matter much more than any party label', as well as the prevailing popularity of religious/moral issues over bread-and-butter matters in public discourse. See V. Collombier (2013) Politics without Parties: Political Change and Democracy Building in Egypt Before and After the Revolution, *EUI Working Papers*, pp. 11-12.

[5] A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials from across the party political spectrum based on purposeful maximum variation sampling. The sample includes officials from political parties belonging to what is widely classed as the *Islamic/Islamist current*, including Hizb al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala (Freedom and Justice Party/FJP), Hizb al-Tayyar al-Misri (Egyptian Current Party/ECP), Hizb al-Nur, or commonly known as al-Nour (Party of Light/al-Nour) and Hizb al-Watan (Homeland Party/Watan); the *liberal* and *right-wing currents*, including Hizb Ghad al-Thawra (Revolution's Tomorrow Party/ Ghad), Hizb al-Mu'tamar al-Misri (Egyptian Conference Party; henceforth Conference Party), Hizb al-Jabha al-Dimuqrati (Democratic Front Party/DFP), Hizb al-Wafd al-Jadid (New Wafd Party/NWP), Hizb al-Islah wa al-Tanmiyyah–Misruna (Reform and Development–Misruna Party/RDMP) and Hizb al-Misriyyin al-Ahrar (Free Egyptians Party/FEP); and the *center-left* and *leftist currents,* including Hizb al-Tahaluf al-Sha'bi al-Ishtiraki (Popular Socialist Alliance Party/PASP), Hizb al-Tajammu' al-Taqaddumi al-Wahdawi (National Progressive Unionist Party/NPUP), Hizb al-Karama (Dignity Party/al-Karama) and Hizb al-Misri al-Dimuqrati al-Ijtima'i (Egyptian Social Democratic Party/ESDP).

presidency of Adly Mansour and his Prime Minister (PM) Hazem al-Beblawi.[6] The data thus collated not only reveals the popularity of the center as a referent of partisan self-placement across the political spectrum, but importantly its rhetorical malleability and contextuality. In the interviews at hand, this malleability finds expression in the multiple frames party officials deployed when denoting the center ground and their placement within it. Beyond reference to a religious median (however defined), these entailed both economic and procedural center evocations. Its contextuality, meanwhile, transpires from close comparative scrutiny of the two rounds of interviews, which reveal variance in the onus party officials placed on certain center evocations and the value they attached to it as a rhetorical asset. Whilst by the end of the Morsi era party officials gravitated strategically towards a religious centre evocation as a means to brush up their parties' Islamic credentials in a political climate that at the time was dominated by Islamists in government, this changed significantly during the interim period which, with al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood/MB) removed from the political equation, saw party officials shift their onus away from religious to economic centre articulations.

Two methodological provisos pertaining to our data are in order. For one, this article does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of all rhetorical permutations of the center in Egyptian party political rhetoric, which requires exploring a much larger sample of party representatives. All we infer from the available evidence is that center conceptions *are* multiple and variable depending on context. Given its focus on the latter half of 2013, our analysis is also circumscribed by time. This is particularly relevant for the study of context on center conceptualisations, which in our research is limited to the final days of the Morsi presidency and the interim period preceding the rise to power of al-Sisi. A broader discussion of iterations of the center vocabulary during the pre-uprising era and/or the al-Sisi presidency from 2014 onwards is hence not possible and will require further investigation.

Rethinking political parties and the center ground

Despite its common usage in everyday parlance, political discourse, and academic writings, remarkably little theoretical clarity exists on what constitutes the center and centrism in party politics. A cursory look at the relevant (Western) literature attests to this. In some spatial models of party ideologies, for instance, the center location constitutes a definable geometrical mid-

[6] During both interview sessions, respondents were asked about their center conceptions and placement. The authors deemed this particular interview design a robust and appropriate means to test the impact of political change on elite rhetoric, keeping the timeframe between interview sessions minimal, thus controlling for significant changes in broader socio-cultural and economic context. We thank Karim Malak for conducting the second round of interviews in November 2013.

point between two ideological extremes to the left and the right respectively. An illustrative example is the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), [7] which maps the election manifestos of European political parties onto a composite left-right ideological scale. Using the *rile*-index, this scale is 'theoretically bounded' at the extreme left (-100) and right (+100), thus featuring an ideological mid-point at the 0 mark. Other models of party positioning, meanwhile, stay clear of one-size-fits-all left-right scales, proposing instead spatial models that acknowledge that the meaning of left and right (and the center for that matter) may vary from country to country as well as over time. [8] Unlike the CMP, these models are thus premised around a more temporal/contextual understanding of party positioning, and one in which the meaning and location of the center are derived from the specificities of the spectrum of political parties operating in any given polity.

This notion of contextuality and variability of the center ground also resonates with some behavioral models of party competition. [9] Indeed, some of the core theoretical (albeit empirically contested) assumptions underpinning these models entail 1) the proposition that political parties/candidates are rational vote/plurality-maximizers, single-mindedly focused on winning public office, and that hence their manifestos constitutes little more than a means to this end, 2) that voter preferences are 'single-peaked' in a one-dimensional ideological/policy space, with most voters clustered around the median position and 3) that political parties strive to tap into the median vote by gravitating towards this electoral center. [10] This electoral center, however, is not static but, as numerous scholars have elucidated, variable not least in part due to changes in public opinion over time. [11] Determined by voter preferences rather than party manifestos, in these behavioral models of party competition, the center is thus again treated as context-specific and variable. Above all, it is conceived of as a tactical location that rationally-acting party elites seek to strive for in their battles for votes and power.

In Western public discourse outside academia as well, centrism carries a range of connotations which are not always tied to ideological left-right thinking and not always positive. For some, for instance, a centrist (party political) position represents a politics of moderation, temperance, compromise, gradualism, pragmatism or reform; a conceptualization of the center

[7] Also known as *Manifesto Research on Political Representation* (MARPOR).
[8] See e.g. T. König, M. Marbach and M. Osnabrügge (2013) Estimating Party Positions across Countries and Time: A Dynamic Latent Variable Model for Manifesto Data, *Political Analysis*, 21(4), pp. 468-491.
[9] See e.g. J. Adams, M. Clark, L. Ezrow and G. Glasgow (2004) Understanding Change and Stability in Party Ideologies: Do Parties Respond to Public Opinion or to Past Election Results?, *British Journal of Political Science*, 34(4), pp. 589-610.
[10] F. Petry (1982) Vote-Maximizing versus Utility-Maximizing Candidates: Comparing Dynamic Models of Bi-Party Competition, *Quality and Quantity*, 16(6), p. 507.
[11] Adams, Clark, et al. Understanding Change and Stability in Party Ideologies, pp. 589-610.

that–as evidenced below–has also been evoked by party officials in Egypt during the period under investigation. For others, meanwhile, it stands metaphorically for political indecisiveness, assimilation, *status quo* politics or a hollow policy discourse.[12] In the realm of everyday politics then, center conceptualizations are as diverse as they are in academic usage, highlighting yet again the associative elasticity of the concept and the difficulty of pinning it down to a set of core characteristics.

The center as a malleable discursive sphere

It is this associative elasticity, as well as its relational qualities alluded to above, that reside at the heart of our conceptualization of the center as a *rhetorical* device in Egyptian party political rhetoric. Indeed, as spelled out in the introduction, what we are interested in is the process of appropriation and meaning-making of the center and centrist stances by multiple party officials at any given time, rather than a mapping exercise of centrist political forces within a quantifiable left-right policy/ideological spectrum, which–as will be elucidated below–we deem problematic in the Egyptian context. As such, we follow the work of Jonathan White who–shedding new light on the study of the left-right binary in European party politics–moves away from a usage of the two concepts that is tied exclusively to the ideas 'they do or do not index',[13] to a broader understanding of left and right that explores *how* they are 'invoked and put to work in political discourse'.[14] As White suggests, '(…) "left" and "right" are discursive resources drawn upon, contested and resisted in political exchange–themselves the site of conflict as much as an exogenous device for its representation'.[15] In his theorizing, White hence not only opens up the possibility that these terms can take on different meanings but encourages analysis of their tactical value as rhetorical assets and as sites of elite contestation.

In the Egyptian setting as well, our findings suggest that Western-centric composite left-right scales–and the center placement within them–are not only inadequate in capturing the specificities of the local party landscape, but in elucidating the multiple and diverse evocations by party elites of the center ground. This, for one, is due to the lack of programmatic clarity and the ideological fluidity that remain hallmarks of Egyptian party politics and that render difficult

[12] K. Lenk (2009) Vom Mythos der Politischen Mitte. Philosophie der Mitte: Abschied von der Utopie, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 38.
[13] J. White (2010) Left, Right and Beyond: The Pragmatics of Political Mapping, *LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series,* 24, p. 2.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. Note that White's research agenda aligns closely with a broader academic debate on the universality of ideological concepts such as the left or right in voter, electoral and party research. See. e.g. P. C. Bauer, P. Barberá, K. Ackermann and A. Venetz (2017) Is the Left-Right Scale a Valid Measure of Ideology?, *Political Behaviour*, 39(3), pp. 553-583.

any clear-cut ideological demarcations.[16] It is also, however, due to the pervasiveness of religious norms in public discourse and policy that render inaccurate composite left-right scales which associate the left with a secular disposition and the right with a religious one.[17] In Egypt this connect simply does not stand given that here we encounter, for instance, numerous so-called Islamist parties advocating right- or left-wing economic policies.[18]

Most significantly, the data suggests that conceptualizing notions such as the center/centrism as mere expressions of an ideological/policy mid-point on a composite left-right scale is not only flawed (for the above reasons), but unable to capture the *contested* and *bounded* nature of the center sphere that transpires from a closer reading of the center vocabulary deployed by party elites. By *contested*, we refer to the claim- and counter-claim making to the center ground that tends to characterize the everyday interaction between political agents. By *bounded*, in turn, we refer to the interplay between elite rhetoric and setting, and the fact that the meanings associated with a center position/location are malleable and filled with content depending on context.

What we hence propose here is a broadening out of how we conceptualize party ideologies and positioning within the Egyptian context, or for that matter within party systems that are nascent and/or marked by significant ideological ambiguity and fluidity. The study of party diffusion and positioning in these circumstances not only needs to be sensitive to context but move beyond the study of party manifestos to an analysis of elite rhetoric. Indeed, it is this attention to political rhetoric that brings into focus the malleability of ideological frames, their often multiple usages as well as their changes over time.

The center in spatial models of Egyptian party politics

Possibly due to the pitfalls alluded to above, few scholars have as yet attempted to map Egypt's political parties on a quantifiable ideological/policy scale. Indeed, although a range of excellent analyses are nowadays available on individual political parties and multiparty/opposition politics pre- and post Egyptian uprising,[19] little scholarly effort has thus far gone into mapping their

[16] See e.g. H. Kraetzschmar and A. Saleh (2018) Political Parties and Secular–Islamist Polarization in post-Mubarak Egypt, in H. Kraetzschmar and P. Rivetti (eds) *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 230-233.
[17] See e.g. O. Knutsen (1995) Value Orientations, Political Conflicts and Left-Right Identification: A Comparative Study, *European Journal of Political Research*, 28(1), p. 63.
[18] See e.g. B. Zollner (2018) Does Participation Lead to Moderation? Understanding Changes in the Egyptian Islamist Parties post-Arab Spring, in H. Kraetzschmar and P. Rivetti (eds) *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 149-165.
[19] See e.g. J.M. Landau (2015) *Parliaments and Parties in Egypt*. (Abingdon: Routledge); H. Albrecht, (2013) *Raging against the Machine: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt* (Syracuse, New York:

ideological diffusion within a one- or two-dimensional policy spaces, the exception being the spatial models developed on the nascent post-2011 party system by amongst others Carbonari, Hassan and Tavana.[20]

Building on Western spatial representations of party positioning, Carbonari, Hassan and Tavana developed two-dimensional models within which they sought to locate Egypt's political parties based on manifesto data. In all three cases, this dimensionality rests on the assumption that Egyptian party politics is characterized by two principle ideological fault lines; an economic left-right cleavage and a religious-secular one. Whereas Western composite left-right spatial models, such as the CMP, presume congruence between left and secular and right and religious, Carbonari, Hassan and Tavana recognize the problems that reside in its applicability to the Egyptian context. As such they are correct in disentangling the two ideological cleavages and in representing them as discrete axes in a two-dimensional policy space.[21] As mentioned earlier, this enables a more nuanced placement of Egypt's political parties, one that recognizes that entities on the left and right might have religious or non-religious dispositions.

This said, the Carbonari and Tavana taxonomies in particular suffer from several shortcomings, some of which pertain explicitly to conceptualizations of the center ground.[22] Tavana, for instance, not only fails to map individual political parties onto his two-dimensional policy space–thus leaving the reader to guess where the parties he references are actually located–but provides little substance to his claim that 'most, if not all, parties [espouse] programmes somewhere in the middle'[23] of the secular-religious axis. From Tavana's account and figural depiction, this claim is lacking in verifiability. Moreover, whilst Tavana presents an

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Syracuse University Press); K. al-Anani and M. Malik (2013) Pious Way to Politics: The Rise of Political Salafism in Post-Mubarak Egypt, *Digest of Middle East Studies* 22(1) pp. 57-73; H. Sallam (2013) *Egypt's Parliamentary Elections: A Critical Guide to a Changing Political Arena* (Washington DC: Tadween Publishing); M. Farag (2012) Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the January 25 Revolution: New Political Party, New Circumstances, *Contemporary Arab Affairs,* 5(2), pp. 214-229; D. Shehata (2009) *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict and Cooperation* (Abingdon: Routledge); J. Stacher (2004) Parties Over: The Demise of Egypt's Opposition Parties, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31(2), pp. 215-233; A. al-Ghaffar Shukor (2003) Political Parties in Egypt, in: H. Mustafa, A. al-Ghaffar Shukor and A.H. Rabi (eds) *Building Democracy in Egypt: Women's Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections*, pp. 31-50 (International IDEA); M. Makram Ebeid (1989) The Role of the Official Opposition, in: C. Tripp and R. Owen (eds) *Egypt Under Mubarak*, pp. 21-52 (Abingdon/New York: Routledge).

[20] In a recent intervention on the subject, Michelle Dunne and Amr Hamzawy also present a taxonomy of Egypt's (secular) political parties post-2011-12. Voicing concern about the usefulness of the 'usual right-to-left spectrum' in mapping Egypt's secular parties, they opt, however, for a taxonomy that positions these parties on a scale 'of proximity to the state' instead. See M. Dunne and A. Hamzawy (2017) Egypt's Secular Political Parties: A Struggle for Identity and Independence, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, pp. 4-8.

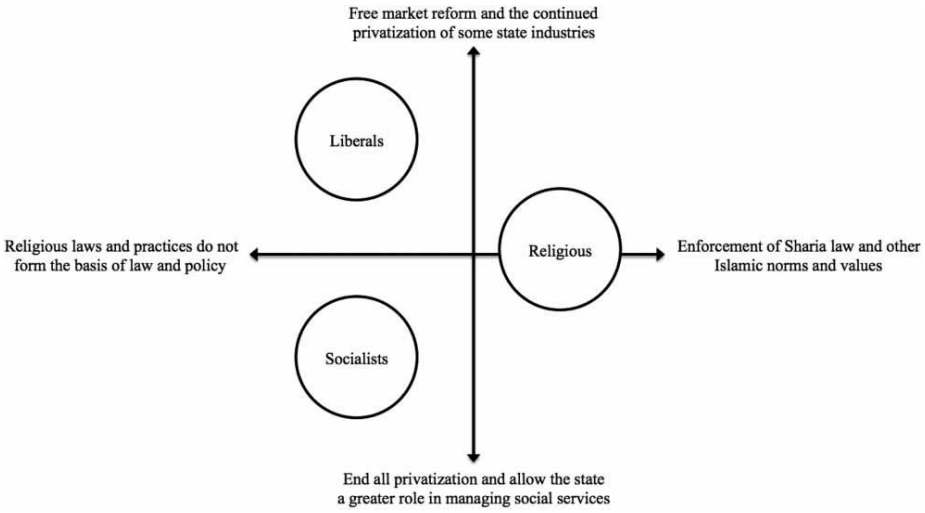
[21] Carbonari, Map of Egyptian Political Parties, pp. 1; Hassan, The Map of Egypt's Political Parties; Tavana, Party Proliferation, p. 562.

[22] Tavana, Party Proliferation, pp. 560-562; Carbonari, Map of Egyptian Political Parties. Note Carbonari's placement of political parties is based on manifesto data and party statements.

[23] Tavana, Party Proliferation, p. 561.

interesting triangulation of groupings of political parties (liberals, religious and socialists) which suggests a *de facto* center ground in Egyptian party politics that is slightly off to the left on the economic scale, he yet again presents little empirical evidence to sustain this point.[24]

Figure 1: Dual-Preference Political Spectrum (Tavana)



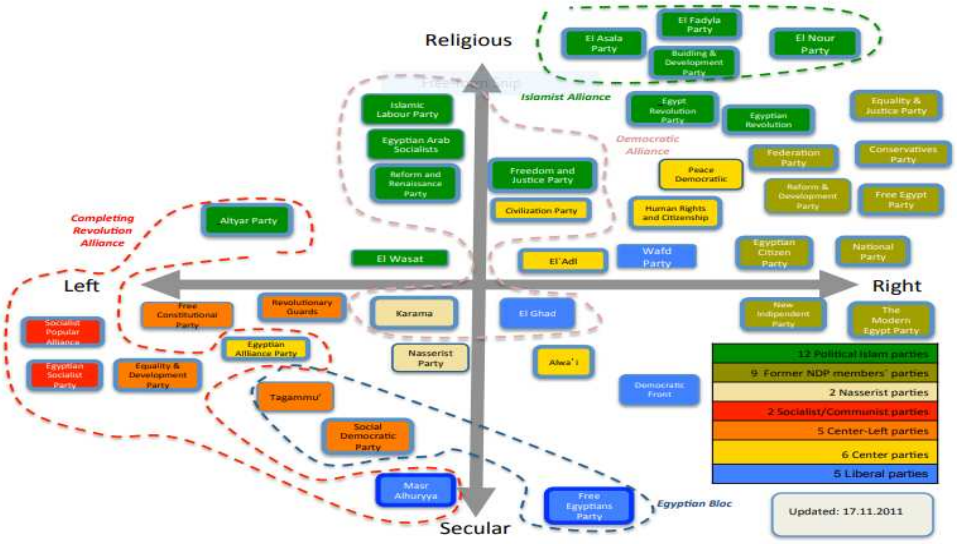
Source: D. L. Tavana (2011) Party Proliferation and Electoral Transition in post-Mubarak Egypt, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16(4), p. 562

In Carbonari's model, meanwhile, the problem resides not so much in a lack of specificity, but with the labeling of political parties (particularly those classed as centrist) and their placement within his two-dimensional ideological x/y-axis. For one, there is little clarity what in terms of ideology a center party stands for and how it differs from those classed as liberal. Moreover, given that Carbonari's placement of political parties is based on manifesto data, it is bewildering to see such vast discrepancies in the mapping of some of the center parties in the model. Illustrative of this are the placements of the *Human Rights and Citizenship Party* (top right-hand quadrant) and the *Egyptian Alliance Party* (lower left-hand quadrant), both of which Carbonari classes as centrist. Given their distances on both the x- and y-axes of the model, one is left to wonder what policy position they share that would warrant both being labeling as centrist. [25]

[24] Ibid, p. 562.

[25] Such discrepancies are, in fact, also evident across taxonomies. Although presumably based on the same pre-2011/12 manifesto data, Hassan and Carbonari come to vastly different conclusion about which parties to designate as centrist. Whilst Hassan classes the NWP, the Wasat party and the ESDP as centrist, in Carbonari's model neither of the three is labelled as such. See: Figure 2 above and Hassan, The Map of Egypt's Political Parties.

Figure 2: Map of Egypt's Political Parties (Carbonari)



Source: J. Carbonari (2011) Map of Political Parties: First Phase of Parliamentary Elections (28 November 2011), *European Parliament Publication,* p. 1.

Beyond these specific problems, the broader issue with these and other spatial models is that–unless designed longitudinally along the lines of the CMP–they offer little more than a snap-shot of party policy/ideological diffusion at any given point in time (in Carbonari, Hassan and Tavana's case the immediate post-uprising era), hence leaving readers in the dark about latent/manifest shifts in party positions (and the drivers behind them). More significantly perhaps, we caution against placing too much faith in the explanatory power of such models in contexts where party manifestos remain ill-defined and where thus it is far from clear-cut how to position individual political parties within two/multi-dimensional policy axes. This problematique manifests itself, in fact, not only in the prevalence of ambiguous party manifestos and party system instability, but also, as we will to demonstrate below, at the level of elite rhetoric where a cacophony of articulations of key ideological markers, such as that of the center, is discernible, adding yet another layer of fluidity and contention that is not adequately captured by any of the above models.

Center evocations in Egyptian (party) rhetoric

Turning to the findings of this research, let us know examine more closely the center in public and party political rhetoric. As concerns public discourse, the term *wasat* and its derivatives have been widely used as a referent in day-to-day politics as well as in relation to formulations of the nation's religious norms and identity. In both these fields, *wasat/wasati/wasatiyya* tend to carry

positive connotations, being associated with an 'ideal', 'balanced' or 'moderate' disposition.[26] Doctrinally, the notion can be traced back to religious scripture, with its origin residing in various Quranic verses, including prominently Sura al-Baqarah 2:143 which refers to the Muslim community as '*ummatan wasatan*', hence as one that is 'justly balanced' or centrist in outlook.[27] In the contemporary era, the notions of *wasat/wasati* and *wasatiyya* have been drawn upon by Islamist (and otherwise) scholars, organizations, institutions and political regimes to signal that they stand for a balanced and measured political/religious message and one that is defined in opposition to any ideological and behavioral extremes.[28] Given its religious source, it comes as little surprise that the notion of *wasatiyya* has historically been most widely associated with various institutionalized and non-institutionalized expressions of Islamic centrism. These include some of Egypt's most prominent Muslim and Islamist voices, ranging from al-Azhar to the MB and the so-called '*wasatiyya* current' of like-minded Muslim intellectuals. Constituting part and parcel of the country's religious establishment, al-Azhar, for instance, has traditionally sought to present itself as a bastion of moderation, with Ahmed Tayib, its current Grand Imam, describing the institution as 'the pulpit of moderate, centrist and tolerant Islam.'[29]

Outside the orbit of official Islam, meanwhile, *wasatiyya* has come to be associated with a grouping of Muslim scholars and their writings, including prominently Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad Salim al-'Awwa, Fahmi Huwaydi, Muhammad 'Ammara and Tariq al-Bishri.[30] Despite some doctrinal differences, these self-declared centrists are united by a reformist reading of Muslim scripture on matters pertaining to religious, social and political life. As Høigilt suggests, these *wasatiyyun*

> (…) reject imitation of previous authorities in Islamic thinking, but at the same time defend the time-honoured exegetical principles of *fiqh*; they support democracy and pluralism, but call for respecting religion; and while they disagree

[26] See e.g. Høigilt, 'Rhetoric and Ideology in Egypt', p. 252.
[27] S. Omer (2013) Al-Wasatiyyah (Moderation) as an Agenda of the Ummah, *IslamiCity*, 30 August.
[28] On the significance of Islamic centrism in religious scholarship in Egypt see e.g. K. Ayaka, (2017) What does Islamic Centrism in Egypt Strive for?: Reflection on Ṭāriq al-Bishrī's Formulation of 'Tayyār Asāsī', *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, 10, pp. 32-41; B. K. Rutherford (2006) What Do Egypt's Islamists Want? Moderate Islam and the Rise of Islamic Constitutionalism, *Middle East Journal*, 60(4), pp. 707-731.
[29] Anon. (2017) Reforming Islam in Egypt: Sisi versus the Sheikhs, *The Economist*, 18 February.
[30] See e.g. Ayaka, What does Islamic Centrism; Høigilt, Rhetoric and Ideology in Egypt, p. 251; D. H. Warren and C. Gilmore (2013) Citizenship and Compatriotism in the Islamic Civil State: The Emerging Discourse of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the "School of the Middle Way", in A.U. Noi (ed) Islam and Democracy: Perspectives on the Arab Spring (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Publishing Scholars), p. 90.

> with Islamic thinkers to both the left and right, they stress the need for dialogue and tolerance.[31]

In their writings and discourse then, centrist scholars seek to advance an imagery of Islam that is broadly speaking plural, modern and non-violent in outlook, accommodating of constitutionalism and democracy, and one that seeks to offer a bridge between conservative religious identity and progressive lifestyle. As such they purport to offer an ideational meeting place of reform-oriented *Islamiyyun* (Islamists) and conservative-leaning *Almaniyyun* (secularists).[32]

Beyond the confines of religious institutions and actors, the ripple waves of *wasatiyya* have also come to permeate more broadly the political discourse in Egypt, with the notion being evoked in letter and/or spirit by political leaders seeking to define the essence of Egyptian national and/or religious identity as well as by party elites pursuant of the popular vote. Alongside coercion, Egyptian rulers from Hosni Mubarak down to al-Sisi have all sought to monopolize the political domain by wrapping their domestic and foreign policies in centrist/moderate cloaks.[33] This has not only enabled them to define what is deemed 'moderate', 'appropriate' and 'culturally-acceptable' in religion and politics, but to denounce as extremists/fanatics/radicals all those challenging authoritarian incumbency. A pertinent example is the current president, al-Sisi, who–as Paola Caridi aptly notes–much more so than any of his predecessors has sought to define and 'control the message of religious consensus'[34] in Egypt to buttress his authority and rule, casting himself as spearheading a 'moderate religious revolution' and a rejection of (Islamist) extremism and terrorism.[35]

Multiple center articulations in party political rhetoric

Within Egyptian party politics as well, there is evidence to suggest that the notion of *wasat* and its derivatives have been deployed discursively as referents by leadership cadres for the purpose of self-positioning. As concerns those party officials interviewed, for instance, two noteworthy patterns are observable. First, most of them–though not all[36]–contended that their political

[31] Høigilt, Rhetoric and Ideology, p. 253.
[32] See e.g. Polka, The Centrist Stream in Egypt, p. 40.
[33] See e.g. Mubarak speech at al-Azhar on 27 February 2010; see www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm_cYsWjS-I (last seen 24 October 2018).
[34] P. Caridi (2015) Consensus-Building in Al-Sisi's Egypt, *Insight Egypt*, No. 7, p. 1.
[35] Ibid, p. 2.
[36] Of the officials of 14 parties that were interviewed, only the representative from Tajammu' rejected outright his party being labeled 'centrist' or 'center-left'. Interview with Tajammu' official (Cairo, 22 June 2013).

parties aspired to a center position within the political sphere. As one such official remarked, 'Egyptians are in love with the term *wasati*, so all parties pretend to be in the middle.'[37] Indeed, party officials not only held a positive image of the center ground, however defined, but deliberately sought to tie their party's position to the societal median, thus evidently viewing the center as an electorally beneficial location. As such they played up their own centrist credentials, whilst discrediting those of their competitors. Instances of such 'centrist outbidding' can be found in the deliberations of officials from Hizb at-Tahaluf al-Sha'bi al-Ishtiraki (Popular Socialist Alliance Party/PSAP) and Hizb al-Misri al-Dimuqrati al-Ijtima'i (Egyptian Social Democratic Party/ESDP), both of whom proclaimed their political parties as centrist, whilst rejecting the traditional ideology-bridging center politics of the NWP, as well as the self-proclaimed post-ideological stances of Hizb al-'Adl (Justice Party/'Adl) and Hizb al-Dustur (commonly known as Hizb al-Dostour; Constitution Party/Dostour) which positioned the center as residing outside the traditional economic left-right and secular-Islamist binary.[38] This attempt to delegitimise competitors serves to illustrate that in the Egyptian context the center remains a highly contested space.

Second, whilst the appeal of the center ground was near universal across the party political spectrum, significant variance can be detected in the meanings ascribed to it, bringing to the fore several distinct interpretative frames. These comprise a *religious*, an *economic* as well as a more *procedural* frame.[39] In the following pages, we elaborate on each of these three frames, before suggesting how one might make sense of this multitude of center articulation during the period under investigation.

Religious center articulations. Given its significance in Egyptian public life, it is little surprising that religious connotations have featured prominently in the center articulations of party officials. This is probably most notable in the case of Hizb al-Wasat (Center Party, henceforth Wasat),[40] whose very name insinuates a close ideational connect to *wasatiyya* thinkers and whose leaders have sought to position the party as a 'middle' or 'moderate' force striving to

[37] Interview with Watan official (Cairo, 19 June 2013).
[38] Interview with PSAP official (Cairo, 17 June 2013) and ESDP official (Cairo, 20 June 2013 and November 2013).
[39] It should be noted that we do not claim that these center frames are *per se* mutually exclusive. However, as elaborated below, we content that significant variance can be detected in their rhetorical onus over time, one that warrants explanation.
[40] The party was founded as a break-away from the MB in 1996, following a dispute over internal reform as well as the formation of a Brotherhood-affiliated political party, yet only gained legal recognition in the aftermath of the 2011-12 Tahrir uprising.

bridge the secular-Islamist divide.[41] Officials from other political parties within the country's religious current, including such diverse formations as the MB-affiliated Hizb al-Hurriya wa al-'Adala (Freedom and Justice Party/FJP), [42] Hizb al-Tayyar al-Misri (Egyptian Current Party/ECP) which merged into Hizb Misr al-Qawiyya (Strong Egypt Party/SEP), and the Salafi Hizb al-Watan (Homeland Party; henceforth Watan) have all also sought to appropriate the spirit and appeal of the notion of *wasatiyya* in their political rhetoric/outlook.[43] Illustrative cases from amongst those interviewed include officials from the FJP and Watan, who in their deliberations regarded religion as a defining parameter of their center positioning. As one FJP official noted: '(…) the FJP is in the center because (…) it represents the Islamic reification of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, the centrist [position] that is there in the urban and rural areas.'[44] Drawing directly on competitors amongst Islamist parties, meanwhile, Watan's representative also exclaimed that his party aims 'to be in the middle, a bit to the right of the Strong Egypt Party and al-Wasat.'[45]

Having declared themselves in one form or another as religiously centrist and/or moderate, it is important to bear in mind that not all of the aforementioned political parties draw inspiration from *wasatiyya* thinkers and that in fact, beyond a common rejection of political violence, it remains in the eyes of the beholder to identify where precisely the religious median resides each of these parties refer to. This is particularly pertinent amongst those forces widely considered on the religious right, such as Watan, but also evident in the differing positions on matters of religion that have been noted, for instance, in the programmes of the FJP, Wasat, the ECP and the SEP.[46]

Religiously-infused center articulations were, however, not only confined to party representatives interviewed from within the Islamist current but featured prominently also in the rhetoric of those party officials widely regarded as belonging to the country's 'secular' political establishment. Examples include representatives from Hizb al-Misriyyin al-Ahrar (Free Egyptians Party/FEP), Hizb al-Jibha al-Dimuqrati (Democratic Front Party/DFP), Hizb al-Wafd al-Jadid (New Wafd Party/NWP) and Hizb al-Tajammu' al-Taqaddumi al-Wahdawi (National

[41] See e.g. Høigilt, Rhetoric and Ideology, p. 253; J. A. Stacher (2002) Post-Islamist Rumblings in Egypt: The Emergence of the Wasat Party, *The Middle East Journal*, 56(3), pp. 415-432.
[42] Following the ouster of President Morsi and the military *coup d'état* of July 2013, the FJP's parent organization, the MB, was declared a terrorist organization and the party banned.
[43] Zollner, Does Participation Lead to Moderation?, pp. 149-165; Anon. (2011) Egypt Elections: The Egyptian Current Party, *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 6 November; Interview with Watan official; Anon. (2013) Asharq Al-Awsat Interview: Al-Watan Deputy Leader Yusri Hamad, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 7 January; El Sherif, The Strong Egypt Party, pp. 216; Interviews with FJP official (Cairo, 18 June 2013) and with Watan official (Cairo, 19 June 2013).
[44] Interview with FJP official (Cairo, 18 June 2013).
[45] Interview with Watan official (Cairo, 19 June 2018).
[46] See e.g. Zollner, Does Participation Lead to Moderation?, pp. 149-165.

Progressive Unionist Party, henceforth Tajammu'), all of whom treated religion as a yardstick of their center politics and articulations.[47] According to one NWP official interviewed, for instance, Islam constituted the binding element of a 'reconciliatory discourse after the revolution because we felt that the idea of religion was hegemonic (…)'[48]. A leading member of the leftist Tajammu', likewise, acknowledged that, while '(…) the secular state rejects religion at all in any mix in politics, in Egypt this is difficult. We take the middle ground, the middle solution on religion (…).'[49]

Whilst attitudes towards religion are often seen as a marker that divides right- and left-wing parties in Western contexts, it is thus evident that this is not necessarily the case in Egypt, where party officials–*tout les couleurs*–have sought to tie their center dispositions and alignment to the views of mainstream society and/or to matters of religious doctrine.

Economic center evocations. Alongside (varied) religious dispositions, party officials have also drawn on the term *wasat* and its derivatives to signify their economic outlook and positioning within a broader (Western) left-right ideological framework. Reminiscent of social market economic models, for most party officials from the center-left and center-right alike, in fact, this outlook stood for a policy orientation that synthesizes an emphasis on the importance of the free market and foreign direct investment with ideas of social justice and state interventionism. On the center-left, for instance, representatives from both the ESDP and ECP asserted that their political parties stood for a 'social democratic' disposition and that post-Tahrir uprising this disposition defined the gravitational center of Egyptian party politics, capturing the 'ideological median' of Egyptian society.[50] As one ESDP official reasoned in this regard:

> 'The [party political] spectrum is divided between the left ideologically, Tagammu, the Socialist Alliance. The center will be social democracy and al-Adl, who have joined us and the Dostour party. Then you have the FEP, the Congress Party on the right. (….) The differences within the ESDP are not that pronounced as they were at the beginning and everyone [in the party] has moved to the

[47] Interviews with an FEP official (Cairo, 20 June 2013), an NWP official (Cairo, 15 June 2013), a DFP official (Cairo, 17 June 2018), which merged with the FEP shortly after the *coup*, and a Tajammu' official (Cairo, 22 June 2013).
[48] Interview with NWP official (Cairo, 15 June 2013).
[49] Interview with Tajammu' party official (Cairo, 22 June 2013).
[50] Interviews with ESDP official (Cairo, 16 June 2016) and ECP official (Cairo, 15 June 2013 and Cairo, 10 November 2013).

> common land of social democracy'. (….) I believe social democracy will prevail when people think about parties and ideology'.[51]

On the center-right of the political spectrum as well party officials sought to assert their centrist credentials through advocacy of an economic third-way. Illustrative here is, for instance, the deliberations of one Hizb al-Islah wa al-Tanmiyyah–Misruna (Reform and Development–Misruna Party/RDMP) official who defines the party as center-right, confirming its advocacy of 'an open door economy' that favors free-market policies and foreign direct investment. He waters down this policy position, however, stating that, because of Egypt's current poverty levels, there is a need 'to keep social justice in our mind' and pursue an economic policy whereby '…maybe the state should keep all strategic industries'.[52] By not questioning the fact that the nationalization of industries undermines fundamental liberal economic policy principles, he thus appears to purport that state-interventionist and social welfarist policies are compatible with a center-right position and not exclusively the domain of a leftist or center-left disposition, stating that '…liberals are also promoting social justice, [the] same as the leftists and socialists. Everyone is today advancing social justice.'[53]

Representatives of other center-right parties as well, including most notably from the FEP and NWP have sought to buttress their center claims by infusing free market rhetoric with social welfarist credentials. The official of the FEP thus stressed that '[s]ocial liberalism, is an idea that liberal parties are talking about now. (…) Everyone wants to make sure that resources get distributed fairly.'[54] This notion was echoed by one NWP official who noted that 'social democracy has become the focus of all political parties because no one can ignore 50 percent poverty or that there are widespread class differences'.[55] He continues to purport that his party, therefore, favors the introduction of a social welfare system that assuages the strain of class differences and the burden of poverty. Again, these positions are attributes of left-wing economic stances and, as such, could be read as a sign of the NWP's intention to broaden its appeal beyond its traditional core constituency, which resides with the bourgeois landowning middle-and upper-middle classes. Considering the NWP's historical legacy, it is, however,

[51] Interview with ESDP official (Cairo, 16 June 2016).
[52] Interview with RDPM official (Cairo, 16 June 2013).
[53] Interview with RDPM official (Cairo, November 2013).
[54] Interview with FEP official (Cairo, November 2013).
[55] The NWP explicitly speak of 'social democracy', while the FEP official emphasizes social justice. Interviews with officials from the FEP (Cairo, 20 June 2013 and Cairo, November 2013) and from the NWP (Cairo, 15 June 2013). Not facing the same ideological contradiction, center-left parties, such as the ESDP and the ECP, regard 'social democracy' and 'social justice' as the defining element of the center; see interview with ESDP official (Cairo, 16 June 2016) and with the ECP (Cairo, 15 June 2013 and Cairo, 10 November 2013).

unlikely that this rhetoric indicates a substantive left-leaning reincarnation of the party. Rather, it may signify the party's attempt to broaden its electability to a cross-section of Egyptian voters. As such, the NWP epitomizes the conundrum of Egypt's entire center-right: on the one hand, the need to address a growing public discourse around social justice, which was heightened in the aftermath of the Tahrir uprising and, on the other hand, remaining loyal to their traditional economic position and support base. It is for this reason that the NWP depicts itself as the core center party that shows '(…) in its programme a lot of common ground with all political forces, liberal and left.'[56] However, by conforming to a center discourse around the issue of social justice, center-right parties are at risk of becoming indistinct from competitors, both on the center-right and center-left, while also forfeiting the full support of the business-owning economic classes and the economic elite. As one Watan official poignantly remarked in this regard, '(…) the designation of center, left and right are in an academic sense not clear'[57] as political parties take up agendas that are not consistent with free-market economic policy principles.

Procedural center articulations. Apart from the aforementioned *substantive* articulations of the center ground, the interview data finally also reveals center conceptualizations that carry a more *procedural* connotation. By procedural we refer to those center articulations that are less concerned with matters of religious or economic doctrine/policy and more with the manner of doing things; that is with the behavioral dispositions of party officials towards political engagement, conflict, and competitors.

In our data, numerous procedural center articulations can be detected, with party officials defining/justifying their median position in Egyptian politics by virtue of their willingness to facilitate dialogue and conciliation as well as engage in mediation between conflicting political parties. Examples of such articulations can be found in the deliberations of representatives from Wasat, the NWP, the RDMP and Hizb Ghad al-Thawra (Revolution's Tomorrow Party, henceforth Ghad), all of whom sought to position their political parties as pursuant of a moderating role in the stand-off between Morsi and his adversaries towards the end of the latter's presidency.[58] An illustrative case is here the deliberation by one Ghad official who, referring to the polarised atmosphere at the time of the Morsi presidency, asserted that there is

[56] Interview with NWP official (Cairo, 15 June 2013
[57] Interview with Watan official (Cairo, 19 June 2013)
[58] Interviews with officials from the NWP (Cairo, 15 June 2013), Ghad (Cairo, 19 June 2013) and the RDPM (Cairo, 16 June 2013). See also N. El-Hennawy (2012) Centrist Politicians Hope to Evade Islamist-Secular Divide, *Egypt Independent* online, 07 September.

'… a split into three [groups amongst parties]: the Islamists, represented by the FJP and the Salafist parties; the opposing side the liberals; and in the middle the moderate parties which currently have no [mediating] role or an effect'.[59] He thus regarded his as the '(…) the only liberal party that is taking a moderate position. We are trying to have consensus on everything, trying to reach a dialogue between all parties. The other liberal parties belong to the opposition, and they are extremely to the other side. They refuse to sit at one table.'[60] Echoing Ghad, officials from the RDMP and NWP both stressed that the post-revolutionary situation demands a 'conciliatory tone' and a mediating role, one which, according to the NWP official, his party was seeking to appropriate in the stand-off between the two political camps at the height of the Morsi presidency.[61] This said, however, although envisioning his party as a mediator between the Islamist and the liberal camps, the NWP official leaves no doubt that he is also governed by concerns over the dominance of Islamists when saying '(…) the Wafd tried to invent the idea of a democratic Egyptian alliance that would spoil the Islamist's idea of diving society.'[62] In this sense, the NWP's proclaimed conciliatory language is to be taken with a pinch of salt, given the clear liberal bias detectable in the official's deliberations.

Center articulations, variance and context

How then is one to make sense of this array of center articulations observable in the rhetoric of those party officials interviewed, and is it possible to detect any pattern in their usages across time? When it comes to the interview data at hand, a contextual reading of the rhetoric deployed by party cadres suggests that conceptualizations of the center ground varied over time and that this variance is, in all likelihood, connected to changes in the immediate political environment pre-post *coup d'état*. Indeed, the data reveals that, whereas pre-July the rhetorical onus of those interviewed revolved primarily around the religious center definitions alluded to above, these clearly lost their traction post-*coup*, being superseded by economically-infused center evocations and placements. The timing and direction of this observed shift in rhetorical onus, as well as the nature of the change in political environment and evidence from qualitative discourse analysis,[63] all lend credence to the assertion that the meaning(s) accorded to the center ground across the period under scrutiny were context-dependent; that is shaped by extralinguistic determinants.

[59] Interview with Ghad officials (Cairo, 16 June 2013).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Within qualitative discourse analysis the connection between speech/text and extralinguistic context has been widely researched and empirically established. See e.g. R. Wodak and M. Krzyzanovski (eds) (2008) *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

In the case at hand, it is not difficult to fathom this connect between rhetoric and context, given the radical political transformation the country experienced in the June to December 2013 period. Recall in this regard that the first round of interviews in mid-June 2013 was conducted at a time when–following the ascendency to power of Islamist forces, including most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis[64]–discourses on the role of Islam in public life and policy had taken center stage in Egyptian politics.[65] Within this atmosphere, political parties across the spectrum sought to brush up their religious credentials and dispel any accusations of being 'secularist' and hence of being perceived as 'anti-Islamic', particularly as at the time mass demonstrations calling for the resignation of the president and fresh elections were imminent.[66] Whilst the call to mass protests was mainly fuelled by popular anger at Morsi's governance, no one at the time assumed that the called-for resignation of the president would diminish significantly the electoral potency of Islamist forces in upcoming elections and with it the prominence of the religious in public life.[67] It is this context then of a competitive environment still dominated by Islamist players and discourse that may help explain the rhetorical prevalence of religiously-inspired center articulations and placements, even amongst so-called 'secular' party officials. Jostling for voice in a highly charged political environment, and one marked by a significant degree of uncertainty, 'secular' party leaders were, in fact, astutely aware that their prospective (electoral) fortunes may well be dependent on the degree to which they managed to pursue an oppositional stance towards Morsi and his government without appearing 'anti-Islamic'; hence their attempts at self-placement as religiously centrist.

By the time the second round of interviews had been conducted in November 2013, meanwhile, Egypt's political climate had experienced a dramatic transformation, epitomized by the reversal in fortunes of its largest Islamist organization, the MB. Morsi had been ousted and imprisoned by the Egyptian armed forces, pro-Morsi protests brutally crushed, with hundreds of MB officials and activists arrested, and the MB and any affiliate NGOs banned by a court

[64] Zollner, Does Participation Lead to Moderation?, pp. 149-165.
[65] On the prominence of Islam in Egyptian public life post-uprising see e.g. N. Brown (2013) Islam and Politics in the New Egypt, *The Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
[66] Supported by the oppositional National Salvation Front (NSF), the so-called Tamarrod Movement spearheaded the anti-Morsi campaign and calls for his resignation and fresh elections. See e.g. P. Kingsley (2013) Protesters across Egypt Call for Mohamed Morsi to Go, *The Guardian*, 30 June. It emerged after the coup that Tamarrod was also backed by Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). See e.g. S. Roll (2015), Managing Change: How Egypt's Military Leadership Shaped the Transformation, *Mediterranean Politics* 21(1), pp.23-42.
[67] At that time no one, in fact, called for the dissolution of the MB/FJP. The MB was then only banned by court ruling following the ouster of President Morsi on the 23 September 2013. See e.g. D.D. Kirkpatrick (2013) Egyptian Court Shuts down the Muslim Brotherhood and Seizes its Assets, *New York Times*, 23 September.

ruling.[68] The country was now in the hands of an army-backed interim government headed by the former head of the Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour and PM Hazem al-Beblawi who hailed from the ESDP. With the new regime's crackdown on the MB, and its focus on issues of law-and-order as well as the economy–and with some polls indicating that public opinion had swung firmly against the group[69]–party officials (particularly from within the 'secular' camp) deemed it possible to reposition themselves politically, reducing (although not disregarding entirely) their onus on doctrinal matters and replacing it with a focus on matters of social justice and economic governance.[70] Indeed, amongst some of these officials, a palpable feeling prevailed that with the MB's downfall the focus of party political debate could progress from matters of religion and state to the bread-and-butter issues of economic development, poverty alleviation, and social justice.[71] As demonstrated above, for quite a few, in fact, the median of post-*coup* politics became firmly associated with advocacy of a mixed economy, with numerous officials asserting that their political parties were social-democratic in outlook or, short of that, favoring an economic model that combined market-economic principles with state control of strategic industries, retention of subsidies and targeted poverty alleviation policies.[72] For these party officials then, the new locus of post-MB center politics resided center-left.

When it comes to procedural center articulations, finally, these too show variance over time, which we suggest is again the result of changes in political context. Indeed, whilst these articulations appear to have held some traction amongst a hand-full of party officials during the immediate pre-*coup* era, they were little evoked thereafter. In part, at least, this differential in significance can be explained by political developments on the ground and here in particular by the heightened levels of elite polarisation between proponents and adversaries of the Morsi government towards the end of the latter's rule. As Kraetzschmar and Saleh have shown elsewhere, overall this period was marked by an ever-hardening 'us-versus-them' rhetoric and a diminishing willingness on both sides of the political equation to replace political brinkmanship with attempts at dialogue and conciliation.[73] Indeed, very few voices at the time sought to

[68] For an anthropological observation of the post-coup crackdown on the MB see e.g. P. Hessler (2013) Keeping the Faith. In Three Sermons, Cairo's Preachers Negotiate the Crackdown, *The New Yorker,* 7 October.
[69] According to an August 2013 *Baseera* poll, two-thirds of respondents disapproved of the MB and held negative views on its period in government. See e.g. Anon. (2013), Sentiments towards the Muslim Brotherhood, *Baseera*, 27 August.
[70] See e.g. D. Butler (2013) Egypt in Search for Economic Direction, Briefing Paper, *Chatham House*, November.
[71] Follow-up interviews with RDPM, ESDP, NWP, Tajammu', FEP and PSAP officials (interviews held between September-November 2013).
[72] Interviews with ECP official (Cairo, 15 June 2013 and Cairo, 10 November 2013), and ESDP official (Cairo, 16 June 2013).
[73] As discussed by Kraetzschmar and Saleh, the growth in political polarisation during the Morsi era was fuelled by contention over the country's new constitution, the nature of the transition process and the president's style of

reconcile the two political camps, yet those that did–including, as we saw, officials from Ghad, the NWP and the RDMP–couched their advocacy of conciliation and moderation in centrist terms, thus presenting the two conflicting political parties as unreasonably entrenched and uncompromising. Whilst for those party officials concerned, this self-placement was justified as being in line with broader ideological stances, many of their adversaries considered this conciliatory positioning as nothing but an attempt to keep options open, given the uncertain outcome of the political conflict at the time. Arguably, this latter assertion appears to have found confirmation in the fact that this type of rhetorical center positioning subsided entirely post-*coup*, with none of its advocates returning to this center conceptualization once it had become clear by November 2013 that the MB would no longer be part of the institutional political process.

Conclusion

This article presents a hitherto little-explored perspective on the study of ideological markers in Egyptian party politics; one that moves beyond more conventional approaches to examining party ideologies and taxonomies based on manifesto and expert survey data to an analysis of elite rhetoric. Honing in on one particular ideological marker–that of the center–it reveals that across the political spectrum party officials not only claimed a centrist disposition but that they entailed often multiple articulations of what precisely the center stood for. These articulations, as we saw, ranged from the religious to the economic and procedural, and are thought to have been strategically deployed by party officials depending on context.

It is evident then that an investigative focus on party rhetoric enables us to uncover layers and shades of center evocations that are unlikely to reveal themselves through conventional models of party positioning. More significantly, perhaps, it presents an approach to the study of Egyptian (and Arab) party politics that safeguards against any uncritical adoption of Western ideological markers such as left, right and/or center which, although widely deployed by party elites in the region, may prove far less tangible and sustainable in contexts of ideological fluidity than hitherto assumed.

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governance; pitting the MB/FJP-led government and its allies against a collection of opposition parties and groupings operating under the umbrella of the NSF. See H. Kraetzschmar and A. Saleh, Political Parties and Secular–Islamist Polarization, pp. 223-226.

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