In the cafes and restaurants of Cairo, Egyptian youth are talking about what role religion should play in Egypt’s new government. Sarah Abdel Aziz is a filmmaker and says that religion is a very personal matter. “I don’t allow politics to interfere with religion. Religion helps me achieve moral values. I don’t really approve of mixing the two.”

Sarah is more certain in her views than 26-year-old Rami Aboud, a tour guide taking his dinner break at the popular Felfella restaurant. Rami says Islam is important to him, but he’s not sure that a candidate’s stance on religion should impact how he votes. “The most important elections for me [is the] presidential elections, not [the] people’s assembly election. My knowledge of politics is limited.”

Rami and Sarah are like a lot of young Egyptians. They know exactly what role religion plays in their own lives. For many of them, it’s a big role. But they are more guarded when asked what role it should play in government.

The elections for the 498-seat lower house of parliament are crucial because they will help decide just that, says Said Sadek, a professor of political sociology at the American University in Cairo. “The importance of the upcoming parliament is that it would elect one hundred people who would write the new Egyptian constitution and that is why it is so important.”

Currently, Egypt doesn’t strictly follow Sharia law, leading to some confusion over where religion really stands in politics and society. But Egypt’s political parties have some firm ideas on where they would like religion to stand.

One such party is the Building and Development Party, the political arm of Gama’a al-Islamiyya – a radical Islamist movement that committed terror attacks throughout Egypt in the 1990s. Earlier this year, they were banned from running in the elections. But the party appealed to Egypt’s Supreme Court and the ruling was overturned in October.

Building and Development has the support of maybe five percent of the Egyptian people. But in some ways it’s the perfect illustration of what is happening in Egypt. For decades, religious parties were banned from taking part in political life. Now, even parties with a violent history are part of the process.

But Islamist groups have fierce critics here in Egypt. They say that the Islamists aren’t being honest about what they envision for Egypt.

Karim Abadir is an economist and formerly a professor at Imperial College in London. He returned Egypt after the revolution and got involved in politics. He created the economic platform for the secular Free Egyptians Party, a group that aims to keep Islamists out of the new parliament:

“They shouldn’t be in politics. Politics is about having a specific program, how you’re [going to] serve the people…We don’t want to go down the line of Iran where they have a so-called democracy, where candidates are vetted for their Islamic credentials and if they don’t conform they’re barred from standing.”

Abadir says that the secular bloc faces enormous challenges from the better-organized Islamist parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party. The Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party is widely expected to do well in the parliamentary elections.

The Brotherhood may have the most fearsomely organized political party in Egypt right now. But there is another political Islamist group in Egypt – and their ascendance has surprised even some close observers. They are the Salafis. Salafis aren’t a specific political party. They are more of a cultural movement. As explained by political sociologist Said Sadek:

“They are puritan, they are fundamentalists, they emphasize mainly social issues and they are more into Wahabbi thinking. Most of the ideas [are] about attacking social practices, criticizing non-Muslims, especially the Copts... They had no strong link with politics and they are now emerging all of a sudden.”
Mohammed Nur, a member of the Salafi-affiliated An-Nur party, is an audio producer. People hear the word Salafi and they think they want to go back to the time of the Prophet Mohammed. But Nur has an HP computer and wears Adidas sneakers. Nur says Salafis – and other political Islamist groups – suffer from misunderstandings and bad press.

But Said Sadek says Salafis are divided even among themselves – and that they haven’t been on the political scene long enough for anyone to truly understand what sort of society they would create if they had political power and influence.

"They have this contradiction. They wear western clothes and [have a] western lifestyle, but at the same time they speak [in] medieval language..."

The Salafis aren’t the only ones who have contradictions. Sometimes it seems as if all of Egypt is a contradiction when it comes to religion and politics. But there’s one thing just about every Egyptian seems to agree on: religion does have a place in Egyptian society.

–Reported by Noel King for America Abroad