

Deputy Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood addresses AUC
By Amanda Craig

During a lecture on November 21, the Deputy Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brothers, Dr. Mohamed Habeeb, spoke of Egypt's political climate and the Brotherhood's stance on religious freedom in response to numerous questions posed by a jam-packed audience. The lecture and Q&A session took place at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and drew such a large crowd that many English speakers were without headphones and had to huddle around impromptu translators at the back of the room.

Dr. Habeeb opened the lecture with a broad assessment of the political climate in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood's stance on citizenship rights. He said that the Brothers support religious freedom and the rights of women, Copts and minorities. "There should be equality between men and women, between Muslim and non-Muslim," Dr. Habeeb said. "It's not a matter of man or woman but of efficiency and high performance."

Dr. Habeeb also espoused democratic reform, suggesting that Egypt needs "strengthening of parties," elections that are "free and honest," and an independent judiciary. "We are living in a very bad reality where the executive authority is all," he said, and "the national party is the only player in the president's election." Dr. Habeeb disregarded last year's amendment of article 76 that outlines the process of electing a president, saying "we knew beforehand that you cannot amend the constitution in this political climate," so the amendment is nothing more than a "mask" for the elections.

He said amendments can not be effectively adopted and enforced until the government represents a consensus of the people. He said, "Is it the right of the Muslim Brothers to amend the constitution? Is this the right of any party? Of course not. This is the right of the people. Thus, elections that are free and honest... should be a reflection of the free will of the people" in order to achieve substantive government.

The executive authority should be "balanced" by an independent judiciary and public freedoms, Dr. Habeeb said, including the freedom to organize political parties. "Today, [Egypt has] about 22 parties, but most of them do not really exist... they have very little presence. They must be activated," Dr. Habeeb said. The Muslim Brotherhood has been continually denied political-party status by the Egyptian government, though it has existed as an organized political group since 1928, and now represents the largest opposition group in Parliament.

In late 2005, over 150 independents presented themselves, for the first time, on election posters and banners as candidates for the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The result was a fivefold increase in representation, as the group now holds 20 percent of the seats in Parliament.

But many in both Egypt and the international community question if the Muslim Brotherhood would be a responsible actor in Egyptian politics. In the weeks preceding Dr. Habeeb's visit, two lectures took place on AUC's campus which would challenge his

rhetoric about democracy and equality. On October 11, political scientist Amr Hamzawy expressed doubt about the Muslim Brotherhood's commitment to democracy, citing "totalitarian structures" and a lack of transparency as characteristics which negate the group's claims. On November 2, Dr. Mariz Tadros, from the Political Science Department at AUC, described the Muslim Brotherhood's gender agenda as one which has not seen much progression of women's rights since the group's inception.

The Muslim Brotherhood's policies and intent have often been questioned and contested, and the Egyptian government's disputes with the group often escalate into surges of disruption or violence. Many Muslim Brothers, including Dr. Habeeb, have been subjected to imprisonment. "When we look at the group of Muslim Brothers, they were hit hard throughout history," Dr. Habeeb said. Still, he is very optimistic, as "we are spreading, we are inside each sector of society... we are able to infiltrate and overcome all these kinds of oppression."

"There's no authority on earth that voluntarily gives up its jurisdiction. If people do not try to regain rights, nobody will get anything. So we represent the avant-garde; we are imprisoned, tortured, some of us become martyrs... and the people gave us two million votes," Dr. Habeeb said. "So we will go on trying until we reach our objects. In time, we will... the journey of 1000 steps starts with the first."

Throughout the lecture, at the request of the audience, Dr. Habeeb addressed more nuanced stances and steps which the Muslim Brotherhood intends to take. He brushed over the question of relations with Israel, saying that agreements made with other countries should be "reviewed" every few years to determine whether or not they "achieved results for the good of Egypt." But Dr. Habeeb was quick to discuss the American government, which he said is "lying and being dishonest." He challenged the government's reaction to Beit Hanan, its policies which ignore the Palestinian people, and the manner in which it has "immorally besieged" Hamas. The Americans say that "they call upon democracy and freedom and human rights, but they are the first to stop democracy... such as their very odd reaction to the democratic election of Hamas, which was without aggression or violence," he said.

"We [Egyptians] don't need anything from [the United States]. What we need is that [the U.S. government] doesn't support and back up the despotic system," Dr. Habeeb said.

Regarding economic development, he said that Egypt should focus on rebuilding the middle class, as a "very big gap between the elite and working classes" has emerged. He then questioned the need for liberalization, saying "Which liberalism are we talking about? Like the United States, Japan, England, here? This globalization is so fierce... it wants to eat up everything that stands in its way. What about the majority, what about Egypt's identity? Do you want it to lose its identity, its belief, its culture and history?"

"Islamic shari'a is the expression, the basis... why do you want to import the shari'a of the West?" Dr. Habeeb asked. "We have the Islamic shari'a, which is with equality and justice for all Muslims, and also for the Copts."

Dr. Habeeb stressed the Muslim Brotherhood's support of the Coptic community numerous times, emphasizing that "Our Christian Egyptians are part of the texture of our society, and we respect them very much."

"We want them to get out of isolation, and to exercise their political and social rights," Dr. Habeeb said. "A year ago I said it is important to have certain documents concerning citizenship for our Christian brothers and sisters... citizenship is not restricted to Muslims, it's for everyone." Thus Copts can be headmasters, judges, ministers or members of Parliament, because "no society should have any kind of monopoly," Dr. Habeeb said.

Yet he was not willing to grant the same rights to members of the Baha'i religion who reside in Egypt. The Baha'i are still waiting for rights of citizenship and recognition of their religion on national identification cards, but Dr. Habeeb was dismissive of the Baha'i, suggesting that the Muslim Brotherhood thinks that the Baha'i are not relevant to the discussion of religious freedom.

"We don't consider this a religion so why should we give freedom to its ritual?... We call upon those who don't have religion to respect the religion of the majority, and they should not work against it, against the society," Dr. Habeeb said.

As for the future of the Muslim Brotherhood, Dr. Habeeb said, "We are not trying to adapt to society. We say what we feel is right, and what we see is not right we say is not right.. The Muslims aren't of one opinion, and anybody who submits a project or idea we are ready to discuss it, to have a dialogue. But it's imperative that we make decisions, and this takes place through a majority."

"And we have had success and are on a path of honesty."