

# OSAMA EL GHAZALY HARB: WE ARE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE NDP AND THE BROTHERHOOD

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CAIRO: Editor-in-Chief of *Al Ahrām's International Politics* magazine and member of the Shoura Council, Osama El Ghazaly Harb is also the vice president of the new liberal Democratic Front party. Officially licensed by the Shoura Council's political parties committee last May, the party has recently elected a number of executive leaders, many from the Harb family, thus fuelling rumors that the family may monopolize the party's leadership positions, triggering comparisons with the ruling National Democratic Party, headed by President Mubarak and his son Gamal who leads the influential Policies Committee. Harb resigned from the NDP in March 2006 objecting to recent constitutional amendments.

The Daily Star Egypt spoke to Harb about the new party, its relationship with the Islamists and the ruling NDP.

## **Do you see the possibility of a confrontation between the Democratic Front Party and the Muslim Brotherhood?**

Obviously I don't prefer the term confrontation, but it is a given that we differ fundamentally with the Muslim Brotherhood. When we first came to introduce the party to the general public, the first thing we said was that we are fundamentally different from the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

And any Egyptian who refuses the NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood, should simply join the ranks of the Democratic Front party. But I consider it premature to say whether our different approach from the Brotherhood could in the future develop into any sort of conflict.

I imagine that it is beneficial that a genuinely democratic spirit should be established in Egypt, meaning that there should be political competition between the Democratic Front and the NDP, the Brotherhood, the Tagammu party, with the Nasserist party. Although we may compete with other liberal parties, there is also the potential of forming coalitions with them because they are closer to us ideologically.

But in the case of the Brotherhood, we fundamentally refuse all they stand for. However this refusal is through democratic channels. It is a political refusal and one that is both intellectual and ideological in nature, but at the same time and with the same tenacity we defend the right of the Brotherhood to express its opinions freely and without any obstacles in their path.

In a democratic system any force must be allowed to express its opinions, as long as it does so within the boundaries of the law and the constitution.

## **Is it true that the Democratic Front's committee leadership is monopolized by a number of your relatives?**

These claims have been intentionally taken out of context. First, I confess that it is not politically conducive for the leadership of any party to be from the same family. I must also say that there was a mistake initially when this news was released because this was regarding the formation of the Democratic Front's committees. And for the formation of these committees to be complete a decision must be issued by the party's executive office.

The truth is that there were some thoughts in that direction, which were not yet expressed to the executive office. Those thoughts were published in the news very prematurely.

That said, I am quite honored that a number of my siblings, and my wife all participated in the formation of the party. I think it is an honor that those closest to me are willing to support the party, I believe there is nothing negative in that. But what is negative is if these relatives are intentionally placed in certain leadership positions.

On the contrary my relatives knew that it was not politically conducive to place them in any leadership positions within the party's ranks. Let us not mix between volunteer-based political work on their own time, effort and at their own expense, and other situations where leadership positions bring plenty of

benefits and perks. This is an opposition party, anyone that works here is here to give and not take. The party's executive committee has not made any final decisions on these appointments till today.

**Why do you think the Egyptian regime has allowed nearly all of Egypt's liberal parties to be politically enervated?**

Unfortunately the post-1952 revolution's political system is one with clear authoritarian characteristics, it is non democratic and it refuses political pluralism, refutes the rights of citizens, freedom of the press and controls civil society institutions.

This system has been present in Egypt for 50 years now and one of its most important marks is that it refuses any competition. If we say that it may be in the regime's best interest to support liberal parties, that rings true within the framework of a democratic system, but this is not a democratic system. In fact the regime believes that it is not in its best interest for any other political force to be present, whether it be liberal, leftist, Nasserist or even Islamist. So the outcome is that the system succeeds in weakening the liberal, Nasserist, and leftist forces with a complete failure to weaken the Islamist forces. Therefore the Islamist political force develops and grows.

**Why do you think the system has been unable to weaken the Islamist political camp, the way it has weakened the liberals?**

In any Islamic society, Islamic values are closer to the heart of ordinary people. For example, if you want to be a member of a communist, liberal or Nasserist party you must be cultured politically to some extent.

But in order to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, you can be illiterate. All you need to know is that you are a Muslim and if you are religiously devout, it is easier for me to reach you through religion. Because of the nature of religion it is closely linked to the grass roots and the masses.

In any Muslim society, where there is a dictatorial non-democratic system, the system succeeds in destroying all political forces except for the Islamic ones. That is why when the system falls apart you discover that the only ones left on the arena are the Islamists.

This is what happened in Iran. The Shah was the epitome of cruelty, he succeeded in destroying the many political forces in Iran. After that system fell, the Islamists rose to power. Therefore if you want to get rid of Islamic extremism in any country you need to open it up democratically.

This would create a climate where there is both the Islamist and the liberal and the leftist, the way Egypt was from 1922 to 1952. The Muslim Brotherhood has been present in Egypt since 1928 and none of them won a single seat in parliament during that period. Who do you think people would vote for in parliament in that period, Makram Ebeid the Christian, or Hassan El Bana the Muslim? The Muslim Brotherhood never had the same clout it enjoys now during Egypt's democratic years.

**Some say that any political party in Egypt that becomes popular will automatically turn into a security target, do you agree with this analysis?**

Our direct experience tells us that this possibility is obviously there, because all political parties complain that they are pursued by security and that security harasses them.

Security does not help it reach the masses, or organize campaign conferences. So this is true and it is related to the non-democratic, authoritarian nature of the system, which tries to control everything and anything. There is to be no serious dialogue on democracy without the implementation of structural reform within the system. This will allow the system to facilitate competition between all political forces.