

Worried About The Future, Mr. Akef's Interview With Al-Ahram Weekly



The Muslim Brotherhood's Chairman Mohamed Mahdi Akef remains defiant in the face of a major security clampdown. The arrests of Brotherhood members, he tells Amira Howeidy, will not alter their path

The following interview was conducted before the National Democratic Party's fourth convention and Pope Benedict's controversial statements on Islam and the Prophet Mohamed. Akef responded with a statement on 17 September describing the pope's words as an insult to Islam and Muslims and demanded a clear apology.

Following are excerpts from the interview conducted in his office in Cairo:

Muslim Brotherhood MPs have been busy discussing constitutional changes and recently offered their vision of what the constitution should look like. But what's the point when whatever you say will fall on deaf ears?

We are aware of the government's dictatorial approach to passing laws and that nothing stops them. But we have a duty as the Muslim Brotherhood to declare the truth regardless of whether [our constitutional vision] is acted upon.

From experience we know the National Democratic Party doesn't have a coherent philosophy. It simply commands a voting bloc that promotes tyranny. But we take our work seriously, we consult on legal and constitutional matters and then we present our vision to the people and to parliament.

There has been speculation that the NDP wants to change from an individual candidacy to a slate system in elections

to prevent the Brotherhood from standing as a group. Does this worry you?

[Political expert] Diao Rashwan has written about this explicitly, saying the change is being engineered behind closed doors by the group around Gamal Mubarak but I really don't give it much attention. My first concern is the glaring injustice with which the state treats the Muslim Brotherhood, arresting our people with or without charges and throwing them in jail. Detentions continue to be extended without justification. It surprises me that the Egyptian press doesn't find such a serious development worthy of their attention. For me it is my top priority. How do we stop the injustice inflicted on our sons? It is the recklessness, the tyranny, corruption and oppression by the state of its people that disturbs me now.

As for amending the constitution and efforts to promote Gamal Mubarak as his father's successor, we know that the government has enough voting power to institutionalise such corruption and tyranny. We can also see clearly how a hostile American-Zionist strategy is targeting the Arab and Muslim nation. It is our mission to expose this, and support anyone who resists it, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine or Lebanon.

A large number of the group's leaders is currently detained. Is this the price you are paying for having 88 MPs, and if so how will you deal with the situation?

I want the public to be aware of this situation and wake up. We do what we have to do, we fulfil our duties. There is clearly a link between the hostile [US-Zionist] strategy and the clampdown on the Brotherhood. If the [government] had not received a green light to do this to us they would not act in such a way. The situation was different during the first stage of the parliamentary elections when the regime was facing [external] pressure.

Back then the MB dismissed suggestions that the government was allowing the group to campaign freely because of pressure from the US administration...

I wanted to embarrass the regime, though they didn't understand. I could have said there was US pressure, and I know there was, but I thought it more appropriate to attribute the [relaxed environment] to Mubarak's election platform which talked about democracy and cancelling the emergency law. I wanted to attribute the change to him rather than the West... And now, is it not the case that the US is giving them the green light to fight everything Islamic?

Have the recent arrests hurt the MB?

Do you really think that if the supreme guide is gone the Brotherhood will be affected? If 100 or 200 are arrested — and at one point there were 3,000 in prison — does it affect the Brotherhood? We are deeply rooted and these insolent security actions do not affect us. They arrested [MB Secretary-General] Mahmoud Ezzat but we have 100 secretary-generals. The Brotherhood is a huge organisation, it is not 100 or 10,000. We are present everywhere, in tens of thousands, and nothing will stop us from pursuing our goals and our plans.

What goals? An Islamic state?

Our objective is to bring up our children on the right path. An Islamic state can't be established in the absence of freedoms. First we demand freedom and when we have freedom the nation will choose the constitution it sees fit.

But the Brotherhood's parliamentary interpellations since the elections have avoided faith-related issues and

focussed on corruption, human rights, freedoms, issues that could have been raised by other, non-Brotherhood MPs?

These are issues that matter to us. Freedom, detention, torture are issues that impact us directly. I would like here to thank the Brotherhood's MPs for their great efforts. According to [parliament speaker] Fathi Sorour this last parliamentary session saw the greatest number of interpellations ever. And 50 to 70 per cent of all interpellations came from the MB and independent MPs.

But is it not the case that the group has performed well in parliament because your MPs have steered away from religious and faith issues?

We didn't steer away... We just place these issues where they should be placed.

But in the past this was not the case. The group's MPs would regularly call for books to be censored among other things...

In the past we had far fewer MPs. Now we have 88, divided into various specialised groups. I don't claim we've excelled in parliament but their performance is continuously improving as they gain more experience. And given that many existing Brotherhood MPs were parliamentary novices, their awareness of parliament's bylaws is impressive. They address Fathi Sorour according to their knowledge of parliamentary precedent and it is driving him mad.

Our parliamentary bloc works independently of the group. They don't take orders from us. We give them general guidelines. The way things work in the Brotherhood is that each sector enjoys full freedom to carry out their duties within the Brotherhood's general framework and policy.

So as the supreme guide you don't ask them to raise this or that issue in parliament?

Never. I rarely even see them, perhaps only once a year...

Some columnists have demanded you be prosecuted and put on trial. Do you take such calls seriously?

[Laughing] As long as we live in this despotic state, anything can happen. But I find these calls absurd, coming from a bunch of paid agents. I have yet to come across a serious writer who says things like that.

Do you know the motives for each security clampdown? Is that why you exclude your statements of any responsibility?

The security apparatus has nothing to do with the arrests. It follows the policy of the regime. But because the security forces like to demonstrate their loyalty they will arrest 20 when the regime only wanted 10. This has nothing to do with my statements or, for that matter, my silence.

In the past, supreme guides kept silent yet we were subject to military trials and mass arrests. Now we've reached a point in Egypt where the margin for demanding freedom has expanded. I'm not the only one calling for more freedom, everybody is.

So do you acknowledge that the government has become more tolerant?

Not really. This is a general climate, whether domestically or globally... I didn't think that people would be able to go out in the street and say down with [Hosni Mubarak] but now this is done. Conferences are now held demanding the release of political detainees. This, too, was uncommon in the past, when there were no street demonstrations demanding greater freedom. So what has happened? There is change, change in policy and change in the political climate. So should the MB stay behind or lead calls for justice and freedom? If freedom prevails, good will prevail.

Any talk about economic development, or any other kind of development, is futile in the absence of freedom. In other words without freedom there is no progress, no prosperity.

When prosecutors interrogated Guidance Bureau member Lasheen Abu Shanab after the Kafr Al-Sheikh arrests he spoke openly about the Brotherhood's structure and hierarchy. In the past MB members charged with belonging to an illegal organisation avoided providing such information which is why Abu Shanab's statements were deemed provocative by the pro-government press.

We have no problem with that. They [the authorities] know much more about us. Don't they know the entire list of Guidance Council members? Don't they know we have 25 administrative bureaus? Don't they know who we are by name?

So why isn't the group, whose members now occupy one fifth of parliamentary seats, more open about its internal structure and the names of its members?

(Laughing) Let me tell you a story. When I was an MP, in the 1987 parliament, we had 37 MPs and thought of forming a political party. We prepared everything and consulted with many legal experts who told us it was our [constitutional] right. [The then MB spokesman] Maamoun El-Hodeibi sought out [then parliament speaker] Refaat El-Mahgoub's opinion. El-Mahgoub asked us not to do this for fear [the authorities] would destroy parliament with tanks.

So is this warning the reason the MB continues to refuse to apply for a party licence?

I'm keen on peace and stability in Egypt. The MB chose to contest only 150 seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Don't you think we could have fielded many more? But the despotic mentality in Egypt cannot accept competition.

But it's not unusual now for groups to announce the formation of a political party without government licensing.

I already exist. But I insist that we remain Islamiya gam'aa (ecumenical Islamism).

So you think a political party would conflict with your Islamic identity?

No. But a political party has to contest elections and have a vision on strictly political issues.

But you already contest elections...

Yes, but there's a difference between having a political vision [only] and a wider, more comprehensive social, educational, cultural and economic vision... and they (the authorities) know this about us, they know everything

and we have nothing to hide... In the past 15 years we feel we've advanced, won more space in the Egyptian street and that we've achieved some of our objectives despite tyranny and torture. In the past 10 to 15 years alone 20,000 MB members were arrested.

You were quoted as saying that the Muslim Brotherhood would form an independent workers union if union elections were rigged. Since when was the Brotherhood interested in labour elections, traditionally a leftist domain?

I don't know anything about this. We have a section that works on labour issues and it's up to them to decide whether or not we want to join with the trade unions. Our policy in general is to contest all elections. Did you see what they [the security forces] did to us in the Chambers of Commerce elections?

But you were quoted as threatening to form a parallel trade union, and this led the left-wing Tagammu Party to announce it would refuse to form a coalition with the Brotherhood...

I never said any of this. It is an issue for our labour section to decide, and do what's best for the workers and for Egypt. As supreme guide I don't go into the details of things like that.

But does the Brotherhood now have a policy to expand its presence within trade unions?

As I said, we are behind any action that serves the interest of workers and Egypt. How this is done is up to the Brotherhood labour section.

So if the elections are rigged would you support a decision to form an independent trade union?

If and when this happens, and our labour section brings it up, I will decide then.

Does the NDP's fourth convention worry you?

It worries me because of what it could do to Egypt, not the Brotherhood. This conference will take Egypt backwards.

If this conference had Egypt's interests in mind, its agenda and the topics they want to discuss should have been made public. But there is consensus now that there is a group within the NDP that makes decisions and modifies laws that only enforce tawreeth (Gamal Mubarak succeeding his father). All the laws and constitutional amendments they're cooking up point in this direction. Take the emergency law, the judicial authority law, Article 76 of the constitution... and now they're working on an election law. All this enhances tyranny.

It's possible then that this will be the last time the Brotherhood is allowed to contest elections.

Who knows what the future holds for us? It amazes me really how people forget there is a God and that things can change from one state to another.

George Bush was quoted by The Wall Street Journal as saying he admires the reformers in the Egyptian government. Do you find this significant?

He admires despots who support his plans . . .

Bush's statements reflect approval of Egypt's shameful position towards the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance.



Naturally, this position is welcomed by the US administration.