

Shaykh Hamdī of Maghāghah, A Salafi Candidate with Coptic Support

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Article summary:

Shaykh Hamdī ‘Abd al-Fattāh is a unique personality in Egypt. Little known outside of his home region of Maghagha in Upper Egypt, he is a candidate for parliament running under the banner of the Salafi Nour Party. In and of itself, there is nothing unusual here – the Nour Party has searched for and nominated local popular candidates throughout Egypt. What is unique is that Shaykh Hamdī has the endorsement of the local Coptic Orthodox priest of his village, Fr. Yu’annis.

This interview discusses why Shaykh Hamdī has received Coptic support, but also explores his understanding of the application of sharia law in the modern world. Shaykh Hamdī is eager to correct common misperceptions, but, perhaps unwittingly, confirms others. Topics include tourism, war booty, jiziah, dress, legislation, and the legality of democracy.

Shaykh Hamdī is an engaging and friendly person. He was sincere and believable, and I trust he will work on behalf of the Copts, as he promises. At the same time it was a challenging interview, as getting him to answer intended questions proved difficult. Whether this was due to language issues, culture and worldview differences, or political doublespeak is hard to say. Nonetheless, Shaykh Hamdī provides an insightful view into the mindset of a modern day Salafi, both confirming and undoing typical stereotypes.

As a final note, Shaykh Hamdī lost his electoral race. After stage one he finished in second place behind the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, and thus qualified for the run-off. Though he lost the run-off, the judge ruled to nullify the result, given the level of fraud witnessed on behalf of his competition. Shaykh Hamdī stated there were 40,000 additional votes cast illegally for his opponent. Nevertheless, rather than a second run-off, the ruling was issued simply to accept the results of the first round voting. Shaykh Hamdī replied, ‘It is God’s will,’ and refused to be angry. Still, he holds out hope for a reversal.

JC: Please introduce yourself to us.

HAF: My name is ‘Alaa’ al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Fattāh Muhammad, but I am known by the name of Shaykh Hamdī ‘Abd al-Fattāh. I have a general institute for the calling of people to religion. I worked thirteen years in Saudi Arabia as an imam, mosque lecturer, and teacher of the Qur’an. I am a member of the Maghāghah Reconciliation Committee which works according to traditional regulations.

I joined the Salafi Nour Party immediately after it was established, and presented myself as a candidate to which they agreed. I did this after reading their platform which I determined to be moderate. It is comprehensive and without fanaticism toward anyone. Among its priorities is the call to implement *sharī‘ah* law, but it emphasizes to do this gradually.

Among the accusations against the Nour Party is that it will prevent tourism, but this is not logical. On the contrary, our program is very powerful. If you compare Egypt, with all its civilization and history, Jordan, Turkey, and Malaysia all have higher tourist incomes. This is because we rely on luxury tourism only. We can boost conference tourism, which not only can bring more money than luxury tourism, it also profits the nation scientifically as doctors and professors bring knowledge in addition to money spent on airfare, hotels, clubs, and general expenses.

There is also medical tourism. We should build world-class hospitals that will draw the majority of medical travelers from the Gulf and from Africa, rather than them going to America or France, where the costs are very high. Here, we have the medical proficiency and lower costs. This will again raise our scientific benefit as well as financial from airfare and hotels, as before.

Yes, we will also promote luxury tourism, but only that which is religiously legitimate. It is not necessary to mix the sexes on the beach. We have many unmarried young men. When they view these mixed settings the result can be one of sin. What is the problem with establishing some family-only or single-sex chalets, where you can enjoy yourself freely without temptation? Turkey has done this, for example. Should there not be freedom for this, is this not respect for freedom? You might say we should be open-minded, but I reply I don’t want anyone to see my wife. So as you call for freedom for the other, I also call for the freedom to keep my wife from being seen.

JC: Would you also allow for beaches where people wish to mix with the other sexes?

HAF: Exactly. But I know from tourists they wish to inquire about the customs of the country in which they are visiting. But are we forgetting about the tourists from the Gulf when we concentrate on Europe? Gulf countries have more tourists, and Egypt is the closest country to them. Right now, they are going to Turkey.

Then, another issue concerns the Copts. What is their status under *sharī‘ah* law?

JC: This is a very important topic and we will approach it soon, but let’s return to you as a person. You are from the village of Qufādah, and friends with Fr. Yu’annis. You are also a shaykh, but what does this mean? How did you become a shaykh? Are you an Azhar graduate?

HAF: No, I have a diploma from the High Institute for Calling which is a private center attached to the Religious Legitimacy Association of Egypt.

JC: What do you do in Maghāghah, what is your job?

HAF: I am a real estate agent, buying and selling buildings, apartments, shops, etc.

JC: Do you preach in the mosque?

HAF: Yes, but not in one in particular. I preach often both in Qufādah and outside.

JC: Here in Qufādah, you are good friends with Fr. Yu'annis.

HAF: Yes, Muslim-Christian relations here in the village are very strong. It is friendship, not just greeting each other in the streets. If there are problems, even between two Christians, we come to the church to help solve them.

JC: You are speaking of your work with the reconciliation committee. Tell me more about that.

HAF: In most instances the reconciliation committee is able to solve problems faster than the legal system. It takes only one session, and the decision is binding on both parties. We search for the truth, no matter who it is with.

Every day we sit to solve problems between Muslims. Often we sit to solve problems between Christians. But what happens is when there is a problem between a Muslim and a Christian the media twists the issue somewhat to become a religious matter. They take refuge in religious chauvinism and turn it from a personal struggle into a religious one. There are occasions where a Muslim boy and girl will make an improper relationship, and the same with Christians. But if it happens between religions, we must treat it with reason and wisdom in the same manner we would otherwise. We don't accept any religious chauvinism in either direction.

JC: One of the benefits of the reconciliation is that it is fast.

HAF: Yes, court cases can take years. This is one of the problems our party wishes to address.....

JC: So if the Salafis gain control of government in Egypt, what rights will Christians have?

HAF: Let's talk first about the perspective of Muslims toward Christians if the *sharī'ah* is implemented. We will treat them with righteousness, respect, friendship, and justice. In terms of rights, everyone will be the same. There will be no difference between a Muslim and a Christian. In terms of their family affairs – marriage, divorce, inheritance – we will not apply *sharī'ah* here but they can judge themselves.

JC: What rights will they have exactly?

HAF: They will have all rights. The prophet said, 'What is for them is for us,' which means,

if I can take salary, or gain positions, or have houses, or ..., in everything that has to do with putting together a government there is no difference between Muslim or Christian.

JC: Even the high positions in government?

HAF: Yes, and there will be equivalence in their salaries as well.

Is there a constitution today that guarantees the rights of minorities like the *sharī'ah* law? No. They are *ahl al-dhimmah*, under our protection. They have rights over us and we have responsibilities toward them. As long as they don't kill me, or raise a weapon against me, or attack me, I am obliged to protect them and give security to them and their houses of worship as well.

JC: But does not this designation as ahl al-dhimmah raise the status of the Muslim over that of the Christian?

HAF: No, but the opposite. They will be more comfortable than the Muslims.

JC: Yes, maybe he is comfortable, but is he equal?

HAF: Let's look at a Muslim and a Christian student. If the Christian scores higher on his marks, is it right for me to appoint the Muslim to a position over him? No.

JC: Is there a verse that says, 'Do not take them [Jews and Christians] as friends/guardians?' (Qur'an 5:51)

HAF: This is not speaking about Christians, so to speak. Of Christians it says, 'You will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, "We are Christians."' (Quran 5:82).....

JC: To be sure I have not memorized the verse, but people tell me that the one I mentioned warns Muslims from allowing Christians to take positions above them.

HAF: This does not intend Christians in particular. But let me ask you a question: Did you know that in Britain there is a law preventing the prime minister from being other than a Protestant [Anglican]? Why? The majority is Protestant, so the prime minister must also be Protestant. So if we have a nation where the majority is Muslim, what should we expect the ruler to be?.....

JC: Very good,.....but domestically – can a Copt head a ministry? Can he run a company? Can he be a school principal?

HAF: What is the problem with any of this? As long as he has the qualifications, why not?

Did you know that our educational policy in Egypt is a complete failure? That is why in our party we will work on developing education. Statistics show the most intelligent children in the world are Egyptian. But as soon as he enters school he becomes the stupidest student in the world.

JC: Allow me to move to a different subject. I live here and I know the genius of the Egyptian people (both laughing). Something that is not known, though, is your commitment to the values of democracy. Some of your shaykhs speak of it as something foreign, imported, and not Islamic.

HAF: What does the word ‘democracy’ mean? It is that a people are ruled by the people. But if there is a heavenly law...? Here’s a question: If you have an appliance, like a TV, will you turn to the agent or just some person when it needs fixing? The agent, of course, since he knows the appliance.

So if God created humanity, he knows what is good for it, and what will keep it from corruption. This is why he gave his law.

JC: In terms of faith, this is fine. But what in terms of democracy?

HAF: You will not find democracy or freedom greater than what is found in the *sharī‘ah*. We say you are free as long as you do no harm. There are three types of harm: to doctrine, to public property, and to private property. Does freedom give one the right to transgress on the will of others?

JC: What happens if the majority does not desire the rule of sharī‘ah?

HAF: Some people say the Salafis will cut off hands (of thieves). This is correct, but at the same time, it is wrong. If your hand is to be cut off, you must first be offered five things: work, a living wage, a home, a wife, and a means of transportation. If you have all five, and you still transgress against the property of others, what do you deserve?

JC: I understand your logic, but you are justifying why the sharī‘ah is good. It is one thing if people choose it now, but what if they change their mind later? Or what if you fail in your policies? Can the people then choose against you?

HAF: Of course, we accept this. If we feel we are not able to perform our duty for the people, we will resign. We are not seeking parliament seats for pride. These are seats of service.

Some in the former ruling party used their seats to grant favors and enjoy immunity. We want to take away this immunity from members of parliament, as pertains to affairs outside parliament. We will work as any other citizen.....

JC: So in parliament, who decides if a law is consistent with or contrary to the sharī‘ah?

HAF: The *sharī‘ah* functions as does the constitution. So any law must move in accordance with the constitution, just as it must with *sharī‘ah*.

JC: So taking an example: Must a woman cover with the hijāb, the niqāb, or is she free to wear what she wants?

HAF: Nothing religious will be imposed on anyone. We will advise only, and the one who refuses is free.

JC: Are there differences among Muslims as to what sharī'ah is exactly?

HAF: No, not as concerns the roots of *sharī'ah*, all are in agreement.

JC: What about new interpretations, consistent with the modern era?

HAF: This has to do with the details, not with the roots.

JC: Or, what if a Muslim interprets concerning bank interest. Might one say that the regulations of sharī'ah were good for their era, but argue that today such policy is allowed?

HAF: We will work with the banks gradually. Most banks in Egypt work with interest. We will let them be, but we will also create *sharī'ah*-compliant banks.

JC: Fine, but this is not my question exactly. Let the people choose their policy. But what if a Muslim wants to argue in terms of sharī'ah that interest is allowable? Shaykh al-Azhar did this in terms of Mubarak's policies. Maybe he was wrong, but can he not argue this way and differ in terms of sharī'ah? And if so, who rules?

HAF: In terms of Shaykh al-Azhar, we must return to a situation where he is chosen by his peers and not appointed by the president, so that he does not become subservient to politics.

JC: You are justifying your position here, but you are just a person.

HAF: No, this is the position of everyone. It is textual in *sharī'ah*, interest may not be taken from a loan. Many speak about interest being too high, and how we must lower it. But why should you lower it when it shouldn't be there originally? Isn't God the one who knows what is best for humanity?

We reject a religious state. Why? A religious state is one where the ruler states that what he decides is from God. No. We want a civil state which is ruled by *sharī'ah*. If the ruler makes an error we declare his error, and if he is correct, we say thank you and accept it.

The religious state, as the media makes out that we believe in, is the equivalent of Europe in the Middle Ages where the church ruled by God's law and there was no room for discussion. The church ruled as if it was in the place of God.

We say we are not in the place of God on earth. No, we present the law of God, and we implement the law of God, but not with haughtiness or pride.

JC: So if the parliament passes a law that violates sharī'ah...

HAF: We will say no.

JC: But whose word prevails? Who decides?

HAF: If the majority is now Islamic, should not the will of the majority prevail?

You are a Christian, and you will raise your children to be Christian. I, likewise, am a Muslim and do the same. But if we take someone like the liberal ‘Amr Hamzāwī, who says I will let my children choose their faith... Do the traditions of Egypt allow someone to do this?

There must be preservation of the identity of Egypt. You are an American and you have your customs, but is it acceptable to implement your customs on the people of Egypt?.....

JC: A last, and most important, question: Why should a Copt vote for the Nour Party?

HAF: Today in a conference someone asked me if we would be like previous parliament members, or if we would work for the interest of Muslims.

I told him I consider myself a candidate for Christians, before I represent Muslims, even if they don’t give me their vote. If I am selected for a seat, I represent the district, not just those who vote for me. This is democracy, and it is also *sharī‘ah*. I will treat the Christian like the Muslim, and in fact be sure to be responsible for them.

While campaigning someone approached me and said, ‘I am a Christian, but by God I will vote for you. You are a respectable and just man.’ I didn’t know who he was, but he had been involved in a reconciliation meeting in which I honored his rights.

I have spoken with Copts in all sincerity. I can be found in the mosque, but I can also be found in the church. I am confident I will capture their votes greater than any other candidate, even if he is a Christian.

Why? I am not interacting with them as if I seek their votes. Actually, elections are a very recent thing. I have behaved this way with Copts for a long time now. I do not speak of ‘national unity’; I speak about the ‘national fabric’. National unity implies there is a difference between us but we come together to solve it and reconcile. No, I say that Egyptian society – Muslim and Christian – is one fabric. The blood of one is the blood that drips from the other.

JC: Praise God, shaykh. Thank you very much.