

The Muslim Brotherhood's Mendacious Charm Campaign in Washington

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Apr 9, 2012

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The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a Muslim Brotherhood delegation in Washington last week to better understand how the Islamist group will govern Egypt. It was a noble attempt at promoting intercultural political dialogue -- an engagement for which many in the American policy community, as well as academia, have long advocated. Yet the Brotherhood came to Washington with an agenda of its own: selling itself as a "moderate" organization to a highly skeptical American public. And it did so using one of the oldest sales tricks: It completely misrepresented itself.

In a certain sense, the Muslim Brotherhood's representatives had no other choice. If they admitted, for example, that they intend to repeal the law that criminalizes sexual harassment -- as one of their female parliamentarians declared earlier last week -- they would have killed their chances at winning over an American public that embraces gender equality. Similarly, if the Brotherhood's representatives used their time in Washington to reiterate their leaders' calls for banning beach tourism, it would have destroyed any hopes of an American taxpayer-aided bailout for the nearly bankrupt Egyptian economy. And if they'd repeated their leaders' 9/11 conspiracy theories, they would have been on the first plane back to Cairo, rather than invited for meetings at the White House and State Department.

Thus, the Brotherhood presented a version of its politics very different from the one that would be familiar to Egyptians. For instance, when asked about the organization's plan to sink Egypt's peace treaty with Israel by putting it to a referendum -- which multiple Brotherhood officials have called for quite publicly -- Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party MP Abdel Mawgoud al-Dardery simply denied it. "No referendum at all concerning international obligations," he told Ben Birnbaum of the Washington Times. "All our international agreements are respected by the Freedom and Justice Party, including Camp David." Sondos Asem, editor of the English-language Brotherhood website Ikhwanweb, was only slightly less misleading. "We've reiterated our position towards both the treaty with Israel and all the treaties that have been signed by previous governments," she said on CNN. "We are not willing to change any of these treaties unless if there is a massive popular will to change that." Asem's "unless" qualification seemingly went unnoticed, neatly buried under her pro-peace platitudes.

The Brotherhood also denied the limited representation that it had afforded Christians and secularists on the Constituent Assembly, which will write Egypt's next constitution. The 100-member assembly includes only 16

secularist party members, six women, and five Christians -- and, as a result, at least 25 of the assembly's members have walked out. But al-Dardery depicted an alternate reality. "The Freedom and Justice Party insisted to be as inclusive as possible -- included liberals, secularists, Coptics, people of Al-Azhar," he told a Georgetown University audience, before serving up a bigger whopper. "What is interesting about the committee writing the constitution, it is criticized by both extremes," he said. "One extreme from Al-Azhar saying that we're underrepresented, and then the secular liberal party is saying we're underrepresented. So that can tell you exactly that the committee is trying really to be in the middle and invite everyone." This wasn't quite right. Al-Azhar -- the preeminent institution of Sunni learning -- was not objecting to the Muslim Brotherhood's supposed centrism. It objected to the Brotherhood's bid to control the constitutional process to the exclusion of others, and thus found itself on the exact same side as Egyptian secularists.

Of course, the Brotherhood's representatives also used their time in America to deny their theocratic aims. "As our name indicates, we are the Freedom and Justice Party," said Asem, the Brotherhood website editor, on CNN. "And what we would like to achieve in Egypt is actually a civil democratic state that is based on the rule of law." But the Brotherhood's presidential candidate, Khairat al-Shater, recently promised to give clerics a legislative role -- an undemocratic structure if there ever was one.

Later, when pressed on the role of women at Georgetown by a liberal Egyptian activist, Asem said, "We are...working to improve the situation of women in society, getting to the root causes of the problem of the marginalization of women." It remains unclear, though, how the Muslim Brotherhood's longtime opposition to legislation banning female genital mutilation, which a Brotherhood parliamentarian recently reiterated, plays into the Brotherhood's supposed concerns for women's social role. And when CNN's Brianna Keilar pressed al-Dardery on the Brotherhood's clitorrectomy stance, the parliamentarian suddenly got defensive. "The Egyptian people will decide for themselves what is good for them," I overheard him telling Keilar. "It is not acceptable for anyone to tell the Egyptian people how to think this way or the other way." Al-Dardery's insistence on Egypt's sovereign right to circumcise women was, perhaps, his most honest remark of the trip.

One only hopes that the Brotherhood's discussions with American officials, including Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and National Security Council Senior Director Steven Simon, were more frank. But I'm not optimistic: The Muslim Brotherhood's English-language moderation always seems to stand at odds with its truly radical ideology.

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