



Photo by Jeff Paslay
 Hanan Kamahi (left) was voted to the Executive Committee of the new, re-structured Muslim association on campus, and Fida Mohammad was elected director.

MUSLIMS

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In addition, the group's bylaws were found to be unconstitutional because only people who adhered to the Sunni branch of Islam were given full membership.

The students who led that group, most of whom are Saudi Arabian, have chosen to take their organization off campus rather than comply with ASUO restrictions. The students who filed the complaint have established their own group.

Fida Mohammad, one of the students who filed the complaint, was elected as director in ASUO-supervised elections held last month.

The focus of the new group is to include Muslims of all sects, promote equal participation by women and recognize diversity within the Muslim community, said Mohammad, a graduate student from Pakistan.

"We're trying to make it even; we're trying to make every Muslim voice heard on campus. We're trying to give them an even, fair say in the actions of the MSA," said Hanan Ramahi, recently elected to the group's Executive Committee.

But problems remain. Two Saudi students hired attorney Charles Porter to retain the names Muslim Student Association of Eugene and Muslim Student Association of the University of Oregon. Members of the Islamic Society of Eugene, closely affiliated with MSA, registered the names several years ago with the Oregon Corporation Division.

Mohammad maintains, however, that the newly elected leadership has taken over the organization and now has access to the names. He accuses Porter of harassment and intimidation. Porter says that's not the case; he's just doing his job.

The tug-of-war is resulting in legal action, with Porter planning a lawsuit against Mohammad and several other students, and possibly against the ASUO, for continuing to use a name that he says belongs to his clients.

However the name game turns out, Mohammad and about 30 other students are in the process of organizing a group that will be quite different from the MSA that previously occupied an office in the EMU.

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As a female Muslim, Ramahi said she was not allowed to fully participate in the previous group, hold a leadership position or publicly discuss political and social issues. In addition, she was routinely shuttled off to a separate, small room for women when she went to pray at the ISE, a popular gathering place for Muslims in the Eugene area.

Several of the Saudi Muslim men were "appalled that I was elected," she said.

"The opposition felt like it was going overboard for a woman to be on the Executive Committee by election," she said. "They were trying to impose a very antiquated, medieval will in the name of Islam."

But Ramahi said her election is proof that the Islamic religion itself does not suppress women.

"If people have misused it, then that's the case since time immemorial," she said. "I don't want people to see Islam as the agency that abuses women. Our opposition is of the Saudi persuasion which oppresses women and which is still oppressing women."

Ramahi, a student from Palestine, wears a head scarf and says it affects the way people perceive her.

"I'm looked at as 'Oh, she has to be oppressed.' Why? Because somewhere in their understanding of Islam, they heard that Muslim women are oppressed," she said.

To provide a religious service that welcomes all Muslims, Mohammad, Ramahi and several others have established a weekly service at the Koinonia Center, which takes place every Friday afternoon.

The Islamic religion consists of the major branches — Sunni and Shi'a — and several sects within those two. The major tenets, however, hold true for all Muslims. Allah is worshiped as the sole deity, and Muhammad is recognized as his prophet.

It is a religion, Ramahi and Mohammad said, that is terribly misunderstood in the Western world.

"People need to know that there is something wrong with the portrayal, not the group," Ramahi said. "For example, our image on TV is heinous, it's ridiculous. If people continue portraying us that way, they'll start seeing us that way, and there's nothing we can do to change that viewpoint."

Mohammad and Ramahi said they have been to several different churches in the Eugene area and spoken to many people about the Islamic religion.

"We do our best to show that we are not different from the rest of humanity," Mohammed said.

"Unfortunately, Muslims always have to prove their humanity," Ramahi said. "They have to insist on their humanity — they have to articulate it. And I think there's danger in just having to say that. Why can't it be understood that we're just like any other human being?"

Both Mohammad and Ramahi said the Western view of Islam and Muslims is not only inaccurate, but dangerous.

"When discussing Islam, it gets confused and clouded with politics, and that's where it becomes dangerous," Ramahi said.

"It might be an advantage to portray a certain people as backward, submissive, non-democratic. In that case it becomes the white man's burden to democratize and enlighten, and that can translate into a lot of things. It opens a gate for intrusion."

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