

## **Br. Aezeden Mohamed, Past President of Muslim Students Association at the University of Manitoba**

Interviewed by: Br. Idris Elbakri.



**MM: Let's begin by having you tell us more about yourself.**

**AM:** My name is Aezeden Mohamed. I am a PhD candidate in the field of aerospace engineering and a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Engineering. I have been MSA president since 2005. I am originally from Libya. I arrived in Canada in 1996. I studied English for 1 year, then pursued Bachelor's and Master's degrees and now I am doing my PhD. I was also president of Canadian Union of Public Employment (CUPE) 3909 in 2006-2007, and a senator at the University of Manitoba Senate for 2002-2006. I was also President of College Housing Co-Op of Manitoba for 2007-2008 and President of Student Council at the Faculty of Engineering for 2000-2002.

**MM: How long have you been in Winnipeg?**

**AM:** I came straight here in 1996. I have been studying at UM the whole time.

**MM: What role do you see MSA playing in the lives of Muslim students?**

**AM:** MSA plays a very important role in the lives of Muslim students on campus. In fact, its role goes beyond the campus to the community at large. On campus, MSA provides assistance to students before and after arriving in Manitoba. Students approach us before arriving from their home countries. We provide them with assistance in areas such as housing, information about the Islamic center, etc... When they get here we introduce them to the community, add their information to our email list, and help them become familiar with the Muslim community on and off campus. We introduce them to the rest of the Muslim students here. As a result, in a very short period of time they get to know what and whom they need. For example, if someone arrives from Jordan, we help them not only meet Muslims but also people from their country. It is a very good support system for Muslim students who come from overseas and who are single. They are not lonely and we help them feel at home. On Friday, about 200 students pray and feel like home and do not miss anything. We also support them spiritually through providing facilities for prayer in congregation and so they get spiritual support. Our MSA here is very fortunate compared to other MSA's because we have very good relationship with the administration. Personally I know University officials such as the President and Vice President. I got to know them through different committees and organizations and we built a very good bridge with them. Therefore we reap the fruit of this relationship like the prayer room. They provided us with \$125,000 for the old prayer room in the education building. For the new room, I approached them and they provided \$350,000 to make this happen. This is like a full facility. We even have wudu facilities in addition to 2 study rooms, one for brothers and one for sisters.

**MM: What about Muslim students born here?**

**AM:** Those who are born here and grew up here are supported through their interactions with Muslims from overseas, which helps strengthen their faith. They learn a lot from those who have the knowledge of Islam. Some who are born here do not pray or fast because they may not be aware of the seriousness of these requirements. Through interaction with overseas Muslim students, their faith grows stronger. The University provides them with an opportunity to meet other Muslims. By being here, and joining the MSA and attending Friday prayer with

different khateebhs who are mostly from overseas (such as Shaikh Ismael Mukhtar and others), they strengthen their faith.

**MM: What about those who are born here who are also practicing. What does MSA offer them?**

**AM:** Those who are born here and are practicing can provide a lot of support to MSA. They know the system and language and are a main source of support for MSA. They really run the show. They can communicate better with non-Muslims and understand the life style better.

**MM: What role do you see MSA playing in the larger campus community?**

**AM:** We organize Islamic awareness week each term. That introduces MSA to non-Muslims. We run this for a week, providing materials and a mailing list so that interested parties can receive information about our activities. Besides this, we do seminars and an annual conference. It is not meant to be just for MSA members but also for non-Muslims. We not only advertise but also send special invitations. During Ramadan we serve food the whole month. We provide taraweeh prayer, a full program from maghrib through taraweeh that includes education. We invite non-Muslims to learn about Ramadan and fasting. We also do a "fastathon" for the whole month. Anyone can invite his colleagues, teachers or homestay family, in addition to distinguished guests.

**MM: Where do you see MSA in 5 years?**

**AM:** I hope it will be the role model for the community at large, an example for the whole community. There is no activity in Manitoba in the Muslim community without the MSA members being behind it. You could not tell me of any activity at MIA without MSA support. MSA members are the driving force of many activities. For example, students and their wives run one of the weekend schools. The summer camp is run by students. You can even find them involved with other Muslims organization such as the Zubaidah Talab Foundation and the Jawad Foundation Canada Inc.

**MM: Do you expect to be President in 5 years?**

**AM:** I won't be President in 5 years.

**MM: What has motivated you to serve as President for so long?**

**AM:** Before I answer your question, you should know that when I ran for President the first time, no one else was running and someone had to come forward. After two years I did not run again and MSA had a different President. Shortly thereafter, the President left MSA and no one was willing to take over. I was approached by everyone to come back to MSA as President but I refused. Finally two brothers agreed to take over temporarily until new elections were held in which I ran for President. Again, no one else was running.

To answer your question, I just love to serve the Muslim community. I want to put my energy to the service of the Muslims on campus. Since I am here and I spend most of my day on campus, I find it convenient to serve. With my connections in the University, I felt I should take advantage to serve as much as I can before I leave. MSA now has a very important role on campus and is respected by non-Muslims. Under my leadership MSA has become the largest student organization and we have a lot of influence. For example, candidates in the elections for the University of Manitoba Student Union or the Graduate Student Association seek the support of MSA. For the first time in the history of this university the Presidents of UMSU, GSA and CUPE 3909 are all MSA members

**MM: How is the MSA President chosen?**

**AM:** By elections by Muslim students.

**MM: Does MSA have a governing constitution?**

**AM:** Yes.

**MM: Are elections held annually? This year was the first time that I heard of MSA elections?**

**AM:** This time the elections were much publicized. Students were waiting for it and prepared for a long time. This time we had the largest number of voters. Normally, we hold elections every year. Normally it takes place after Friday prayer. Usually there are barely enough candidates and the elections ends up being informal and quick and is done by a show of hands. When there is lot of interest and competition, we implement a ballot and box. There were times when no one wanted to run and we had to beg people to run.

**MM: How often do the MSA executives meet and are their meetings open?**

**AM:** This is the negative part. It is very unfortunate that the MSA executives are all students and most of them are undergraduate and busy with their daily class assignments and exams. In addition, some work part time. Where can they find the spare time to serve the Muslim community? When the President requests a meeting, it is not easy to get them all to meet. It would be a very positive achievement if we could meet once in a month. In the past before I was involved in MSA, I was told the MSA executives hardly met and communicated by email.

**MM: Since the elections were held one week ago, have you called for a meeting?**

**AM:** No because the executive was not totally complete. One of the positions was tied so we had to vote again for that position. We completed that just today.

**MM: What is the composition of the MSA executives like in terms of background?**

**AM:** Five members are Canadian raised or born with various ethnic origins. We have 4 sisters and 4 brothers from different ethnic backgrounds. We have a Malay, Somali, Iraqi, Turkish, Pakistani and a Canadian, in addition to myself. It is a mixed group.

**MM: How does the MSA executive make decisions?**

**AM:** Normally we get ideas from everyone including members, for example for the MSA annual conference.

**MM: How do you decide which speaker to bring?**

**AM:** Normally, we ask around. As long as we agree and can get a well-known speaker to respond to our invitation and the members and executive agree.

**MM: Is there a provision to replace an executive who is not fulfilling their duties?**

**AM:** We should do that. Informally, it has happened automatically. For example, when previous MSA executives were not able to fulfill their duties, the MSA President sought volunteers to do the work and cover the duties. The executive may still be officially in office while the work is covered by a volunteer. MSA continues to operate even with one member. I am not going to stop the work of MSA because executives are not able to meet or fulfill their commitments.

**MM: Since you have lead the MSA for so long, what do you think are the fundamental skills a good leader should have on campus?**

**AM:** Very good question. Communications skills and ability to accommodate Muslims who come from different backgrounds are important. We have people on opposite sides of issues and a good leader has to bring them together.

**MM: Some of the undergraduate students and some sisters feel alienated from MSA, is there any reason for that?**

**AM:** That is not true. That is not true at all. We have people from a wide range of points of view. The range we accommodate is very broad. We have a wider range than any other Islamic organization in Manitoba. We have Shi'a, Ibadhi, Ismaili plus the four schools of Sunni Islam. In fact, we always call sisters and brothers to bring their ideas and suggestions forward. Even today, after Friday prayer, I thanked all those who voted and I requested those who lost in the elections to please bring their ideas and implement them. All MSA activities are in the newsletter and are announced after Friday prayer. Those who are interested come forward. The simplest thing people need to do is to sign up for the newsletter. In reality, some do not show up or participate no matter what we do. Some members of the group who ran for elections this time, in the past I asked them to fill a vacant position. We have even non-Muslims helping out. Whoever told you that should understand that as President I have to protect MSA. When someone sends me an email and tells me that they want to do a movie night and all they want from me is to book a theater and equipment, I say sure, but I request information about the agenda of the movie night, topic, or title. It is a simple and straightforward request. It is common sense for us to want to know what the movie is about. They never came back. I have proof from the emails. Some have asked me to book a room for a program. What is the program? An event related to Palestine. I am sorry I can't do it. If they feel alienated from MSA, let them. As MSA, we are responsible for everything that goes on under our umbrella. It is illegal for us to act as proxy for other organizations. When I came, MSA was drowning and I picked it up. There was a time when for Friday prayer there would be no khateeb and no room for prayer. Now we have a room and the khateeb and topic are announced ahead of time.

**MM: Is there a relationship between MSA and the Jewish Student Association?**

**AM:** Some JSA members attend our events. I met with JSA President and we would like to meet and talk about common issues.

**MM: What is the MSA policy on the prayer room barrier? Did sisters have an input on the decisions relating to their space in the prayer room and the barrier?**

**AM:** The barrier is a very complicated issue. It is not an issue only here, but elsewhere. It is not that I just made a decision. I try to accommodate a broad range of opinions. So I came to the conclusion that the partition we have now is appropriate. Some want a full partition and others do not want it at all. The middle way is what we have: a half barrier on one side and a full partition on the other for those who want it. This is the best that I can come up with. I did the best to protect brothers and sisters from further problems. With the side with a half barrier, sisters who do not want a barrier, no longer have an excuse to open it by force and create chaos. I am [morally] protecting the sisters and brothers by doing this. In the past, there were serious issues at a time when I was on holiday. Many sisters want a full partition, but it is not right for one side to impose its opinion.

**MM: Space at Universities is very hard to get. What do you think the University gets out of it?**

**AM:** Frankly, not trying to exaggerate, but it is based on my relationships and communications. I was fortunate to get to know people from the administration and to work with them closely on a number of events.

**MM: Do you think the University uses the prayer room to market to students from Muslim countries?**

**AM:** Not at all, nothing like that. In fact, many overseas students are not given admission after their year of English. There are many other student groups and they didn't get anything like what we have. Other universities have even removed the Muslim prayer rooms after September 11.

**MM: By what criteria do you select the speakers for Friday prayers? How do you ensure that the khateeb have good recitation, sound knowledge and will speak within the bounds of Canadian Law?**

**AM:** It is not an easy question. We do not restrict anyone with good intentions who wants to deliver khutba as long as they meet our criteria. We normally tell those who want to give khutba to follow the following rules: avoid all sectarian differences, stick to the time allotted, make general du'a with out specifying any country and make it related to the lives of the students. We allow no politics so we can accommodate everyone.

**MM: There were reports of somewhat extreme rhetoric in the khutba...**

**AM:** You know, this never happened before but happened recently. I actually sat with the speaker and warned him. It was not violence but it is the zeal of the youth. They have energy and motivation, and that's why it is not wise to let youth lead this organization without senior members guiding them.

**MM: Why did you let this speaker come back then?**

**AM:** Because he promised to not repeat his mistake and he acknowledged it. We do not want to alienate anyone and want to give everyone opportunity. If it is repeated then we will take action.

After every Friday prayer I receive positive and negative feedback and I go through these comments with the speaker. Often times I found the speakers to have made unintentional mistakes and did not mean to sound extreme.

**MM: Is MSA at UM affiliated with MSA National?**

**AM:** Yes.

**MM: Why do you only bring Sh. Abdurraheem Green as a speaker?**

**AM:** Our goals and intentions are to focus on campus on Muslims and non-Muslim. He left a very good impression on the community. In order to approach non-Muslims and give them the message, the best thing is to bring someone who is from them: white, green eyes, blonde. This is the best way to talk to non-Muslims. He is young and the youth enjoy him. The other reason is that we approached others like Yusuf Estes and were not successful. Abdurraheem Green likes Winnipeg and he is a very simple person. He does not require much of us. He even stays with me and MSA saves money. He has good skills in da'wah.

**MM: Where does MSA gets its funding?**

**AM:** MSA does not need much money. We need money for the ticket, booking fee and food. We sell tickets and we approach donors.

**MM: Does MSA get funding from UMSU?**

**AM:** Yes. For the conference we get a few hundred dollars.

**MM: To conclude, what is your advice to Muslim students?**

**AM:** Everyone of us we has to be a role model in class, in lab, in the department, with friends...Muslim engineering students have to be role models for engineers and so on. Amongst ourselves we should stick together and work together and stay with the jama'a. We should not create divisions and we should give MSA importance in our lives.