

Lebanese presidential hopeful discusses effects of constitutional design

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Chibli Mallat, a candidate for the Lebanese presidency, spoke at Harvard Law School last night not to gain support for his electoral aspirations, but to deliver an academic address on Middle Eastern governance.

“A government which is not naturally inclusive fails in its democratic calling,” Mallat said. “A government which is not naturally inclusive is illegitimate.”

In a lecture titled “The Challenge of the Middle East to Constitutional Theory” sponsored by the Islamic Legal Studies Program, Mallat argued that the present difficulties with developing stable democracies in the region have raised

questions about how Western constitutions can ensure true democratic development, especially in the Middle East.

Currently in the U.S. as a visiting fellow at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and an attorney for Amnesty International, Mallat drew from research he conducted for a book to be published in June, “Introduction to Middle Eastern Law.”

Using examples from around the region, Mallat outlined reasons for the lack of stable democracy there. In each case, he said the ruling parties and factions exclude minorities, and posited that majoritarianism is incompatible with true democracy.

Regional crises, Mallat said, force leaders to “rethink constitutional theory to include minorities in particular situations,” referring to Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq.

The Middle East, Mallat argued, challenges the West in “pinpointing the need for a government which really does mirror the people.” He warned of the phenomenon of “Lebanonization,” or the collapse of the state along ethnic and nationalist lines.

Responding to questions from the audience, Mallat spoke in support of federalism, saying that it is “one of America’s most important contributions” to governmental structure.



Mallat Speaks on Middle East Democracy

But he cautioned that the infrastructure for federalism in the U.S. is largely territorial and does not suit the Middle East, where numerous conflicting ethnic groups may coexist in the same small area.

When asked about his aspirations for the Lebanese presidency, a topic which he had avoided during the speech, Mallat said he has been working to open a forum for presidential debates through outside bodies such as the European Union because of what saw as pervasive Lebanese corruption.

Mallat said he decided to run because of his larger concern for the country's political welfare.

"Unless there is a change in the presidency, things will stay generally deadlocked," he said.