

**Top Sunni cleric Tantawi dies of heart attack**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**Mar 11, 2010**

Sunni Islam's top cleric Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, a controversial figure in Egypt, died on Wednesday in Saudi Arabia of a heart attack suffered while boarding a plane, state media said.

Tantawi was the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning. He had been in Riyadh to attend the King Faisal awards ceremony, Egypt's official MENA news agency said.

Tantawi, 81, was boarding an early morning flight when he suffered severe pain and fell on the stairs, Egyptian television said. He was rushed to the Amir Sultan hospital in Riyadh where doctors pronounced him dead.

An Egyptian official told AFP that Tantawi had died of a heart attack.

The news of his death was "an indescribable shock," his son Amr told the channel. Al-Azhar: prestigious institution, controversial head

"The family has decided that since God chose for him to die on Saudi land, he will be buried in Al-Baqie" cemetery in Islam's second holy city of Medina, he added.

Prayers were held in Tantawi's memory in Medina in the presence of Saudi officials and Egyptian ambassador Mahmud Mohammed Awf, the official Saudi Press Agency reported.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who is also 81 and recovering in Germany after a gall bladder operation, mourned the death of Tantawi.

**'One of the most honourable scholars'**

The Grand Imam was "one of the most honourable scholars in Islam, and one of the defenders of its moderation, enlightenment and spirit of forgiveness," Mubarak said in a statement carried by MENA.

The United States paid tribute to Tantawi's "hospitality," recalling that he had hosted President Barack Obama when he visited Cairo to deliver a keynote address to world Muslims in June last year.

"As the grand sheikh of Al-Azhar University, he was a voice for faith and tolerance who was widely respected in Muslim communities in Egypt and around the globe, and by many who seek to build a world grounded in mutual respect," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs.

Tantawi was appointed head of Al-Azhar, the 10th century university that has trained the majority of Sunni Muslim clerics from Africa and Asia, by Mubarak in 1996.

"The Islamic and Arabic world has lost a scholar and a jurisprudent" who was "dedicated to his work and to everything that served the good of Islam and Muslims," Al-Azhar said.

The softly spoken cleric with a trim white beard, who was always seen wearing a traditional Azharite white turban, has long been a controversial figure in Egypt.

His rulings on a wide range of topics, such as the Islamic veil, abortion, suicide attacks, women prayer leaders and female circumcision, often caused a stir in the Islamic world and beyond.

Many saw him as an employee of the state who moved Al-Azhar, which is tasked with propagating Islamic culture and religion around the world, in line with government policy.

"He was the weakest head of Al-Azhar ever because he saw himself only as a government employee," Islamist and political analyst Kamal Habib told AFP.

"His tenure saw a severe deterioration in Egypt's political life, and as a result a deterioration of the religious institution because of its links with politics," said Abdel Halim Qandil, a leading opposition figure.

### **Banned the niqab**

Last October, a national row broke out after Tantawi banned the niqab, or full face veil, in all residences and schools affiliated to Al-Azhar, except in classrooms where the teacher is male.

Many of his other rulings also ran into opposition in some Muslim circles.

In 2003, he said suicide bombers were "enemies of Islam," adding that "extremism is the enemy of Islam."

After the September 11 attacks on the United States, Tantawi said: "It's not courage in any way to kill an innocent person, or to kill thousands of people, including men and women and children."

He rejected Osama bin Laden's call for a jihad, or holy war, against the West.

The top cleric also sparked controversy in 2008 by shaking hands with Israeli President Shimon Peres at a religious conference. He said at the time he did not know the octogenarian Peres.

*-AFP*

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.  
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126262>