



Will adults  
make  
embryos  
redundant?

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## HUMAN RIGHTS

### Academies Seek Release Of Egyptian Scientist

Leaders of the U.S. science academies are protesting an Egyptian court's decision to jail Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a longtime human rights activist and perhaps the most prominent social scientist in the Arab world. Ibrahim was convicted in Cairo on 21 May of misusing foreign funds and defaming the Egyptian government, drawing a prison sentence of 7 years. The presidents of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine sent a plea for mercy to Egyptian President Muhammed Hosni Mubarak on 31 May, saying that Ibrahim did not get a fair trial. They ask Mubarak to make a "magnanimous gesture" by "immediately and unconditionally" releasing him.

Human rights groups and scientists around the world have been stunned by the court's action, which also led to jail sentences for 27 of Ibrahim's colleagues at the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies in Cairo. This has been "absolutely a body blow to human rights activity in Egypt," says Morton Panish, formerly of AT&T Bell Labs and a member of the academies' Committee on Human Rights. The Ibn Khaldoun center, which Ibrahim founded 12 years ago, has been shut down.

The trial took place in Egypt's Supreme Security Court, a special court operating under "emergency" laws enacted in the 1970s to deal with Islamic extremists. Observers say the charges against Ibrahim appeared flimsy: For example, he was accused of mishandling a \$250,000 grant from the European Union for monitoring election procedures, even though the donor had found no misuse of funds. According to the academy committee's report on the affair,\* released last week, the prosecutor called no witnesses, and the judges returned a guilty

verdict without reviewing volumes of defense material—just 90 minutes after the arguments had been completed. The Egyptian Embassy in Washington, D.C., however, defended the verdict in a letter to *The Washington Post*, saying that the trial was open, proper procedures were followed, and Ibrahim has the right to appeal.

The Committee on Human Rights has been following Ibrahim's case closely and in February dispatched representatives including Panish to attend part of the trial. Their report calls the treatment of Ibrahim "symptomatic of an increasingly less tolerant attitude toward those working to promote democracy and the growth of civil society." Says Panish: "Many Egyptians thought this would come out OK. Now they are in shock."

Some believe that Ibrahim's efforts to expose official misconduct got him in trouble. Although he has worked for the United Nations and the Egyptian government, the committee's report points out that since the mid-1990s, the Ibn Khaldoun Center has increasingly turned its attention to the government's sluggishness in introducing democratic reforms. Ibrahim has also been involved in studying touchy areas such as



**Sentenced.** Ibrahim looks out from cage where he was put for the trial.

conflict between Copts and Muslims. Last summer, while out on bail, Ibrahim said in a speech at the American University in Cairo that he believed his uncovering of election fraud in parliamentary elections in 1995 and his plans to keep tabs on the fall 2000 elections prompted his arrest. Observers say Mubarak may have been ruffled by an article in which Ibrahim sniped at Arab leaders, including Mubarak himself, for grooming their sons to be their successors. "I think the government has been irritated with him for a while," says Torsten Wiesel of Rockefeller University in New York City, chair of the

human rights committee.

The Egyptian press has been hostile to Ibrahim—who is married to a U.S. citizen, sociologist Barbara Ibrahim, and has dual citizenship—characterizing him as a chronic troublemaker backed by anti-Egyptian supporters of Israel. Wiesel says the committee is working to counter the bad press by contacting about 50 science academies internationally. "We are asking them to write so there are more voices," he says.

Ibrahim and his family have steadfastly claimed to have faith in Egypt's system of justice. They now plan to appeal to Egypt's highest judicial authority, the Court of Cassation. That appeal may be heard in a few months.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

## EMBRYONIC STEM CELLS

### German Leaders Spar Over Bioethics

**BERN**—An intense debate over the ethics of embryo and genetic research is setting Germany's president against its chancellor, splitting traditional party allies, and stepping up the pressure on a new federal bioethics council that was scheduled to hold its first meeting on 8 June.

The dispute had been simmering for months, but it was energized by guidelines issued in May by Germany's main research funding agency, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), that would open the door for researchers to import embryonic stem (ES) cells (*Science*, 11 May, p. 1037). The federal research ministry asked the DFG to postpone a decision on the first German proposal to use ES cells—submitted by Bonn University neuropathologist Oliver Brüstle—until political leaders and the new bioethics council had explored ethical concerns over such research.

The council is stepping into a war zone. On 18 May, German President Johannes Rau—whose office is largely ceremonial, but whose opinions carry considerable weight—asserted in a major speech that "certain possibilities and plans of biotechnology and genetic engineering run contrary to fundamental values of human life." Concerned about research on ES cells and on preimplantation diagnosis—the testing of test tube-fertilized embryos for genetic defects before they are implanted into the mother—Rau demanded a strict demarcation of the ethical limits of research. "Questions

\* Available at [www.nas.edu](http://www.nas.edu)