

US threatens Egypt with sanctions over imprisonment of human rights activist

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The imprisonment of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a prominent Egyptian human rights campaigner who was sentenced to seven year's imprisonment in July 2002, has sparked a crisis in relations between Egypt and the United States.

On July 1, 2000, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, 63, was arrested in Egypt and held for 15 days under the country's emergency laws. Ibrahim holds dual Egypt/US citizenship, is a professor of sociology and heads the Ibn Khaldun Centre for Democracy, a research centre that promotes civil and minority rights.

The arrest was carried out at the Ibrahim home. His files, personal computer and family safe were also taken. Twenty-seven others were arrested in connection with Ibrahim, who were all co-defendants at his subsequent trial.

The charges levelled against Ibrahim included embezzlement and accepting foreign funds without government approval to make a film damaging the image of the Egyptian government. The film was never broadcast. Ibrahim pleaded not guilty to all the charges but on May 21, 2001 an Egyptian court sentenced him to seven years in jail. The co-defendants in the trial received sentences ranging from two to five years imprisonment.

Immediately Ibrahim's lawyer said that he would be requesting a suspension of the sentence until the Cassation Court, the highest in the country, was able to review the case. Ibrahim served eight months of his sentence pending the appeal. He has always protested his innocence and stated that the trial and verdict were politically motivated. Ibrahim charges that a primary reason for his arrest was that the government needed to cover up irregularities in the parliamentary elections in 1995. Advocates of Ibrahim state that the only film he participated in making was part of a civic education programme by the Ibn Khaldun Centre to encourage wider participation in the upcoming elections. Ibrahim had planned to monitor those elections in an attempt to

ensure they were free from irregularities.

The arrest and sentencing has met with widespread international condemnation, with Amnesty International prominently opposing his incarceration and trial.

On February 6 this year the Cassation Court granted Ibrahim a new trial in the Supreme State Security Court. The 27 other defendants were also granted new trials. At the hearing were human rights representatives from Egypt and abroad as well as representatives from the US, Canadian, Norwegian, Australian, British and Dutch embassies. Sara Hamood, a spokesperson for Amnesty International, said that the organisation would monitor the new trial and that Amnesty, "still believe it's politically motivated and has been used as a pretext to punish people who criticise government policy." Ibrahim's lawyers said they expected the charges to be dropped or the retrial to result in his freedom.

The retrial took place in July this year and on July 29 he was again sentenced to seven years prison. Ibrahim stated that he would once again appeal the decision and was "determined to fight on for freedom and democracy and pay whatever it takes". His wife Barbara commented, "The rule of law died today in Egypt". Four co-defendants were also sentenced to prison during the retrial.

The state security court in Cairo announced that Ibrahim had been convicted due to his statements that Egypt's Coptic Christians faced religious persecution at the hands of the government.

Since the original arrest of Ibrahim, the US has taken a keen interest in the affair. As early as July 2000, the *Washington Post* editorialised under the heading of "Free Saad Eddin Ibrahim" that he should be immediately released.

Egypt's role as a key US ally is reflected in the fact that it is one of the world's largest recipient of US aid, second only to Israel. Since the 1979 Camp David peace treaty

with Israel, the country has received annual payments amounting to nearly \$2 billion. This amounts to nearly 10 percent of the total US foreign aid budget of about \$14 billion.

However, following the retrial and jailing of Ibrahim, President George W. Bush stated that additional aid would be withheld forthwith from Egypt. On August 15, State Department spokesman Philip Reeker announced, “We confirmed to them [the government] that we’re not contemplating any additional funds for Egypt at this time. We also reiterated the concerns regarding the verdict in the case of Dr Ibrahim.”

It had been expected that Egypt would receive a further \$130 million in aid. On August 22, a US official said that President Bush would write to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak opposing the treatment of Ibrahim, its opposition to Egypt’s attacks on pro-democracy groups and to formally inform him of the planned financial sanctions.

In response, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said on August 22 that it opposed the US position. “We do not give in to (American) pressure. Everybody knows that. We do not interfere in the judiciary’s affairs and we ask everybody to respect our judiciary like we respect theirs.”

The Egyptian news agency Mena condemned the US in more explicit terms, saying that Egypt “does not need a preacher to guide it on the way it should protect human rights”.

The decision by the US to withhold aid cannot be explained simply with reference to the trial of Saad Ibrahim. After all there have been many cases of severe human rights violations throughout the Middle East and these cases have been well documented in the past. The Egyptian government has been constantly criticised by human rights bodies over the last period due to its anti-democratic actions. The US stance can only be understood within the context of Washington’s plans to launch an imminent invasion and war against Iraq and its general role in the ongoing Arab-Israeli crisis.

Mubarak has repeatedly criticised the US plan to invade Iraq and spoken in almost apocalyptic tones of the dire consequences of such overt belligerence. He told Egypt’s state-run television on August 27 that he had spoken to the Bush administration and told it, “If you strike at the Iraqi people because of one or two individuals and leave the Palestinian issue (unsolved), not a single (Arab) ruler will be able to curb the (rising of) popular sentiments. We fear a state of disorder and chaos may prevail in the

region.” He also referred to Israel’s military onslaught against the Palestinians, commenting that it is “completely futile and the killing and the destruction might continue for another 50 years.”

Naturally Mubarak was careful not to fundamentally undermine Egypt’s status as a client regime of the US. He added that, “Our relations with the United States are strategic and unchangeable under any circumstances, and that connecting aid with a local issue is not very accurate.”

But as far as the Bush administration is concerned, Egypt and the other Arab states must be brought into line by a combination of the carrot and the stick. During the last war against Iraq in 1991, the US was able to establish a temporary coalition of forces internationally, including a raft of states in the Middle East. Today, however, two key allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have repeatedly stated their objections to US military action against Iraq.

This week Adel el-Jubeir, the foreign policy adviser to the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, warned, “There is no country I know of supporting force at this time”. Abdullah is the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia due to the chronic illness of King Fahd.

Mubarak’s warning of the social impact of another war against Iraq and the destabilisation of the entire region is a fairly accurate picture of the situation confronting his regime. Following a substantial decline in the support of his National Democratic Party at the 2000 elections at the expense of Islamic opposition groups, the US-led war against Afghanistan served to weaken his rule even further in a country where social tensions have reached breaking point. Such was the level of anti-war protest in Egypt, the most populated country in the region, that Mubarak was not able to speak openly of his support for the war and waited several days until after the bombing began to make a public statement on the issue.



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