



## Australian Bahá'í Community

### **Religious identity and the Bahá'í community of Egypt – Update January 2007**

Recent court rulings in Egypt highlight the dire human rights situation facing the Bahá'í community there. The rulings in turn have touched off a debate between human rights organisations and major Islamic groups about freedom of religion and belief.

Deprived of all rights as an organised religious community since 1960, Egyptian Bahá'ís are facing an immediate crisis over government efforts to deny them all-important identification cards. The ID cards are required by law and are essential for access to employment, education, and medical and financial services, as well as freedom of movement and security of property. At the heart of the current situation is a government policy that forces Bahá'í to either lie about their religion and illegally falsify their religious affiliation - or go without ID cards, which currently require that a person choose either Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, which are the three officially recognised religions in Egypt.

On 4 April 2006, a three-judge Administrative Court ruled that Government efforts to deprive Bahá'ís of ID cards were illegal, and upheld the right of the Bahá'í plaintiffs to state their religion on official documents.

While Egyptian human rights groups immediately hailed the decision, conservative Islamic organizations—including scholars at Al Azhar University and representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood—urged the government to file an appeal. Media attention on the case has been intense and more than 400 articles, stories, commentaries and programs have appeared in the Egyptian and Arabic news media about the case or its fallout since the initial ruling.

On 16 December, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the government's position in the case, issuing an 11-page ruling that focused largely on the theology of the Bahá'í Faith rather than on legal issues surrounding the rights of Bahá'ís to be treated like other Egyptians citizens under international law.

The ruling is already having an impact and media attention was recently drawn to the case of Bassem Wagdy Nassif, a young Egyptian man who was fired from his position as a Physics Teacher Assistant at the German University in Cairo simply because, as a Baha'í, he was unable to obtain the new national number ID Card.

The controversy promises to continue unabated, despite the Supreme Administrative Court's ruling. Several new court cases have been filed in recent months over the issue of the Bahá'í Faith and religious identity. These cases include:

- The case of a university student who was suspended in his senior year because he was not allowed to renew his exemption from military service without a new computerised ID card.
- The case of a twin brother and sister who have been denied birth certificates, necessary for enrolment in school, because their parents refuse to falsely identify them as Muslims. At a 23 January 2007 hearing before the lower administrative court, the case was continued until 3 April 2007.

For further information see <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/egypt>