

PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community
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Egyptian court removes final barrier to identity cards for Baha'is

GENEVA (16 March 2009) – A court in Egypt today removed any grounds for preventing Baha'is from receiving proper official identity documents, clearing the way for an end to years of deprivation for Egyptian Baha'is – and opening the door to a new level of respect for religious privacy in Egypt.

The Supreme Administrative Court dismissed an appeal by two Muslim lawyers that sought to prevent implementation of a lower court ruling last year that said Baha'is can leave blank the religious classification field on official documents, including all-important identity cards and birth certificates.

“We are pleased that the court has finally put this matter to rest, removing any possible excuse that would prevent the government from issuing official documents to Egyptian Baha'is,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

“Our expectation now is that the government will move swiftly to bring this ruling into practice and, at long last, grant Baha'is the essential right that all citizens have of possessing proper documents.”

Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), said the ruling actually goes far beyond the issue of rights for Egyptian Baha'is.

“This is the first time that the Supreme Administrative Court has found that any Egyptian has the right to keep their religious convictions private, even if the state does not recognize their belief system,” said Mr. Bahgat, whose organization handled legal representation for Baha'is in court.

“The final ruling is a major victory for all Egyptians fighting for a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights regardless of their religion or belief,” he said.

Mr. Bahgat said that because the Supreme Administrative Court is the highest court on such matters, there can be no further appeal to this case – and that, therefore, there should be no delay in the government’s implementation of the new policy.

“The government policy that justified mistreatment of Egyptian Baha'is has now been firmly and finally struck down,” he said.

For nearly five years, since the government began introducing a computerized identity card system that locked out all religious classifications except Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, Baha'is have been unable to get documents essential to day-to-day life. Among other things, they have been blocked from obtaining education, financial services, and even health care in government hospitals.

In April 2006, a lower administrative court upheld the right of Baha'is to be explicitly identified on official documents. But in December that year, the Supreme Administrative Court reversed that decision.

In a compromise, Baha'is proposed using a dash or the word “other” on documents, instead of being forced to list themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, and, on 29 January 2008, a lower court again ruled in their favor. But then two Muslim lawyers, who oppose anything that might be seen as even tacit recognition of the Baha'i Faith, filed an appeal.

In response, government officials took a “go slow” attitude on implementing the lower court ruling, saying they wanted to wait until all legal issues were cleared up.

The ruling today came in the case of 14-year-old twins Imad and Nancy Rauf Hindi who have been deprived of birth certificates and were unable to legally attend school in Egypt.

In recent weeks, several other cases involving Baha'is have been likewise resolved in their favor. But the Rauf Hindi twins’ case was the final case to be settled.

For more information, go to <http://news.bahai.org>