
EGYPT: Axed academics attack deadline

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Ahmed Abdel Rehim, a demonstrator in the faculty of commerce at Ain Shams University, is one of 400 lecturers at Egypt's second biggest public university posted to administrative jobs after failing to meet a deadline to obtain postgraduate degrees. Rehim was among hundreds of angry academics to have twice protested against the move outside the office of the university president.

"It was the biggest shock in my life," said Abdel Rehim about receiving notification from the university that he would be transferred to an administrative post. "After studying hard for long years and becoming one of the top-class students in my faculty, I now face the prospect of having my dream of becoming a university professor shattered."

Under regulations governing Egypt's public universities, lecturers were given a maximum of five years to obtain masters and PhD degrees. But Abdel Rehim and his colleagues believe that Ain Shams President Ahmed Zaki Badr has arbitrarily applied the time limit.

"The executive regulations of the relevant law state that compliance with this deadline is not obligatory and that the final say should be made by boards of respective faculties and departments to which scholars belong," he said.

Last week, the lecturers also protested outside the office of Higher Education Minister Hani Helal, waving posters saying 'No to the abuse of power' and 'No to the squandering of public money'.

Protesters accused the Ain Shams president of wasting public money by targeting Egyptian scholars studying overseas for postgraduate degrees. Fatma Mahmoud, one of the protesting lecturers, said the university leader had ordered the stipends of students abroad to be suspended and their recall to Egypt, thereby disrupting their scholarships and squandering huge amounts of taxpayers' money spent on them over the years.

Mahmoud, a medical student, said some of the lecturers affected by the "oppressive" decision had already obtained their degrees but the faculties concerned had not yet notified the university administration.

"Other lecturers have failed to meet the deadline because the supervisors of their dissertations have hectic schedules. This decision has pronounced a death sentence on our academic careers."

During their protests, staged amid tight security, the lecturers urged Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to intervene to scrap the decision. But university sources said the decision was irrevocable.

"The only way out for those lecturers is to lodge an appeal to the president of the university, detailing their circumstances and excuses. The appeals will be studied case by case," a university official said on condition of anonymity. "Hard economic conditions may be to blame for the failure of many lecturers to obtain their degrees on time as the process is costly."

Academics at Egypt's public universities complain about receiving meagre salaries. Last year they went on a rare strike to demand higher pay. The government has promised to raise their wages but they have insisted on a substantial increase.

To Ahmed Amer, who is responsible for student affairs in the commerce faculty at Ain Shams, the action against the under-qualified academics should be enforced.

"The campus is not a place for the negligent and the lazy," Amer said. "Only those complying with the five-year limit should be retained and promoted."

More than 60 lecturers in the faculty are facing the axe under the controversial decision.