

Court grants students access to disputed campus

Egyptian court rules in favour of Nile University in its dispute with Zewail City over Sheikh Zayed campus.

Mohammed Yahia

20 November 2012

An article by Nature Middle East.

On day 83 of a sit-in by Nile University (NU) students in front of campus gates in Sheikh Zayed, a city on the outskirts of Cairo, an Egyptian court has granted NU students access to facilities and laboratories currently occupied by staff and researchers of Zewail City of Science and Technology.

Students and faculty of NU celebrated the court's decision. "The ruling is very clear and we do not see different interpretations of it," says Mohamed Abdel-Mottaleb, director of the university's nanotechnology programme. "It overturns the past prime minister's decision that reallocated our campus to Zewail City. This overturns all the decisions based on that, which means the whole campus will be returned to us."



Nile University

The main building of the disputed campus.

The verdict permits students and faculty of Nile University to occupy part of the campus. However, a spokesperson for Zewail City interprets the ruling differently. "The court allows the students of Nile University to temporarily use one building only until they fix their legal status and we respect that decision," says Sherief Foad. Zewail City will retain control of all the lands surrounding that one building, as well as any new buildings they erect.

The campus is made up of two main buildings, one administrative and the other research laboratories, and a third smaller building that houses utilities and the workshops the students use during their applied research. "Our lawyer clearly explained that the word building here refers to all the campus, not just one of the main buildings," says Moustafa Ghanem, vice-president of research at Nile University.

"The idea of dividing the campus between us does not make any logistical sense," says Abdel-Mottaleb. "We will need gates and a parking space, not to mention sports fields for the students. How will we both share the utility building that serves the whole campus? We need to reach a permanent working solution."

The land, owned by the Ministry of Telecommunication, was allocated to Egyptian-born Nobel laureate Ahmed Zewail in 2000 to build Egypt's first international centre of excellence in research. However, the project failed to get off the ground and the land was given to Nile University, a new private university, in 2006. Following the end of President Mubarak's rule, the land was reallocated to Zewail's proposed project.

Foad insists that the court has upheld that Nile University is a private university, so it cannot use public land. "The details of the court ruling clearly states there are several illegalities in the set-up of Nile University but we respect that the court based its decision on sympathy for the students there."

The ruling states that it was illegal to give public property to Nile University, a private enterprise, in the first place. However, the five judges sitting in the court have said in the verdict details that they have taken the decision to allow the university use the campus for the sake of its students, and have ordered NU to sort out its legal situation.

Prior to the popular uprising, the NU's management were trying to turn the private university into a civil university, but this was halted when Mubarak was ousted.

What next?

"The ruling is an important first step, but we wait to see how it will be implemented," says Ghanem. He wants NU students to be given immediate access to the campus. "The next 48 hours will be pivotal for us as we see what the government will do."

Ghanem says that NU students gaining access to facilities should not negatively impact Zewail City. "They do not have students yet. They have researchers, many of whom we know and respect. They can continue their work in any of the labs in the other universities they are collaborating with, such as the American University in Cairo. They also have an administrative building in downtown Cairo."

"This will in no way delay our researchers or the project in our current buildings," contends Foad. "We have reviewed all the details of the ruling and expressed our gratitude to the court for stressing the importance of Zewail City. We have the support of the Egyptian people and the government and will continue our work accordingly."

The students have refused to end their protest until they resume classes on campus. "The students have no doubt the ruling is in our favour and it is very positive, but we want to see how swiftly the government will implement it," says protestor Heba Shalaby, a research assistant at Nile University.

"They will not leave. After all the broken promises they received over the past two years, they do not trust anything they are told anymore," explains Ghanem.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2012.11865