

**The Ion Ratiu Democracy Lecture
at the Woodrow Wilson Center**

Introducing Saad Eddin Ibrahim

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Introducing Saad Eddin Ibrahim can be an easy task or a complicated one. Having been asked to do so this evening I can simply say that a legendary scholar like Saad Eddin Ibrahim is too well known to really need an introduction. I could add some vague pleasantries and voice empty clichés. But I will try to do the impossible which is to make sense of the life of a Muslim scholar in the 21st century at the intersection of so many global developments. I will do so as objectively as I can, acutely aware that Professor Ibrahim's life and predicament as a commentator of his own society reflect those of all of us involved in writing and thinking about Muslim society.

I will approach my introduction on three levels: a brief biography; an introduction of Professor Ibrahim's scholarship; and, finally, the impact of that scholarship on the world.

I would also like to compliment the Woodrow Wilson Center for hosting the Ion Ratiu Democracy Lecture and everyone concerned for selecting Professor Ibrahim to deliver it. His life and message reflect the purposes of Ratiu's own vision.

It is a great paradox, characteristic and a hopeful feature of our time that the ideas about democracy and human rights of a man from East Europe are echoed by a scholar in the Arab world who is introduced by someone from South Asia at an event in Washington DC. Such is the miracle of the age of globalization and the power of ideas.

Tonight the spirit of Ratiu will be pleased.

I first met Professor Ibrahim at Princeton a quarter of a century ago. About two decades ago when my book *Discovering Islam* was printed Professor Ibrahim reviewed it and introduced it with characteristic generosity to Arab readers in the Middle East.

Born in 1938 in Mansura in Egypt Professor Ibrahim is the author of many books on the Arab world and the recipient of many awards. Many of these awards come from the Arab world. He has written over one hundred articles in Arabic and English periodicals and appears frequently in the national and international media. He is currently the head of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo and a Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo. He has been an advisor to the Egyptian government and is a frequent and popular visitor on campuses throughout the world. Not only did he advise President Sadaat but was frequently advising President Mubarak when he was the vice president. Mubarak's wife Susan was Ibrahim's student and did her MA with him. He said that he "was flattered" that Mubarak and his wife would ask him for advice. The relationship continued after Mubarak became president after Sadaat. Ibrahim felt that Mubarak had successfully stabilized Egypt after the death of Sadaat.

When he was challenged by the Islamic militants Mubarak was alarmed. Once again he turned to Ibrahim. Ibrahim was given a television chat show specifically aimed for young people. For five years the program called "The Enlightenment Program" was

broadcast. Ibrahim helped Mubarak in his first two presidential terms. But in his third campaign Ibrahim felt the President was not living up to his promises of change and Ibrahim now became critical. When Mubarak continued to ignore Ibrahim's recommendations Ibrahim felt that he was not serious about change. When Ibrahim suggested that the Muslim Brotherhood should be taken seriously and its members inducted into government ministries Mubarak was offended. That was the turning point according to Ibrahim.

Professor Ibrahim's academic research brought him to some interesting conclusions in the late 1990s. He argued for the need to talk to those who claim to speak for Islam. He alerted the authorities to probably what they knew in private but were not prepared to concede in public. Without incorporating the pain and anguish of ordinary people they would have little alternative but to seek more militant expressions.

Professor Ibrahim was also pointing out that the United States policy in the Middle East was failing because it could neither predict nor account for change. Professor Ibrahim did not see himself as a "provocateur." He said, "What I do is raise issues that nobody else would raise, not to be provocative but to be a conscience for my society, for my country, for my time."

Bureaucracies being bureaucracies some senior members of the government saw this as political criticism and in a blatantly knee-jerk reaction arrested, tried and condemned Ibrahim to seven years hard labor for the charge of defaming the government. For safe measure they also threw in charges of corruption and moral turpitude. If it is any consolation to Professor Ibrahim these charges are standard fare for anyone perceived as a threat in most parts of the Muslim world. Indeed Professor Lawrence Rosen of

Princeton University and I wrote an article in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* when we heard about Professor Ibrahim's arrest making this very point.

As someone who conceived and completed major films and book projects on Muhammad Ali Jinnah the founder of Pakistan who embodied democracy, women's rights, minority rights and respect for the law I am familiar with the jealousy of individuals and the smear campaign. I know how lonely the struggle can be and how surreal the talk of democracy and rights. One day I was praised to the skies and the next slandered and defamed. I was never sure who was saying what and why.

When Professor Ibrahim was arrested the fear and uncertainty of his position was overtaken by his fascination as a sociologist with his environment. "It was a field day for me as a sociologist. If there is any consolation to being prisoner, it is having this human laboratory. You see a part of the Egyptian body politic that you can't see outside." This was true. In terms of authentic anthropological insights Ibrahim's vantage point was unmatched. Conditions in jail were not only appalling but the very notion of justice was reduced to a farce. People had been imprisoned for years on the most flimsy of charges. With little hope of justice individuals in society are driven to desperate acts. It was precisely this very argument that Ibrahim was warning against in his work. In one sense he had become a victim of the veracity of his own work. The leaders of Egypt were happy to shoot the messenger and ignore his message.

Ibrahim was not alone in being arrested. 27 of his colleagues at the Ibn Khaldun Center were also jailed. Ibrahim was personally mortified: "I feel very responsible. And if there is anything that saddens me about the ordeal that I went through, it was what happened to my family and young colleagues. I regretted that the government made

others pay who were completely innocent, who had nothing to do except being my aide, being my associate. If we were in a respectful law-abiding society then none of that would have happened.”

Once in jail Ibrahim quickly discovered who his true friends were. There is an interesting comment Ibrahim makes about Egyptian intellectuals. It is as much a sociological comment as it is a Shakespearian one. According to Ibrahim “I also learned how easily Egyptian intellectuals could be cowed and intimidated.” Few were prepared to risk the wrath of the government when Ibrahim was arrested. “Some probably took delight in my predicament, who knows? But that was quite revealing to me.”

Most of his colleagues and supporters ignored his plight and it was only very slowly that the trickle of support began for him in the country. That support was stimulated by the sense of outrage which began to develop abroad. Ibrahim was rapidly adopted as a major civil rights figure by the international world and pressure was put on the government to release him. In 2003 after 14 months in prison Egypt’s highest criminal court acquitted Ibrahim of all charges. Once he came out international institutions and the media feted him. There was talk of his running for the presidency of Egypt. If he did run and succeed then perhaps the lessons he learned as a prisoner could be used to reform prisons.

When I met him in Egypt in Cairo last December I was delighted to see that Ibrahim’s spirit had not been broken by his ordeal. He had the same twinkle in his eye and the sharp sociological insights to offer that I knew of old. I felt strangely proud and reassured as a person desperately promoting a discussion of scholarship and democracy in Muslim society.

Considering the shabby treatment of Professor Ibrahim it would be tempting to dismiss the status of scholars and knowledge in Islam. That would be a mistake. Islam places the highest emphasis on knowledge. The Prophet of Islam had said: “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.” Many Muslims may not know this saying and most people in the West are unaware of it. But this saying alone has enormous implications for how Muslims contemplate our world. The Prophet had also urged Muslims to go as far as China to acquire knowledge. It is well to recall that China for the Muslims in the seventh century would be like visiting an entirely different world. The word knowledge or *ilm* is used more often in the Quran than any other word except the word for God.

This is in the ideal and Muslims are aware that the reality of their present societies is far from it. Muslim scholarship is unsatisfactory when compared to other regions in the world according to all the statistics available to us. Take the yardstick of the Nobel Prize itself. The Muslim world population which is about 1.4 billion people has only produced a few Nobel Prize winners. Paradoxically, the winners have not been well received in their own societies. Indeed some have been the victims of vicious physical and verbal attacks. There are almost 60 states which have a Muslim majority population and most of their leaders are dictators whether in uniform or out of them. Dictators unfortunately do not promote open scholarship. Their egos and their systems are built on the false vision of courtiers who seek little more than self-promotion. One of the first victims of these tyrants is the scholar. That is why the plight of the scholar is one of the most neglected and important area of studies in the Muslim world. By marginalizing, persecuting, and sometimes murdering scholars society is depleted of perhaps its most valuable asset.

Little wonder that scholars find refuge abroad and usually in Western societies.

Unfortunately the depletion of scholarship means that Muslim societies have a long way to go before they can begin the process of internal healing and then of identifying the correct course of direction for the future.

It is well to reflect that if this could happen to Ibrahim who is both an American citizen and married to an American then what is the fate of an ordinary Muslim who may not have the privilege of either American citizenship or an American wife. We need to create a world in which Muslim scholars are not an endangered species.

Professor Ibrahim can take consolation in that he has become a metaphor for Muslim scholarship today. As head of the Ibn Khaldun Center he is aware of the life of that scholar. Ibn Khaldun – one of the great heroes and founding fathers of sociology – was himself a metaphor for his society in the 14th century. Ibn Khaldun lived in a time of turmoil and change. He too suffered the vagaries of fortune. In my book *Discovering Islam* I concluded my discussion of Ibn Khaldun thus:

“Ibn Khaldun’s life also teaches us many things, confirming them for us in our own period: the uncertainty of politics; the fickleness of rulers; the abrupt changes of fortune, in jail one day, honored the next; and finally, the supremacy of the ideal in the constant, unceasing, search for *ilm*, knowledge, and therefore the ultimate triumph of the human will and intellect against all odds.”

Thank you Saad Eddin Ibrahim for providing us through your life an example of “the ultimate triumph of the human will and intellect against all odds.”