

Student Democracy Prevails

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Demonstrations at a Baghdad medical college overturn the rigged election of a Ba'athist professor as dean.

In the first demonstration of student power since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, students in the Medical College of Mustanseriyya University have forced the resignation of a dean accused by some of being a diehard Ba'athist.

The dean, Dr. Alim Abdul Hameed Yacoub, resigned on May 19 after a demonstration during which students presented a petition demanding that he step down. The petition, which was signed by 400 students and 30 faculty members, claimed that Dr. Alim engineered his re-election by manipulating elections demanded by the American forces occupying Baghdad.

Carrying signs and chanting slogans, the students demonstrated in front of the dean's office and asked to present their petition directly to Dr. Alim. One of them was permitted into the office where Dr. Alim read the petition and immediately afterwards wrote a letter of resignation.

The students charged that Dr. Alim postponed elections for a new dean from May 16 - the date set by Baghdad's American controllers - to May 17 without informing many of the 157 faculty members who were eligible to vote. As a result, they said, only 32 of the 157 showed up for the election. All voted to return Dr. Alim.

"Dr. Alim rescheduled the vote for 17 May but only told his friends," said Dr. Yehyeh al-Eithawi, one of the teaching staff who was not informed of the new date. "Most of those he told were working directly under him in the department of Community Medicine. He was guaranteed their votes."

Dr. Alim served as Dean of Basra's Medical College before being appointed to Mustanseriyya University, Baghdad's second largest university and one of the oldest universities in the world, two years ago. He was unpopular among students who compiled a long list of complaints against him. These ranged from trivial matters like a ban he imposed on smoking on campus, to his closure of the college club for two weeks after students refused to hang Saddam's photograph there, to more serious allegations - most importantly, that he lied to US officials about his membership in the Ba'ath Party (a prerequisite for all university deans) and that he once headed a Ba'ath Party investigation board inside the university.

A student who asked to be identified only as Yaacoub said he had been suspended from the university for seven years after being accused of membership in the opposition Dawa party by a board headed by Dr. Alim.

Dr. Alim could not be reached for comment. But Assistant Dean Dr. Riad Al-Jubouri, one of Dr. Alim's supporters, admitted that "the vote was not on the level of great democracy." He added, however: "I challenge anyone who says that Dr. Alim was a Ba'ath Party supporter. Everyone knows that there were orders [in Saddam's time] that no-one could ignore - even other deans."

To avoid a vacuum at the top of the Medical College, it was agreed that Dr. Alim would continue as caretaker dean until new elections could be held, probably by the end of the year.

"If this vote is carried out legally, and the teaching staff vote for Dr. Alim, then the students will accept that," said one student.

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