

Dismissal could hand Bredesen clemency case

12/11/02

By JOHN SHIFFMAN
Staff Writer

Gov.-elect Phil Bredesen, who supports capital punishment, intends to review each request for clemency as execution approaches but has not turned his attention to the case of Abu-Ali Abdur'Rahman, spokeswoman Lydia Lenker said yesterday.

The aide would not comment further.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision yesterday to dismiss the Abdur'Rahman case could set in motion a chain of events that would force Bredesen to confront the issue early in his term.

Sundquist faced the life-or-death clemency decision three times. Each time, he denied clemency: first, for convicted child-killer Robert Glen Coe, who was executed in 2000; then for convicted cop-killer Philip Workman, whose 2001 execution was halted by the Tennessee Supreme Court in the final hour; and finally for Abdur'Rahman, whose execution was stopped this year by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Sundquist is a vocal proponent of the death penalty. As a congressman, he once advocated the death penalty for rape and as governor held a news conference at the site where Coe killed Cary Ann Medlin, 8.

Bredesen has not made many public statements on the death penalty.

But unlike most governors, Bredesen has experienced a personal brush with violent crime. His wife, Andrea Conte, was kidnapped in 1988 from a Nashville parking lot. Her kidnapper, who subsequently killed another woman, broke Conte's jaw, but she was able to escape.

Bredesen said the incident left him in a "cold fury."

Conte later formed the victims'-rights group You Have The Power and served on a state sentencing commission.

Nashville lawyer David Raybin, who served on the commission with Conte and has handled several clemency cases, said Sundquist was reluctant to grant clemency.

"Bredesen will probably be more realistic than Sundquist and grant clemencies in those rare instances where they should be granted.

"Certainly, his wife is very influential in the victims'-rights movement, and I would think her influence would be against granting any clemency except in rare and very meritorious cases."

Randy Tatel, executive director of the Tennessee Coalition Against State Killing, said he was impressed by Bredesen's campaign promise to examine each case closely on its merits.

"We're at least hopeful that there's at least somewhat more of a pragmatic feeling about this with the incoming administration than with the outgoing administration."

Abdur'Rahman's lawyer, Bill Redick, said he wasn't sure how his client will approach Bredesen on clemency.

"There are serious claims that have never been heard, and we will seek every avenue available.

"We haven't had a chance to consider the new administration yet."