



# POWER2YOUTH

## The Student Movement in Egypt. A Microcosm of Contentious Politics

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## The Student Movement in Egypt. A Microcosm of Contentious Politics

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### Abstract

*The paper is concerned with understanding endogenous and exogenous student activism in authoritarian regimes, through focusing on the case of Egypt from the 1960s until today. The first part of the paper is dedicated to a definition of "student movements" and "youth activism" with their various forms. The second part presents a historical analysis of student movements in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular. The research benefitted from qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with a number of student activists from various political parties and from various student unions in public and private universities in Egypt. Qualitative analysis sheds light on the various grievances of student movement activists, and the interplay between endogenous and exogenous political participation by student movements. More in general, the paper shows that student movements in authoritarian regimes are a reflection of the dynamics of contention within these countries.*

**Keywords:** Egypt | Youth | Education | Arab Spring

### INTRODUCTION

Studies on student movements have argued that they come in many shapes and forms; while they are at times endogenous (having a focus and impact that does not extend outside the university), other times, particularly in developing countries, student movements are linked to key political issues that may lead to social unrest or even regime change (Altbach 1989). Through focusing on the student movement in Egypt from the 1960s until today, this paper shows that student movements in authoritarian regimes are a reflection of the dynamics of contention within these countries. Student movements in Egypt represent a dynamic example of both types of movements: endogenous and exogenous. During certain historical moments, like the 1967 six day war, the build-up to the 1973 war, the 1977 bread riots, the 2000 Aqsa intifada, the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq and the 25 January 2011 uprising, student movements have been concerned with politics beyond campus. At these moments, student movements were an essential aspect of contentious politics on the streets. They were able to mobilize others to their cause and were able to exert political pressure on the various ruling regimes from Nasser to Mubarak and beyond. Students are also influenced by the general contentious politics within a polity, which influences the dynamics of contention on campus, during certain critical junctures within an authoritarian regime's history. For instance, with the first wave of demonstrations in the 2000s, the March 9 movement emerged, asking for the freedom of the campus from security intervention. Moreover, during public debates on parliamentary electoral rigging in the 2005 and later the 2010 parliamentary elections, student

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activism started to focus on its endogenous grievances, calling for free and fair elections of the student council. With the end of the Mubarak regime, and the ensuing national debates on a possible democratization process, new free and fair elections and a new constitution, student activists once again turned their focus on democratizing their own electoral process.

This paper is concerned with understanding endogenous and exogenous student activism in authoritarian regimes, through focusing on Egypt. Why do student activists participate in contentious politics beyond their universities at certain times, while at others they are more concerned with politics within the boundaries of their universities? How do student movements influence contentious politics within a polity, and how, on the other hand, does the dynamics of contention within an authoritarian regime influence student activism on campus?

This inquiry can be understood through first defining student movements with their various forms. Second, a historical analysis of student movements in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular will be advanced. Third, qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with a number of student activists from various political parties and from various student unions in public and private universities in Egypt will be conducted. This qualitative analysis will shed light on the various grievances of student movement activists, and the interplay between endogenous and exogenous political participation by student movements.

## **1. STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORIES**

In much of the literature written on student movements, scholars have adopted a set of frameworks and definitions relevant to the broader topic of social movements. However, some have used specific definitions for student movements in particular. Wood (1974:65) defined student movements as “the engagement by students in non-institutionalized political activities, such as illegal demonstrations against the Vietnam War, illegal civil rights protests, strikes, sit-ins,” and so forth. Gill and DeFronzo (2009:208) use a less critical definition in their work, defining a student movement as:

A relatively organized effort on the part of a large number of students to either bring about or prevent change in any one of the following: policies, institutional personnel, social structure (institutions), or cultural aspects of society involving either institutionalized or non-institutionalized collective actions or both simultaneously.

Other scholars like Braungart (1971) are more specific when identifying student movements, through arguing that these movements are a reflection of students' political ideologies. Some have revolutionary radical leftist tendencies, some are moderate left and liberal centre, others are moderate conservatives while still others are radical right.

This paper however will not rule out broader definitions of social movements and will adopt Sidney Tarrow's definition of social movements: “a collective challenge by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 1994:3-4). This definition can be relevant to both endogenous and exogenous forms of student activity, as “interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities” can be found

both within the university and beyond. Thus, just like broader social movements, student movements are determined and impacted by political opportunity and are organized through mobilizing structures.

### **1.1 Student Movements and Youth Activism**

A great deal of attention has been given to why activism is more common among youth, and particularly among university students. Scholars have disagreed on whether activism can be attributed to the nature of young people or to the environment surrounding students during university years. Feuer (1969) argues that youth activism is attributed to a generational conflict that is explained by either psychoanalytic factors or social environmental factors. He further argues that students can become active due to what he describes as the "oedipal conflict," as a student's hatred towards his/her parent is reflected in larger disagreements on social systems and values of the older generations. Thus students move with an aim to change the institutional or non-institutional structures or values that were supported by their parents.

An alternative explanation is provided by Seymour Lipset (1967), who argues that the university atmosphere allows students to become exposed to modern values and knowledge that could act as opposing to more traditional values and existing institutions that are supported by their parents' generation - which becomes particularly relevant in developing countries.

The generational conflict approach has been criticized by many due to its inability to explain why the majority of students do not participate despite being of the same "generation" as those who do participate and despite being exposed to the same environment. Additionally, the oedipal conflict in particular is criticized for not explaining why students in universities revolt and mobilize more often than youth of the same age who did not attend higher education universities. Flacks (1970), for instance, studied American student movements of the 1960s and noted that activists usually came from the "new middle class" families - composed of parents who have critical attitudes towards the values and social systems of the dominant culture. Thus, students are defending their parents' beliefs and are not necessarily resisting older generations.

On the other hand, some scholars, such as DeFronzo (1970), argue that the students' family background is not the main determinant of their activism, and that it is more directly linked to the social characteristics of being a student. While becoming more independent from their parents, and before becoming burdened by the financial requirements of a family, young students are more likely to be idealistic with a "potential receptiveness to radical ideologies which propose a revolutionary means for bringing society into greater conformity with moral ideals and, thus, accomplishing major social change" (Gill and DeFronzo 2009:205). In addition, Allerbeck (1972) argues that being free of family constraints during this age period increases the likelihood of activism. DeFronzo and Allerbeck's hypothesis is most able to explain why students are the group most likely to engage in movement without suffering from what was deemed by Mancur Olson as the main challenge for collective action: free-riding. Olson (1971:2) argues that "rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests," due to this phenomenon, as it is would be much more "rational" to wait and reap the benefit of other groups' action so as to not incur or suffer

any unintended cost as a result (Marwell and Oliver 1993). Thus, one can argue within this framework that the social characteristics of being a student, as outlined by DeFronzo (1970) and Allerbeck (1972), present less incentive to free-ride, as there is less of a cost to pay. This position is supported by a participant in an in-depth interview, who mentioned that “students protest because they don’t have as much to lose. They have less to pay. Can a married man risk all he has to protest? No, he will be thinking about his wife, kids, and other responsibilities.”<sup>2</sup>

This framework will be expanded on throughout this paper, hypothesizing that as the political opportunity is narrowed, potential cost incurred by students will likely increase; which will in turn increase the likelihood of the free-ride phenomenon. Moreover, as curtailment of freedoms outside of university increases, the same is likely to occur within the university, which may transition student movements from being exogenous to becoming endogenous movements (even if represented in a small group of students) that focus on reforming university policies to increase spaces for participation.

### **1.2 Student versus Youth Activism: Same Activism, Different Concepts?**

Much of the literature on the Arab world does not draw a distinction between student activism and youth activism, and at times these terms are used interchangeably, while in some instances student movements are placed under the realm of youth movements and not treated in their own right. Asef Bayat (2010:29), for instance, explains that movements in general should not be identified in terms of their actors but rather by “the nature of their claims and grievances,” and so despite the fact that students are usually young, they ought to be treated as a different category. He sets student movements apart from youth movements by defining them as the embodiment of “the collective struggles of a student body to defend or extend ‘student rights’ - decent education, fair exams, affordable fees, or accountable educational management” (Bayat 2010:29). Other scholars, however, look at student movements in the Arab world specifically as major driving forces of change and regime opposition. Such literature looks at student movements in the historical context, and perceives them as an early form of youth activism (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011).

## **2. STUDENT MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVISM IN THE ARAB WORLD: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Historically, student activism in the Arab world was triggered more by national and transnational political issues than by campus-related issues. Egyptian and Lebanese universities were among the first to engage in organized political activity. The first recorded action by Arab students took place in Lebanon at the Syrian Protestant College, which is now the American University of Beirut (AUB), in 1882. It was triggered by the forced resignation of a popular chemistry professor for his support of Charles Darwin’s theories; the demonstration quickly expanded to a semester-long protest against the limited course offerings in the medical school (Anderson 2011). Also in Lebanon, protests against the 1948 war ushered in a decade of powerful student protests on behalf of Arab nationalist goals. The mid-1960s represented a short period of “student apathy” especially in countries like Lebanon and Egypt that had a long history of student activism (Anderson 2011). The loss of the 1967 war alone did not immediately bring

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, Cairo University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 13 March 2016c.

students back to the stage until protests broke out again in 1968 with students presenting more extensive demands to their governments and university administrations than ever before. Arab students sought to determine who had the authority to decide the parameters of their educational and political lives (Anderson 2011).

In Egypt, students had a more nationalist agenda from the beginning, starting with the 1919 Revolution and lasting all the way into the early 1950s, with university and secondary students joining workers and labour unions in massive street demonstrations to oppose continued British control over their country (Anderson 2011). Under the governments of Nasser and Sadat, students were the first to show resistance (Barakat 1977, Lust-Okar 2005). In Algeria, the general student union launched a huge campaign to enlist international support for the Algerian Revolution (Barakat 1977). In Tunisia, students played a crucial role in the struggle for independence from the French (Barakat 1977). Moroccan students participated in a number of political strikes and riots against the regime, until they were brutally suppressed in 1965 (Barakat 1977). In 1986, Palestinian students were among the most frequent participants in actions of the intifada, often undeterred by the Israeli army's policies of shooting and arresting students or closing down Palestinian universities (Bayat 2003).

The 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing war precipitated much student contention, where students in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen and Sudan demonstrated to express anger against both the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US-led war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait (Bayat 2003). The Aqsa intifada of the year 2000 and the American-led invasion of 2003 also precipitated another wave of student activism and contention, both on campus and on the Arab street.

Students in the Arab world protested and mobilized others both on campus and on the streets to express their grievances in a number of ways. The earlier years of the 2000s saw a rise in the organization of various conferences by young people in their universities; student activists initiated strikes, sit-ins, street marches and produced new student newspapers (Bayat 2003). Students also resorted to humanitarian aid, grassroots charity and boycotts, or product campaigns, as a form of political mobilization. This was prominent in the 2002 Palestinian crisis, as Arab students collected food and medicine for Palestinians (Bayat 2003). The campaign to boycott American and Israeli products in 2000 gained much sympathy in the Arab world. Outside campus walls, student activists are grouped among other opposition forces and thus face the same forms of repression from authoritarian regimes. Records of police brutality against students are found in almost all student protests across different Arab countries (Barakat 1977, Bayat 2003).

## **2.1 Student Movements in Egypt: From Exogenous to Endogenous Mobilization**

In the first half of the twentieth century, student activists were encouraged by the political elite to participate politically and to demonstrate against colonialism (Gorgas 2013). However, as soon as Arab states gained their independence, the newly founded regimes tried to co-opt university students through financing and controlling universities (Gorgas 2013). This was evident in the 1950s; which saw a shrinking of political space and a tightening of freedom of expression (Abdalla 1991). As the military came to power and dissolved independent political parties, participation in political life decreased substantially. Only sporadic political action

among students materialized as Nasser succeeded in diverting student activities into state-sponsored events (Anderson 2011).

The 1967 defeat marked the end of political dormancy among students and catapulted the issue of freedom of speech to the fore by shedding light on the failings of the military regime (Anderson 2011). Abdalla (2008:149) for instance argues that “[t]he student uprising of February 1968 was the most vocal expression of public unrest following the defeat of 1967.” Gervasio (2010) further notes that both the 20 February 1968 uprising by Helwan workers and the series of student strikes, sit ins and demonstrations in the same year were significant challenges to the regime. In fact the student movement was at the forefront of challenging the state monopoly over public space. The November 1968 demonstrations that followed were another landmark. “The strengthening of the regime’s grip on the universities, far from producing the desired result, encouraged the students to wriggle out of the regime’s ideological containment and prepared the soil for the emergence of more militant student movement in the years that followed” (Abdalla 2008:175). The post-November 1968 period marked an important shift from the state attempts to monopolize and control the political public space to a policy of “licensing” political activities.

Generally among Egyptian youth, sentiments of activism were awakened - born out of a dissatisfaction with the restrictions put in place in university campuses, the intimidation tactics used to curb participation in political life, and the general lack of viable employment opportunities for young people. These grievances led to the eruption of a sustained and influential student movement that was initiated in February 1968 and lasted till the mid-70s. The university campus was predominantly the stage on which youth articulated their demands for freedom of expression, for the right to peacefully protest and assemble, and for the liberty to hold public debates on campus, among others. However, calls for change extended into the political arena, with youth calling for the establishment of a constitutional court, the separation of powers between the executive and judicial branches of government, and the institution of a truly representative parliament (Abdalla 1991).

This era of political organization among students was triggered by a spontaneous strike that took place on 21 February 1968, in which workers in Helwan took to the streets to protest the lenient verdicts handed out to Egyptian Air Force officers who were seen as the main culprits behind the death of thousands of Egyptian soldiers and as responsible for the resulting defeat of the Egyptian army in 1967. The protests escalated and transformed into a greater uprising in which students from universities across Cairo and Alexandria played a significant role. Unsuccessful attempts by the regime to contain the student movement started on campus with deans of schools calling on students to restrict their protests to the confines of university campuses. As the attempts to contain the protest failed, the regime was forced to make concessions. Nasser ordered the retrial of the officers who were accused of negligence, and formed a new cabinet, comprised mostly of civilians. He also promulgated the 30th of March Programme which aimed at reforming the political system. Another wave of protests, however, took place in November of 1968 after the announcement of a new education law that was seen as unfavourable to students. The ensuing effort made by the regime to tighten its grasp over universities however backfired - creating fertile ground for militant student movements in the years to come (Abdalla 1991).



According to a former Cairo university activist, while describing his experience in Cairo University's student union in the 1970s, "Students or youth in general have always been the spark behind every single action/movement in our modern history [...] not just in Egypt, but everywhere."<sup>3</sup> The participant, like many of his colleagues, was part of the Socialist Youth Organization (SYO), which had an ideology that was reflected in the type of demonstration students participated in during that era. He participated in the 1968 demonstrations against Nasser in solidarity and cooperation with Helwan workers, and then participated once again in 1972 against Sadat's stance and relations with Israel. Thinking back to when he was in university, he believed that students had a strong influence on the streets, and thus on the regime - to the extent of attributing Nasser's declaration of resignation to their demonstrations, even though he and his colleagues all participated in the demonstrations protesting the resignation in itself, thus reflecting support for Nasser despite disagreeing with some of his decisions.

Endogenously, students were very influential in calling for reform on campus. The participant in the in-depth interview cited some examples of the activity undertaken by the SU, including the writing of a student decree that organizes the roles and responsibilities of students and faculty, successfully removing the campus guard/security, and creating an administration for student care as well as creating several bodies that improve the learning environment on campus. He added that "I became so influential at times that I used to feel more powerful than Parliament members. Members of the University administration would not pass decisions without taking our consent or permission. This made us feel appreciated by the university and by other students."

### **Sadat and a New Wave of Student Activism**

The next wave of demonstrations came in 1972, one year after Sadat's ascendance to power, when a new student movement was in the making. A congress for the national committee of students called on students to form committees for the defence of democracy. White-collar unions and journalists followed suit. Two weeks later the movement was crushed and over 200 students were arrested. As a consequence, student contention increased, which led Sadat to shut down universities for a month. Secret police and soldiers have since that time been present in universities. Among the many variables that sparked student reaction was Sadat's speech on 13 January, 1972 in which he justified his lack of action on Israel. In his speech, he described the next year as a "foggy" one and explained that a war with Israel was unlikely given Egypt's tenuous position and inability to fend off a retaliatory attack by the US should Egypt attack Israel. The student protests called for the return of occupied Egyptian territory and for war against Israel. They were forcefully dispersed the next day (Abdalla 1991).

Further student activism and protests lasted through the summer of 1972 and the academic year 1972/1973. At this point, political polarization among the students was tangible and three main groups espousing different political ideologies took shape. The first were the leftist group that had organized the 1972 protests, the second were the Nasserites and the third were the rightist group which derived their inspiration from religious doctrine. This last group, known as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, would soon rise to prominence on college campuses throughout Egypt (Williams 2016). Huge riots erupted in January 1972 and concluded with

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, Cairo University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 13 March 2016c.

Sadat ordering mass arrests of student leaders and members. However, with the advent of the October war, Sadat decided to stop prosecuting the students and ordered their release, which dissolved some of the tensions that had developed between the regime and the student movement. The October war marked an end to the student riots of the 1972/1973 wave and the multi-party policy that proceeded quieted campus activism as students started joining new political parties (Williams 2016).

Later in 1977, students were active participants in the bread riots, the largest riot that Egypt has seen since the monarchy (Shehata 2008). At this point, the regime used various divide and rule methods to contain the movement. When leftist groups became heavily involved in university politics, Sadat encouraged the emergence of Islamic student groups in universities. This led to increased Islamist power on campus, where they won the elections of the various student unions. In the wake of the Camp David peace accords, the Islamists turned against Sadat, aligning with leftists against him (Shehata 2008). In response, Sadat passed a bill regulating student activities through providing the university administration with powers to interfere in the results of student union elections. In addition, political parties were banned from being present on campus, and special security forces became a presence instead. This was later extended under Mubarak, who barred Islamists from running in student union elections.

### **Student Activism under Mubarak**

Sporadic student demonstrations took place under President Hosni Mubarak. However, none of them evolved into full-fledged uprisings or extended outside of university campuses. Instead, short-lived reactions to political events were more common. Mass demonstrations for example took place in solidarity with the Palestinian people during the two intifadas, and in 1991 in opposition to Egypt's involvement in the Gulf war. In 2003, scattered protests took place in reaction to Egypt's position on the invasion of Iraq. Overall, scholars assert that the Mubarak era ushered in a period of latency among university students because of the regime's restrictions on student movements and constant monitoring of universities (Okasha 2014). According to Lindsey (2012:6),

Under the Mubarak regime, universities were tightly monitored and collective organizing and public debates (let alone overtly political activity) of every kind proscribed. Student union elections were rigged. Deans and presidents were vetted by the intelligence services and appointed based on their political loyalty to the regime. And all appointments, conferences, invitations to visiting speakers, and travel to academic events abroad required a security clearance from those services.

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) continued to control universities as during Sadat. Under Mubarak, the NDP was able to hegemonize student clubs, and mobilized students who wanted to become candidates in the unions. Student union leaders were mainly members of the NDP or closely aligned to the party. Thus, universities became quasi-governmental institutions, with limited freedoms (Gorgas 2013). Student activism during this time was perceived by scholars to be mainly endogenous - especially by scholars concerned with the activism that started to develop during and after the American invasion of Iraq (Shehata 2008 and 2010, El-Mahdi 2009, Abdelrahman 2015). While the role of student activism at the time was essential for the development of the so called "pro-democracy" movement

(El-Mahdi 2009, Abdelrahman 2015) in Egypt, students started to be also aware of their own internal struggle against regime control of public university campuses.

By the mid-2000s an independent student movement was in the making, to free the student body from the NDP's hold on power in various student activities and in the student unions. This independent student movement was a benchmark in independent student activism, as their call for independence was not only directed at the NDP, but also at the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood. For instance, according to a participant in a focus group discussion, "We did a parallel student union to avoid the corruption of the electoral process of the ordinary student union, which was largely funded by the NDP. They would sideline ihwani groups to ensure that SU representation is not politicized."<sup>4</sup>

### **Post-2011**

From 2011 until 2013 student movement activism was at its apogee: students from all political ideological backgrounds mobilized for their causes, political parties were allowed to function on campus, and lawsuits against the presence of security forces were on the rise. Moreover, students and even faculty organized regular protests and demonstrations against senior administrators with ties to the former regime who were implicated in corruption and political repression in universities (Lindsey 2012). This activism sometimes took the shape of violent confrontations with administrators, sit-ins, and clashes with campus security and military forces. Nonetheless, protests were rarely coordinated and never evolved into concerted action towards broad-based reform.

Three major gains were attained by the student movement in the aftermath of the January 25 uprising: First, months after January 2011, a decree was passed to outlaw any national security apparatus in all public universities. Second, the student charter was written in 2011, which allowed for further liberty and freedom in student organization. Third, a law was passed that allowed students to directly elect the positions of dean and chair of any department from among the university faculty (Abd Rabuh 2014). These three developments allowed for more freedom and liberty within campus, and empowered students to have a say on the fate of their university.

However, in 2013, the status of security in universities returned to the pre-2011 conditions - if not worse. This period saw a concerted clamp-down on campus activism. Since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, the student group "Students Against the Coup" had staged regular protests on university campuses across Egypt and particularly in Cairo University and Al-Azhar (Dunne and Bentivoglio 2014). As a result police often entered campuses and engaged in clashes with students. Clashes between security and students led to the arrest of 1,352 students in the 2013/2014 academic year, 257 of whom were arrested on campus. In November 2013, a protest law came into effect announcing a two-year prison sentence for those who "violate public order." Nonetheless, protests persisted as the university constituted one of the last remaining arenas for expressing dissent. At least 16 students were killed on campus throughout the 2013/14 academic year and hundreds arrested or expelled. The 2014/15 academic year also witnessed significant demonstrations despite the start of classes being postponed to pre-empt protests. Demonstrations against repressive university policies and in opposition to the

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<sup>4</sup> Focus Group 3, 2 May 2015.

regime took place during the first week of classes in October 2014.

Eventually, this has had an impact on the shape of student union organization, as students refrained from demonstration on exogenous issues related to the political and socioeconomic conditions in the nation, and focused more on protesting for the release of their colleagues and friends who had been detained as a result of their student activities (Ahmed 2014). Moreover, many students' activity merely took the shape of rallying support for assisting the detained students (through helping the detained students in preparing for exams, assisting the families of the detained students when necessary, etc.).

As for private universities, while they only began to appear in the early 2000s and were known to be apolitical, students therein have started to become more politically involved, not only in exogenous political affairs, but also in endogenous student problems within their universities, calling for more rights and freedoms on campus. At the American University, campus activism manifested in students' questioning the ties that senior university administrators had with members of the former regime, and in strikes against tuition rises in addition to a lack of transparency in the university's finances. A series of protests demanding better working conditions for workers also took place. Similarly in the German University in Cairo, protests against the death of soccer fans in Port Said took place and calls for the overthrow of the military regime were made. When two students were expelled from the University for clashing with the head of the disciplinary committee, a hunger strike and sit-in followed.

As private universities are not organized by the same laws regulating public universities, they thus had a different experience in the past few years. Yet, they faced another set of difficulties instead, some of which will be touched upon in an upcoming section.

### **3. STUDENT VOICES IN POST-JANUARY 25 EGYPT**

In-depth interviews with members of student unions confirmed that student participation in universities has gone through different phases since 2011, where freedom of participation went from its peak in 2011-2013 to then becoming precarious and even dangerous since 2013. This has discouraged many students from participation and has placed many others at risk of detainment.

Interviews were conducted with six SU members, four of whom were from public universities. All four public university interviewees had experience in participating in the SU before 2013 and thus were able to reflect on the contrast between the 2011-2013 period and the post-2013 period. Some participants in the in-depth interviews, and also in a focus group, referred to their understanding of the SU activity before the 2011 revolution - where some students were pre-elected into their positions by the university directly and where sham elections took place with very little participation (whether as voters or candidates) from the student body.

In 2013, student unions in public universities across the nation were cancelled. In some universities, parallel SUs were formed as a means of compensation to the missing student body, as was the case in Ain Shams and Cairo University for instance. However, this was not the case in all universities. The SU in Al-Azhar University for instance has been completely

dormant in the past two years. A member of the last active SU explained that this could be due to the strong political presence of the Al-Azhar SU, which was usually an eclectic SU in which students with many different political and ideological backgrounds (including religious ideologies) worked together. He adds that “the cancellation was to put some pressure on the students because we were very active, we played a role in many protests internally and externally, and we would always write political press statements to condemn certain acts or support others.”<sup>5</sup> When asked about how participation in the SU changed over the years, he explained that:

After the revolution, we were not scared to speak, and while some students would get harmed outside of university due to engagement in political protests, we felt safe on campus. There was never a case where we can't release a press statement or protest. Things improved even more in Morsi's year, as there was less danger in going to the street, even though there were problems in other areas. This all changed in Adly Mansour's year. It was either you express an opinion supporting the regime or you don't speak at all.

A leading member in the Ain Shams University SU had a different experience, as he participated in the formation of a parallel student body until the SU was re-enacted. His goal was more student-focused, with an aim of preparing students for life after graduation. Yet, while his work was not exogenous, or even politically endogenous, he has also faced constraints after 2013. “There are too many security concerns and too much censorship, many events are cancelled because the university is afraid of having too many youth in one place [...] youth organization is forbidden.”<sup>6</sup> While permits were not needed for most activities in the 2011-2013 period, no student activity could be organized now without a security permit - a matter that was deemed difficult by the interviewees.

This has driven students to find alternative means of participation and to reconsider approaches adopted in 2011-2013. The Vice President of the Cairo University Student Union exclaims that “the SU always used to be in opposition, but we found out that we should have entered the unions from a reformist perspective,” implying that adopting such an approach would have a more useful impact.<sup>7</sup> Another SU member in Cairo University, who participated in the SU through his membership in the students' branch of the Constitution Party, explained that since 2013, most of the SU activity has been related to demonstration in solidarity with detained students. This participant explained that despite his revolutionary background, membership in the 6th of April and active participation in the January 2011 revolution, he believes that these approaches need revision. He emphasizes that “there is a difference between courage and suicide, if you can't do it now, then don't go commit suicide for a cause that won't remember you.” He explains that he reached this conclusion because many of his friends and colleagues are currently detained due to their participation in protest, and thus further protest would not be a remedy. He believes that he needs to not cause his own exclusion, and continues to work within the system so that he is able to find its weaknesses. It is due to this approach that he is participating in the 2015/16 SU elections - which have been

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, Al-Azhar University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 11 July 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, Ain Shams University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 15 July 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, Cairo University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 27 August 2015a.

boycotted by many due to amendments in the student law that placed impeding restrictions on who is able to run. He explains that the participation rate is very low and that he expects voter turnout to also be low, but is still insistent on running so "it is not a total sham, and because [he] would like to find out what is happening from the inside."<sup>8</sup>

### 3.1 Student Activism in Private Universities

With the exception of the American University in Cairo (AUC), the history of most private universities is quite brief, as the late 1990s and early 2000s marked their establishment. Since then, student activity within these universities has been more or less limited to endogenous matters for a number of reasons, including the geographic location of most universities - which tend to be located on the outskirts of the city, far from where protests and demonstrations usually occur. The exception to this was the campus of AUC, which was located near Tahrir Square before it was moved to New Cairo in 2008, and thus its students had more opportunity to participate in events or protests outside of the university. Since then, students have looked inwards towards internal university affairs. One of the interviewees explained that AUC SU "never demonstrate[s] outside of university to make sure that nothing harmful happens." Yet, internally, there have been recent successes by the AUC SU, when the administration responded to the students' demands for budget transparency and for placing a cap on tuition.<sup>9</sup>

For other private universities, students have become more active since 2011, particularly endogenously, where it became common for students to demand for more rights and freedom on campus. Yet, as was the case with public universities, administrations became more strict in dealing with any student activity after 2013 despite not being subject to the same laws that organize student activity in public universities. However, in comparison to public universities, some private universities allowed for less freedom in the period between 2011 and 2013. An active SU member in the Germany University in Cairo (GUC) explains that in 2011, when students demanded to review the SU regulative law in GUC, the administration stopped the process and sent letters to the students' parents informing them that they should advise students to stop their activity. He also adds that the simple act of putting up the poster of a friend who had passed away during the events of the Port Said soccer match in 2012, was prevented "for fear that students would chant against the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)."<sup>10</sup>

Later in the year, the SU was stopped and a new election was announced. The voter turnout in the new election was very low due to abstention of the majority of students. The formed SU designed parallel elections, which attracted 2,082 students to vote, while the official elections only attracted 200 students.<sup>11</sup> This SU interviewee then argued that student inclusion is conditional upon alignment with administration, and that whenever a disagreement occurs, prosecution is sure to follow. To support this argument, he cited an example of the SU president of the British University in Egypt, who was expelled and received a court decision for his

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<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, Cairo University Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 17 November 2015b.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, American University in Cairo Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 10 June 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, German University in Cairo Student Union, in-depth interview by P2Y research team, 21 July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

protest against the university laws organizing student activity. He also cited an example in Misr International University, where students went on strike in 2013 to protest the death of a colleague in a car accident inside the campus, and the reaction of the university security was violent. GUC also witnessed a very similar experience, where a student passed away from a collision with a university bus, leading to protest in the university, which was in turn reacted to with violence and the expelling of those who participated in the strike.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The rich history of the student movement in Egypt saw many transitions, linked to the political situation of each time period. Usually adopting a reformist approach, student movements in Egypt have contested decisions linked to war, socioeconomic concerns or lack of political freedom, and have at many times been very influential. While political developments have always impacted the level of activity of student movements, the past five years have seen a particularly quick development of events. The last few years of Mubarak's rule in Egypt could be characterized in terms of dormancy and acquiescence, where very little student activity was present, and those who were active were screened heavily by security, which maintained a tight grip on universities. In stark contrast, the period between 2011 and 2013 saw an increase in mobility in and out of universities, where students were able to freely make their demands with little or no fear. Curtailment of student activity returned once more after 2013, where the regime's fears of certain groups in the political opposition has led it to mainstream its strict security regulations in all universities without exception, setting conditions for participation and student activity that impede engagement to the extent that remaining docile has become a favourable option selected by many students in Egyptian universities.

In an effort to explain such transformation, and through the historical analysis and results of the interviews and focus group discussions presented throughout this paper, one could find a number of patterns characterizing each historic time period. It is observed that the greater the threat posed by students towards the regime, the more likely it is that student activity will be curtailed within the university. Through the scanning of the student movement history in Egypt, it could be argued that the time period in which students were most influential was that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet, while students were active in resisting certain state or university policies, the ideology adopted by the more powerful student organizations of the day was not far from alignment with that of the state. This is reflected in students' participation in the demonstrations resisting Nasser's resignation. Moreover, the support from the street for student activity was more significant than the people's support for modern day student movements - as reflected in the strong relationship formed between students and the labour movement. This entailed that students had more resources and more influence. Yet, once the vision of the student movement was in contrast with the state's vision, curtailment of student activity was intensified, as can be seen from Sadat's position on student activity. Modern day student movements share more characteristics with student movements of the mid-70s onwards than with the period between 1968 and 1972, as their ideologies and goals are very different from the current regime's vision - positioning them as more of a threat to the state. In reaction to this threat, the space allowed for student movements has become limited once

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

more, resulting in the prevalence of the free-rider phenomenon referred to above, where students start having more to lose with their participation in student movements and thus may decide to avoid activity that puts them under threat of persecution.



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