

8. Apr. 2015

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Kommentare ( 0 )

## Mobilisation and Contestation Between Egyptian Student Movement and the State

by *Hakim Khatib*

The role of social groups in making historical events succeed takes shape according to two important factors: Their ability to change and the kind of their contribution to the development of that change in a way or another. The role of social groups especially emerges at times of revolutions and their subsequent changes on the political, socioeconomic and even intellectual levels. The most active and capable group to achieve change is the group of youth and students. In the revolutionary movements in Latin America, for instance, students prominently contributed to the fall down of long-lasting totalitarian dictatorships such in Chile, Brazil and Argentina. In the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011, students' roles varied from one country to another based on three axes of context, networks and contentious practices. This article expands on the role of Egyptian student movement in thriving for change despite the intensified restrictions by the state and how it continued its protest under repressive circumstances as a political actor.



Mansoura Uni students want to topple Uni president who was appointed by Mubarak's regime  
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The Egyptian student union (the institutional form of the student movement) enjoys a long register of mobilisation and contribution to social and political change at critical junctures of the country's history, and a long register of contestation with the authoritarian state; therefore, the contribution of student movement might depend on perception in different historical contexts. The type of the regime and its structures and the space of freedom available for all social groups affect the role of students in driving change.

Student movement has played a distinguished role in the history of Egypt, even under the British colonisation before 1919 revolution. Students were in the heart of protest and change and took an important and active part in tackling and debating important national issues. Despite all repressive policies to control the political activism within the universities since 1950s, student movement remained, in some times more than others, an important actor in the political landscape in Egypt. In January 2011, students, like any

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other social milieu in Egypt, perceived the change as an opportunity to demand freedom of political practice at universities.

Such perception stems from inter alia socioeconomic and political grievances over the past decades. Since then, universities have been important contention fields in Egypt, provided that since 2011 the state, under several consecutive governments, has been unwilling or unable to institutionalise the student movement. Following the removal of Mohammad Morsi in 2013, students continued to protest and contest. The number of students' protests reached 1677 only in the period between July 2013 and January 2014, whereas the same period witnessed 72 student protests in favour of the Egyptian authority according to Democracy Indicator Report in 2014.

Different actors in Egypt had different readings of the continuity of contestation. While some – the Muslim Brotherhood and some liberal factions – consider the student movement legitimate and perceive the army intervention as a coup d'état, others perceive the on-going protests belong to a specific political faction, namely, the Muslim Brotherhood, which means that the demands of the student movement do not enjoy a support among wide segments of social milieus in Egypt.

Since 3 July 2013 Egyptian student movement has been weakened due to a sharp political polarisation, loss of control within universities, and loss of social sympathy and support due to acts of vandalism and transgression against private and public properties, and in some cases violence against individuals by some students. Despite the repressive security measures of the Egyptian authority against the student protest, which led to the expansion of more protests within several universities, the student movement seemed unable to coin a cohesively united student movement that could articulate their demands or to develop a collective action to face a collective threat.

Apart from aspects of cohesion, there are however further complex factors to be considered when analysing the weakening of the Egyptian student movement.

“The length of the conflict, the modes of contentious interaction before the introduction of violence, the extent of repression or tolerance by the incumbent regime, and the origins and histories of the populations (urban, tribal) that join the mobilisations” impact significantly the student movement's actions, said Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel in their 2013 book *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*.

Some students in protests resorted to violence; nevertheless, there might be some factors that might have contributed to such a relation between the student movement and violence. On one hand, the political contestation in the Egyptian society has reflected in the structures of student movement at universities, which transformed into confrontations among students affiliated with different political factions. Such contentious political context has escalated within the frame of mobilisation, demobilisation and counter-mobilisation campaigns. On the other hand, the excessive violence of security forces and police against student protests led to the death of several students, the injury of dozens, the arrest of hundreds, and sentencing several students, in questionable trials, to several years in prison. In addition, tens of students were suspended from universities for, arguably, their involvement in violent acts.

The Muslim Brotherhood has also mobilised its supporters within the universities against the incumbent regime, despite the ultra repressive security measures against protests. The political contention between the

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Muslim Brotherhood and the new president affected the student movement, which was called by some, rather many, Ikhwanisation process of the movement (turning the student movement into Muslim Brotherhood loyalists), which has negative connotations in the Egyptian political construct.

The current president Abdulfattah Al-Sisi is known for his strict views concerning the student movement and student union in Egypt, especially through his support to a law on regulating student protest, which in return many perceive as a repressive measure against freedom of political activism within universities. Al-Sisi comments on the student movement might increase the contestation between the authority and the youth segments, especially within the universities. The file of freedoms does not seem to have priority in Al-Sisi's policies, as security and improvement of economic conditions remain on the top of the list.

As students have been a substantial element of the Egyptian uprising, and many of them have joined the protests on Tahrir Square, their universities have not witnessed the same revolutionary change. Presidents of universities affiliated with the old regime, presence of police and military on campus and repression of political freedom within the higher educational institutions raised key questions concerning democratisation of universities as well as demands for socioeconomic equality. The socioeconomic student protests influence the patterns of interaction between the state and the student movement. This interaction consequently has an impact on political participation, institutional representation and social justice.



**Hakim Khatib** is a lecturer at Philipps University Marburg, Darmstadt and Fulda University of Applied Sciences and a PhD Candidate in Political Science on the political instrumentalisation of religion in Egypt at the University Duisburg-Essen.

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