



# Arab Reform Brief

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## Youth Activism in Egypt

*Dina Shehata*\*

After nearly a decade of political demobilization, popular support for the Palestinian intifada in 2000 has stimulated the resurgence of youth activism, this time breaking with many of the taboos that characterized Egyptian life for several decades. Like much of the Arab world, Egypt is witnessing a youth bulge or “period in which the proportion of youth in the population increases significantly compared to other age groups” Today, youth constitute approximately one third of the population, a population that has been historically excluded on the political and economic level due to policy failures. While marginalized as a social group, they continue to entertain high expectations due to urban exposure and education, and are therefore amongst the most politically mobilized groups in Egyptian politics.

Youth activism is demonstrating unique characteristics that are setting it apart from the earlier waves of youth activism in Egypt. It is occurring largely outside existing parties; it is non-ideological, inclusive and internally diverse, and is largely taking place outside their traditional place of operation, the university campuses. Interestingly, Islamist youths are this time playing a secondary role in the current wave of youth activism. Youths are also making use of a much more extensive array of information and communication technology as a tool to organize, mobilize and to express their views and to challenge the State and the Egyptian political system on issues of political and constitutional reform. While youth has re-created those new channels and spaces of expression and mobilization, their multi-faceted forms of exclusion threatens to radicalize them.

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\* Researcher at the Al Ahrām Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo.

The events of 6 April 2008, which saw parallel mobilization by textile workers in *Al Mahalla Al Kobra* and by youth in a number of urban centers, highlighted the resurgent role of youth in Egyptian public life after a long period of abeyance. The most recent wave of youth activism in Egypt can be dated back to the 2000 *intifada* when hundreds of university and school students mobilized in solidarity with the Palestinians. In 2002-2003, youth activism expanded in opposition to the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. In 2004-2005, youth mobilization shifted towards domestic issues and youth became an important part of an emergent movement calling for political and constitutional reforms.

Youth activism since the year 2000 has demonstrated some unique characteristics that set it apart from earlier waves of youth activism in Egypt. For example, the current wave of youth mobilization has occurred largely outside existing parties and movements, and has tended to be less ideological and more inclusive compared to earlier waves. Moreover, the current generation of youth activists has made extensive use of information technology as a mobilizing instrument. Through their websites and blogs, and through social networking sites such as facebook, youth have been able to coordinate various protest activities, even in the absence of organized political structures. The 6<sup>th</sup> of April strike, mentioned above, was wholly a product of virtual activism among youth.

This paper examines the current wave of youth activism, by situating it in its broader sociological and historical context, then highlighting its distinguishing characteristics and assessing its potential impact on the prospects for political reform in Egypt.

### **Youth Exclusion in Egypt**

Egypt, like much of the Arab world, is experiencing what is known as a youth bulge, meaning “a period in which the proportion of youth in the population increases significantly compared to other age groups.”<sup>2</sup> According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), in 2007, 28 percent of the Egyptian population was between the ages of 15 and 29. Youth thus constitute approximately a third of the Egyptian population. However, youth in Egypt are a disadvantaged social group and suffer from various forms of social exclusion. According to Assaad and Barsoum, in spite of an increase in educational enrollment, poor educational standards, and an educational system that is poorly attuned to the needs of the labor market, have produced high unemployment and underemployment levels among youth. 83 percent of the unemployed are in the age group 15-29, and 47 percent between the ages of 20-24. Youth with a secondary education or above constituted 95 percent of unemployed youth. In addition to high unemployment levels, youth also suffer from underemployment. In 2005, 72 percent of labor market entrants were employed in the informal and low wage sectors.

In addition to low educational standards and high levels of unemployment, Egyptian youth also suffer from delayed marriage rates. High marriage costs have led to delaying marriage among young men and women. 57 percent of men in urban areas were not married by the age of twenty nine and 22 percent were unmarried by thirty four.

The final form of exclusion that Assaad and Barsoum address is political exclusion. According to a survey conducted by Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies on youth (ages 15-24), civic participation among

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<sup>2</sup> Ragui Assaad and Ghada Barsoum, *Youth Exclusion in Egypt: in Search of 'Second Chances'*, Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper, Number 2, September 2007, page 5.

youth is exceedingly low. 56 percent of the sample had never participated in student union elections, 67 percent had never participated in any student activities and 84 percent had never participated in a public protest or demonstration.<sup>3</sup> Another study has also found that 67 percent of youth do not have a voting card, and that 80 percent have not participated in the 1990 and 1995 parliamentary elections.<sup>4</sup>

The various forms of social, economic and political exclusion have rendered youth, particularly urban educated youth, a marginalized social group, but one that has high levels of expectations due to its urban exposure and education. As a result, youth have been among the most politically mobilized groups in Egyptian politics for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

### **Youth Activism in Egypt in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Youth, particularly university students, have been an important player in Egyptian politics for much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. During the liberal period (1919-1952), youth mobilization against British colonialism and in support of constitutional rule was a mainstay of Egyptian public life. University students were an important constituency in most of the major political movements of the time (Al Wafd party, the Muslim Brotherhood, Young Egypt and the Communist Movement), and youth activism during that period was often an extension of the activism of these groups.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Youth Orientations Survey, Unpublished Report, Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2004.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ahmed Tohami Abdel Hay, the Political Orientations of the New Generations, Al Dimukratiyya, Volume 6, April 2002, 121.*

<sup>5</sup> *Said Eissa Mohamed, The Development of other Student Movement in Egypt, Ahwal Masriyya, Volume 40, Summer 2008, 27-40.*

During the Nasser period, political activism was highly constrained, and youth mobilization was restricted to state sponsored organizations such as the Youth Organization and the Youth Vanguard which were part of the ruling Arab Socialist Union. However, in the wake of the 1967 defeat, university students and workers were the first to mobilize against the Nasser regime. In 1968, university students and workers staged demonstrations calling for the strict penalization of those responsible for the 1967 defeat, and for the restoration of political rights and freedoms. The Nasser regime responded by issuing harsher sentences on military officers, and by promising limited political liberalization within the ranks of the ruling party.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1970s, youth activism gained momentum. In 1972/1973, leftist students formed a number of independent clubs and associations on university campuses and staged a series of demonstrations to press the Sadat regime to wage war to reclaim the Sinai. Moreover, leftist university students were an active participant in the January 1977 bread riots which were the largest that Egypt had seen since the dissolution of the monarchy and the institution of the republic in 1952. To counteract activism by leftist and Nasserist students, the Sadat regime actively encouraged during the second half of the 1970s, the emergence of Islamic student groups on University Campuses. By the end of the 1970s, Islamist students had successfully marginalized leftist student groups on university campuses and had succeeded in dominating students unions in most of the principle Egyptian universities.<sup>7</sup>

However, after Sadat's visit to Israel, and the subsequent signing of the Camp David Accords and the peace treaty with Israel, Islamist student

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid, 33-34.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid, 34-36.*

groups began to join their leftist counterparts in criticizing Sadat's foreign policy orientations. As opposition to the Sadat regime began to increase, the regime passed a new bill regulating student activities. The 1979 students bill which continues to be in force up to this day, allows the university administration to interfere directly in student elections by vetting candidates. It also created a special security unit known as the university guard which was given the authority to operate inside university campuses to ensure their 'security.' the 1979 Bill also prohibited political parties from operating inside university campuses.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the severe restrictions imposed by the 1979 bill on student activism, the Mubarak regime maintained a relatively tolerant attitude towards non-violent political activism for most of the 1980s. As results, Islamists students were able to maintain their presence on University Campuses. Student activism during the 1980s tended to focus primarily on cultural and foreign policy issues rather than on domestic issues. Islamist students also attempted to uphold a strict moral code on university campuses by forcing gender segregation and banning artistic and recreational activities that were seen as un-Islamic.

It was not until the early 1990s, when the regime adopted a more confrontational approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that the restrictions on student activism stipulated in the 1979 Bill were actively enforced. During the 1990s, Islamists and other opposition students were barred from contesting student union elections and students loyal to the regime were placed by the university administration at the head of students unions. The ruling Democratic Party began to establish a number of clubs on university campuses in the hope of winning back the support of university students.

Furthermore, the University guard became a more visible presence on university campuses and students from the Islamist, and also from the non-Islamist opposition were frequently monitored and harassed. As a result of these restrictions, which were part of a more general crackdown on the Egyptian opposition, youth mobilization was highly circumscribed during most of the 1990s.

### **The Resurgence of Youth Mobilization since the 2000 *Intifada***

After nearly a decade of political demobilization, youth activism began to resurge again with the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifada* in the fall of 2000. In 2000 and 2001, students staged a number of demonstrations in support of the Palestinian *intifada*. Moreover, hundreds of students joined the Egyptian Popular Committee for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) which was created by a number of leftist activists from the seventies generation. With strong participation from youth, EPCSPI launched a boycott campaign of American and Israeli products, collected donations and sent aid caravans to the occupied territories. In 2002-2003, youth activism continued to gain momentum as a result of the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. On March 20-21, tens of thousands of Egyptians, primarily from the younger generations, staged large demonstrations in *Al Tahrir* square in down town Cairo. These demonstrations were the largest that Egypt had seen since the bread riots of 1977.

In 2004-2005, as national and international attention shifted towards issues of political and constitutional reform, youth activism also shifted in that direction. Hundreds of young activists joined new movements such as Kifaya and Al Ghad party. Youth for Change, a sub-group of the Kifaya movement, became a vocal actor during the pro-reform protests of 2004-

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

2006. These protest, though small, attracted a great deal of national and international attention and broke with many of the taboos that had characterized public life in Egypt for several decades. First the protestors focused on domestic as opposed to foreign policy issues. Second, they staged popular demonstrations in public areas without official permission, thereby challenging a long standing ban on popular demonstrations outside university campuses. Third, they raised slogans that directly attacked the president and the security establishment also challenging a long standing taboo against directly criticizing these 'sovereign' institutions. Finally, protestors used news forms of protest such as candle light vigils which helped attract attention.

The role of youth was also visible during the demonstrations that accompanied the judges' protests in the Spring of 2006. Judges, who had exposed instances of election fraud during the 2005 parliamentary elections, were referred to a disciplinary committee by the High Council of the Judiciary. In response, the judges Club of Egypt held a sit-in, and various parties and movements staged demonstrations in solidarity with the judges' sit-in. Youth from movements such as Kifaya and the Muslim Brotherhood were highly visible during these protests. The regime reacted strongly to such activism. Hundreds of activists from the Brotherhood and from Kifaya were arrested and detained for several months.

Another manifestation of youth activism during that period was the emergence of a small but outspoken bloggers movement in Egypt. According to a recent report issued by the Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center, by April 2008 there were approximately 160,000 blogs in Egypt. And while only 20% of these blogs were political in nature, they succeeded nonetheless in causing a stir and in attracting popular and official attention. These blogs were distinct because of

their bold criticism of public officials and official practices. Bloggers used colorful language to criticize public figures including the president and his son. They also relied on multi-media, including photos, videos and cartoons to make their message heard. Some blogs became sites for posting footage of torture and various human rights violations by state security officers. Such footage helped put the question of torture on the national agenda and several officers were penalized as a result of footage shown on blogs.

In 2007-2008, and as a result of a general crackdown on political mobilization, youth activism also began to dwindle. However, as political mobilization subsided, another type of mobilization began to gain momentum. The years 2007-2008 witnessed unprecedented levels of strikes and protests by civil servants and factory workers. The decline in real incomes, as a result of inflation, coupled with rising prices caused economic hardship among large segments of the population. This triggered a series of protests which exceeded 1000 in 2007. However, the demands of workers and civil servants were restricted to economic issues, and there seemed to be little coordination between protesting workers in different sites.

The only exception to this pattern was the strike of April the 6<sup>th</sup> which saw joint mobilization by textile workers in *al Mahala al Kobra*, on the one hand, and by young urban activists on the other. Textile workers had scheduled a protest on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2008, after the regime failed to comply with demands they had made in an earlier protest. A number of young activists, some of whom were said to be associated with Al Ghad party, formed a group on facebook and called for a national strike in solidarity with *al Mahala* workers. The call for a national strike was picked up by bloggers, and then by the mainstream media and thus received wide national attention. By April 6<sup>th</sup> it seemed that

everyone had heard about the proposed strike and some people whose numbers are not known did stay home on this particularly windy day. The regime, for its part, reacted harshly to both the workers strike and to mobilization on facebook. Security forces forcefully prevented the strike in Mahalla, and as a result violence broke out on the streets and several people were killed in confrontations with the police. In a parallel fashion, a number of young activists who had created the group on facebook were arrested and detained for several weeks.

### **Characteristics of the Current Wave of Youth Activism**

The latest wave of youth activism which can be dated back to the Fall of 2000 has some unique characteristics which distinguish it from earlier waves of youth activism. First and foremost, the current wave of youth mobilization has occurred largely outside existing parties and movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The strict restrictions imposed by the regime on student activism during the 1990s, coupled with tight restrictions on the activities of political parties and movements, significantly weakened the links between university students, on the one hand, and political parties and movements, on the other.

Moreover, during the 1990s, most parties and movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, experienced internal divisions, partly as a result of the continued domination of an aging leadership and the marginalization of younger activists with more moderate ideas. However, while shying away from joining older parties and movements, youth were an important participant in the creation of newer parties and movements such as EPCSPI, Kifaya and Al Ghad party. These movements were mostly led by middle aged figures who were active in the 70s, many of whom had split from older parties and movements during the 1990s. These newer movements tended to be more moderate and

pragmatic in their discourse and to adopt a more consensual approach that focused more on what united, rather on what divided Egyptians. Moreover, these movements were less conciliatory in their approach to the regime and favored comprehensive political reform. As a result, these newer movements were more appealing to youth.

The second characteristic that distinguished the current wave of youth activism is that it was predominantly non-ideological in nature. Many of the youth that joined movements such as EPCSPI, Kifaya, and Youth for Change or who blogged on the internet, did not clearly subscribe to a well defined ideological orientation. Most seemed to share a general commitment to the values of human rights, pluralism, democracy, and social justice and some displayed watered down leftist, and Islamist orientations. Thus, unlike previous generations of activists who were steeped in the writings of Marxist or Islamist writers, most of these activists focused more on consensus building and action, rather than on theoretical ideological squabbles.

A third characteristic which defined youth activism during that period is that most of the youth movements that emerged since 2000 tended to be inclusive and internally diverse. Movements such as EPCSPI tended to bring together activists from different ideological trends who shared a commitment to common values such as support for the *intifada* or constitutional reform. Moreover, unlike older coalitional movements which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the newer movements did not restrict their activities to the drafting of joint statements and declarations and focused more on direct action and mobilization behind common objectives.

A fourth distinctive characteristic of the last wave of youth activism is that it occurred largely outside university campuses. For most

of the twentieth century, university campuses were the primary site of youth activism. However, since the early 90s, and largely as a result of the strict constraints imposed by the regime on political activism inside university campuses, youth activism within campuses was largely limited. And even though students continued to stage some demonstrations inside university campuses, the most significant protest events staged by youth since 2000 occurred outside the campuses. Moreover, whereas in previous decades, student unions had played a central role in leading student activism, such role was largely absent during the current wave of youth activism. Student unions which have dominated by pro-regime activists for most of the 1990s have become largely ineffective and delinked from student activism.

A fifth feature is the secondary role played by Islamist youth. Since the late 1970s, youth from the Islamist movement had been at the forefront of youth activism. And for most of the 1980s and early 1990s, university campuses and student unions were dominated by activists from the Brotherhood. However, largely as a result of extended repression, the presence of Islamist groups on university campuses was tightly monitored and controlled. The Brotherhood for its part, adopted a low profile, and attempted to avoid further confrontations with the regime. Thus in 2000 and 2003, Islamist students shied away from taking a leading role in the demonstrations supporting the *intifada* and opposing the war on Iraq. Similarly, in 2004 and 2005, as youth activism shifted toward domestic issues, activists associated with the Brotherhood were initially reluctant to mobilize in support of the issue of the moment, namely political reform. It was not until Kifaya began to attract domestic and international attention that the Brotherhood began to mobilize in support of political reform.

The final distinguishing characteristic of the most recent wave of youth activism is its extensive use of information and communication technology as both an organizational and mobilizational tool, and also as a means for expressing the views of youth. Given the strict constraints on formal political participation, youth were able to use the World Wide Web to create an alternative or virtual political space. This was made most apparent during the April 6<sup>th</sup> Strike which was wholly organized online and in the ever increasing number of blogs written by youth.

### **Conclusion**

The recent wave of youth activism which can be dated back to the 2000 *intifada* has brought to light one of the principal challenges that confront the Egyptian political system, namely a large young population that is suffering from various forms of exclusion and a decaying political system that is increasingly unable to meet the demands of this population. The inability of existing political structures, both in the regime and in the opposition, to integrate youth was made abundantly clear over the past 8 years. Most instances of youth activism occurred largely outside pre-existing political structures and both the ruling party and opposition parties and movements failed to appeal to youth who preferred to join some of the newer parties and movements. However, the regime, with the tacit support of some of the older parties and movements, has successfully eliminated these newer groups and has thus left youth with no one to lead them or represent them. Kifaya is now largely defunct and Ayman Nour the leader of Al Ghad party is serving a five year prison sentence.

The multiple exclusion of youth, coupled with the insistence of the regime to bloc all avenues of youth participation, threatens to radicalize youth activism. Thus far, youth activism has been moderate and reformist in tone and has

relied exclusively on non-violent tactics. However, continued exclusion might lead to the emergence of more radical and militant groups among youth. The challenge during the coming period for both the ruling party, and for opposition parties and movements is to make

room for the emergence of new groups that are better able to represent youth and to articulate their needs. Absent such a development, youth in Egypt, as in much of the Arab world, will remain a ticking time bomb.