

April 2016

## **Against the Grain: Student Movement in Private Universities**

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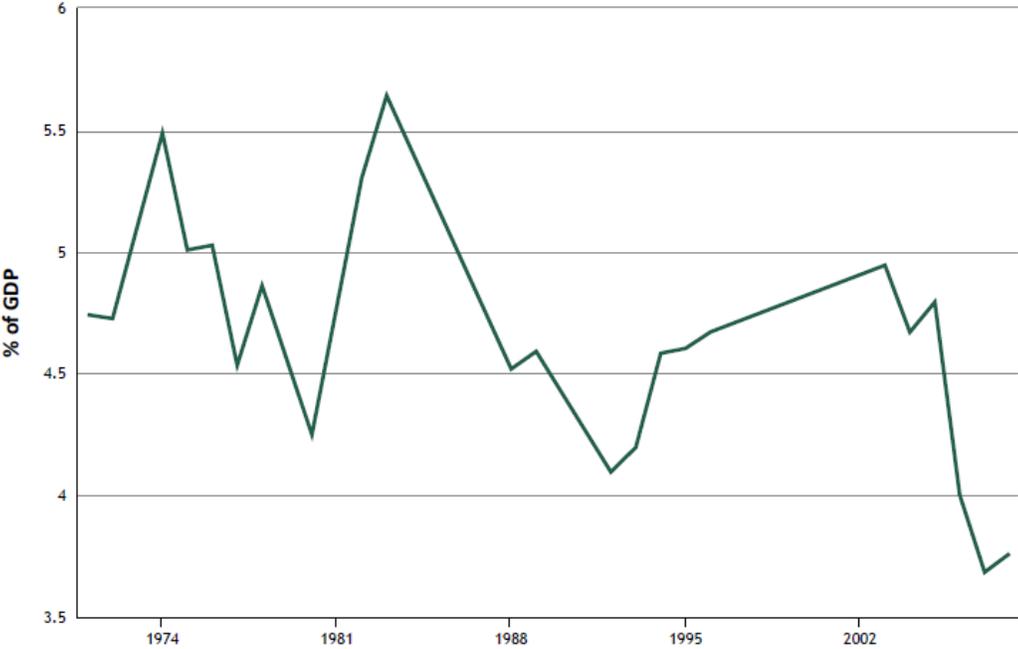
### **Abstract**

This paper aims at looking at the unlikely activism that has erupted in private universities since 2011 till today. The argument being that private universities are "apolitical spheres", immune from the social grievances that would give rise to a need to articulate an interest and militate against structures of power. Private university students are among the upper-middle and upper classes, effectively classes that have been in close alliance with the state, politically and economically. Hence, their activism is not only counter-intuitive to their class interests but also in many cases detrimental to their well-being. The paper uses in-depth interviews (2-4 hours) with 10 students from three different universities to shed the light on the subjective choices that they make and how their individual narratives reveal their entanglement with a wider cause as well as a successful case model of their mobilization.

### **Contextual Framework: Higher Education in Egypt (1982-2014)**

The term of former president Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) was beset from the very start by a serious debt crisis in the early 1980s. The government was forced to implement austerity measures outlined by the IMF (reduce subsidies, float currency...etc.) (Khan and Williamson, 2011) and starting the 1990s an even more financial restructuring of the budget and a massive privatization program took place. The Mubarak regime's willingness to work with the IMF and the World Bank in their austerity and economic restructuring program set the tone for the rest of his term in

office: the “neoliberal turn” that would gradually scale back state investment and expenditure in nearly all key areas of the economy and would reroute the state funds to capitalist cronies and regime loyalists. Perhaps the most acutely effected by this structural realignment is public spending on higher education (Fahim, 2011). The state expenditure on higher education systematically declined during the 1980s, with only a few spikes, and then reached a plateau during the 1990s, to take another dive and continue to decline till 2014 (see diagram below).



Source: [World Development Indicators \(WDI\), September 2014](#)

Of particular interest is the fact that the steady decline in public expenditure in education was paralleled by series of executive laws and bylaws, generally known as the law no.101 for the year 1992, which established the legal mandate for private universities. The law would set a precedent in allowing individuals investors and businessmen in creating a university as a "private venture", although technically the university was still deemed as a not-for-profit organization. The first university, October 6 University (O6U), was established in 1996, truly capturing the kind of relationship the state will have with the higher education. By 2014 there were over

twenty private universities in Egypt\* providing different kinds of specializations from medicine to business administration. The tuition fees for private universities ranges from 20,000 EGP to 50,000 EGP per year, bearing in mind the average household income in Egypt is 25,000 EGP per year (as of 2012) (Ahram, 2012). Although public universities are nominally “free”, there are administrative fees that amount 200-300 EGP depending on university. Also for the past few decades public universities have moved to include departments and sections that teach in foreign languages (mainly English and French) and that have a different fees from the more conventional curricula. On average students in enrolled in sections with foreign language instruction, pay between 5000 EGP and 10,000 EGP<sup>1</sup>. Thus, most students enrolled come from families whose annual income places them in a socio-economic stratum that could dispense with such tuition fees. The number of students enrolling in private universities would reach over 70,000 students (compare with public universities), constituting on average 4% or more of the total number of enrolled students (CAMPAS, 2012). Compared to 86,697 enrolled students in three major public universities within the great Cairo area (Cairo, Ain Shams and Helwan) (as of the academic year of 2013/14 according to the SCU report) This increase would also parallel the steady decline in public spending in higher education, reaching its lowest point in 2014.

A major difference between public universities (with no fees at all? See for example language departments at Cairo U) and private universities with regards to students' activism and involvement in collective organization, is the long established tradition of students unions and student clubs in public universities. Further, the student movement in public universities played crucial role in nearly all political agitations since its very inception, starting with the 1919 revolts all the way to 1977 bread riots (Roza, 1991). Even during Mubarak's most notorious times, student unions were still in place, and elections were held annually (please mention at least one or two well-known student

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\* For the scope of this paper I focus mainly on the universities within the Greater Metropolitan Cairo area. It is difficult to give an exact figure, but for the sake of scale, although not accuracy, there are about ten university campuses all around Cairo--excluding privates institutes (these are not registered as universities)

1 Even more, recently Cairo University instituted the 'credit hours' system in a number of faculties, whose fees can reach up to 50,000 EGP (Ahram, 2013)

unions organizations). For example student union elections in Cairo and Ain Shams University were held annually since 2000 and up until now. Such historical accumulation is completely absent in private universities, as all the universities surveyed in this paper, did not have a student union since its establishment. And demanding the creation of one, would become the centerpiece in most of the students' mobilization and grievance against their universities – namely the absence of an elected a structure that represents the student body and would mediate their needs and demands vis-à-vis the university administration.

## **Methodological Issues**

### **Gender trouble**

Although the ratio of female to male students seemed to be hovering around 1:1 ratio across the board in most universities (CAMPAS, 2012) and even in certain colleges and majors, females are more represented (Pharmacy for example), a recurrent problem in all fieldwork is the lack of representation of female students among the students' movement. The problem of women's participation in social movements is a well-established fact of social science research (Stewart, Settles and Winder 1998). There are many reasons why female students would readily participate in actual student mobilization or action but might not be given the visibility their male counterparts enjoyed. Of all the universities surveyed and the student unions and movements that were contacted, I was only able to speak with three female students out of a total of twenty students from five different universities. One of which eventually opted not to sit for in depth of interview, making the total number of female students interviewed out of a total of ten, only two.

The invisibility of women or female students is hence directly connected with the question: visibility to whom?

As an outsider, older, male, a stranger - my access to female students is fraught with the restrictions that the conventional patriarchal order imposes on most females in Egypt. Even those among the upper echelons of society. One would think that part of social distinction of the more affluent classes is a more liberal attitude towards women

and their daily social interactions, but actual experience showed otherwise. The images and photos of students participating in protests, sit-ins or rallies clearly show female students participating alongside their male peers (check the photo appendix), yet this visual visibility does not translate into physical visibility and the two female students I got to interview, each confessed as having a "special relationship" with their fathers and families.

Every student I interviewed and followed up with the question: "whom of your friends or colleagues in the movement in general do you think I should talk to?", only led to more male students recommending other male students. And when I explicitly asked one student why he didn't recommend or suggest any of his female colleagues, the answer came, "I didn't really think about it that way". The two female students I got to interview, each spoke at length about their involvement with their male colleagues at different points in time, and each did not particularly dwell on the "challenges" of being a woman amongst men. To the extent that when I asked one of them, if she felt that at any point she was being discriminated against, she answered, "no".

The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the students' movement play a very significant role when it comes to the gender dimension. The female students are not "intentionally" excluded from the movement and its different mobilizational and decision-making processes, but rather it is their visibility that remains in question. How much of the female students' actual participation and efforts is being acknowledged and recognized? In terms of media and public accolades how many female students have received the same appreciation as their male counterparts? Speaking for the movement itself, how many female spokespersons were allowed to share the same representative positions as their peers?

The female interviewees did not strike me as oppressed women, or even marginalized. They were imposing characters, acutely aware of their surroundings and some were even shrewd and conniving. But the fact that their male colleagues dominated the public representation of the movement and its articulation in a wider context reveals the persistence of the invisibility of women's contribution to political movements, even across class and contexts.

## The Age Gap

The age difference between the oldest student and the interviewer is twelve years. That immediately created a sense of seniority that precluded a more informal, peer-to-peer interaction. In a society where the notion of respect to elder is still very relevant, this dynamic was hard to overcome. The seniority\* phrases their stories and narratives in such a way, that they become "respectful", "coherent" or "palpable". For example, some interviewees started using a more formal register of Arabic in the first part of the interview. And only after being assured that this interview will not be considered as an official statement, and will not be used to judge the "seriousness" of the student or his/her engagement, did they assume a more informal degree of communication. > the research is often assimilated as a scholar situation or an "exam" by interviewees, especially students who used to pass exams..

The seniority did not only force the students to be formal and coherent, but to withhold information that might be deemed as "trivial", "silly" or "childish". In that sense the interviewees strived to be "serious" and "factual". After explaining that no information will be classified by how "serious" or "unserious" it is, and rather that the interactions taking place between peers and colleagues is central to the study did they concede in sharing more information. However, again the majority elected not to speak too much about inter-group dynamics.

One method used to create a more egalitarian dialogue was the duration of interviews. The respectful distance imposed by a sense of seniority was hard to sustain after two or three hours of conversation and in many interviews, a real "breakthrough" came after two hours of dialogue. I observed that most interviewees (with the exception of few), "warmed up" to me, after sensing that my approach is not to gather factual information or official accounts, but rather individual experiences. The idea that I was interested in

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\* Seniority was never forsaken for a more horizontal social interaction, even in university micro-society. Students immediately used honorifics when addressing me, even when I insisted it is not necessary. The social stigma surrounding disrespect for elders is too strong to be mitigated by the informality and camaraderie of a university society

their personal narrative, rather than a data-oriented survey helped mitigate a sense of estrangement between the interviewer and his subject.

### **Student Activism post-2011**

A significant factor in the way students chose to speak or sit for an interview was the overall general context. Since October 2014 the state has been arresting university students across the board, sending a message that student activism is going to ruthlessly crushed (HRW, 2014). For private university students, the administration has used different tactics to intimidate students and discourage students from participating (ranging from disciplinary hearings, to denying students to sit for their exams, to suspension and even in the case of student Ahmed Abu Zeid, a terminal suspension). This context made many students apprehensive about talking to strangers about their personal experiences in the movement or the unions. Even students as senior as the president and vice-president of the student union for the BUE, questioned me repeatedly about who I am, whom do I work for and the purpose of my research. After answering them extensively about my research and the purpose of the research and trying to offer them all the possible assurances, both evaded my attempts at interviewing them and after a while, refused to return my calls or messages. This kind of response practically shaped the research and who and why chose to sit for an interview. Many students openly discussed their reservations and fears about being interviewed and having their names or identities associated with any kind of research on the student movement. A few readily cooperated, yet the majority proved to be a challenging target audience.

### **Schematic Presentation and Possibilities of Student Mobilization**

The paper will be divided into two sections: the first section will be a schematic division of the interviews based on the subject narratives of the students. The second section will demonstrate a successful case model reflecting the efficacy of the student's mobilization and activism.

The categorization of the interviews will schematically organize them into three typologies: one comprising students with former socialization experiences (mainly

Ultras, extended network of football fans and supporters and previous student union activities), students with no prior socialization experience but heavy involvement in mobilizing and organizing the movement, and finally the problematic schema of female students. The analytical framework that guides this schematization will use Hirsch's study of Divestment Movement in Columbia University in the 1980s (Hirsch, 1990), Mannheim work on the concept of 'generation' (Mannheim, 1972) and Fillieule's survey of demobilization and disengagement (Fillieule, 2014) as well as Cable's (Cable, 1992) and Somerville's work (Somerville, 1997) on women's participation in social movements among other references relevant to particular terms (Snow and Moss, 2014, Walder, 2009) . The logic being that students with former socialization experiences are generally more apt to respond to calls of mobilization or engagement (Hirsh, 1990). While students with no former socialization experience and who nonetheless make the conscious choice to join the movement or engage reflect the subjective mediation that links institutional/concrete factors to transient/micro factors (Mannheim, 1972). And finally the inadequate terms of analysis when it comes to women's participation that either reduces women to a collective, homogeneous 'identity' thus limiting the diversity and subjective variance as to how each member or participant in a movement might respond/participate and the second what defines women's interest can be socially constructed via a political struggle and not specifically through a "feminist" position (Somerville, 1997). In addition to the structural constraints to women's participation and preconceived gender roles that are observed in certain situations and challenged in others (Cable, 1992).

The second section will outline the process of mobilization in MIU (Misr International University) on the Cairo-Ismailia Desert Road, over the span of one year, where the students mobilized a movement with the objective of constructing a pedestrian bridge over the highway that abuts the university campus. The university is located right by the highway with no demarcated pedestrian crossing or traffic light to allow students and staff to cross safely. After the death of one of the students by a speeding truck, the construction of the pedestrian bridge became the central mobilizing cause for the students. Following a year of protests and violent confrontation with the university

administration, the bridge was finally constructed and inaugurated on 14 March 2014 (see photo appendix).

## **Schema of Narratives**

### **Former Socialization and Participation**

The first scheme examines three subjects with former group socialization experiences and involvement in sociability networks and the impact of those experiences in association with subjective individual factors, which together engendered an interest to participate and engage with the student movement. The subjects are Nagy Hamid, Lotfy Gouda from MIU (both members of the Ultras) and Botrous Wanis<sup>2</sup> from GUC. Nagy Hamid is a male, Muslim, dentistry major, whose father is a medical professional and whose mother is a housewife; he comes from an apolitical background. His immediate and extended family all work within the medical field and confess no particular political position and no former political experience (party politics or otherwise). He confessed, however, that his father was exceptionally lenient with his active participation. Nagy Hamid did not especially dwell on the influence of his experience in the Ultras and yet mentioned how extensive the Ultras network is, as it cut across his school friends, and later university colleagues. He did, however, talk about how his parents were used to him being arrested during football matches and its related cheering activities. His introduction into the student movement came through his school network and other Ultras members that also joined the university. The intersectional nature of the Ultras (that cuts across school, district and university) proved to be central to how many youth either directly participated in political mobilization or got inserted in networks that eventually allowed them to participate in other movements, such as the student movement. Nagy Hamid raised key questions on the spontaneous nature of the protests, specifically when Antoan Sameh died, and how

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<sup>2</sup> All interview subjects will be given alternative names original his have rather would he stated who Zeid Abu Ahmed except – name

the student movement later failed to replicate that success because it never examined the reasons for that initial mobilization.

Lotfy Gouda (who is now currently incarcerated at the time this paper was written) is a male, Muslim, management major, who was forced to transfer universities because of his academic record, just before his final year. His mother is a schoolteacher and his father owns an export-import company, he described them as both former-regime loyalists, who didn't terribly mind his engagement in the student movement. He was one of the most difficult subjects to interview and one whose experience in the Ultras community was starkly evident than all of his peers. He was a capo, or a yell captain, in the Ultras hierarchy, a fact that made his voice chronically loud and his words unusually articulate, but not necessarily lofty. Throughout the interview he never used the personal pronoun, "I", not once. He constantly referred to an imagined community of "We". His description of the way he experienced the movement was always hovering around an impassioned rhetoric of what the students should be about, or what it ought to have been about, rather than any subjective, realistic engagement with it. Lotfy Gouda borrowed heavily from the Ultras repertoire in using techniques, tools and mechanisms in consciousness-raising among the students, from the use of flash mobs, to group chanting, to information sessions. He was always at the forefront to instigating students to protest, and was repeatedly expelled from university, culminating in him having transfer to another university this year. Despite that transfer, Lotfy Gouda still maintained ties with his former peers and still managed to be an active member of the movement. He was randomly arrested almost two months ago, and remains detained as of the writing of this paper.

Both Nagy Hamid, Lotfy Gouda and Tamer Hedayat embody Mannheim's definition of 'contemporaneity', in the sense of social relations that were forged in the context of similar experiences (Mannheim, 1972), that engendered a certain common motivation (in that case highly organized social groups for the objective of supporting a particular team or club), and gave rise to a common sense of social solidarity, effectively constituting a 'generational unit'.

In a similar vein, to social relations forged in context of similar experiences there was the experience of Botrous Wanis is a male, Christian, Pharmacy student from GUC. He is the editor of the university newsletter, *The Insider*, a position that made him acutely aware of what was happening, even if he was not directly involved. He came from a family of professionals, his father and mother, both pharmacists. He described both his parents as typically feloul (former-regime loyalists), and not necessarily really interested in politics. Although he didn't mention any particular role models that inspired him, politically, he talked profusely of a maternal uncle whose literary merits and achievements he strove to emulate. Botrous Wanis was one of the few subjects that actually had previous experience in political mobilization during his school years. As a senior student, the school refused to organize a graduation party for his class, which resulted in the students protesting and then calling for a sit-in that was even endorsed by some of the parents. Although he didn't particularly single out this experience as being formative, there is no doubt that school students protesting against their school administration is a profoundly influential experience (Fillieule, 2013).

Despite that experience, Botrous Wanis was a pessimist who criticized the current student union leaders as "ineffectual" and "misguided". He emphasized the university administration was invincible and that the student movement had no chance in actually defeating it. When asked why he participated in a movement he considered futile, he answered that the movement at first was more focused and more in touch with the students and the general Zeitgeist but later got hijacked by amateurish and inexperienced students.

### **Student Movement as Formative Experience**

The second scheme involves the narratives of four students who professed no prior experience with any group socialization or structure: Asfour Ahmed from MIU, Ahmed Abu Zeid from BUE (British University in Cairo), Tamer Hedayat and Fares Mohsen from GUC. Each of the four came to play a significantly prominent role in the students' mobilization in their respective universities, with Ahmed Abu Zeid being the most extreme case of a university terminally expelling a student because of their political influence. None of them had previous political experience or group

socialization experience. Asfour Ahmed is a Muslim, male, dentistry major, who came from a "socially-mixed" background. He described his familial background as being comprised of a broad spectrum of socio-economic classes (perhaps the only student interviewed who explicitly describes his family as such). He is an only child, of parents who both work in the medical field. Asfour Ahmed did not have any prior group socialization experiences but rather one where mentorship relationship with former student movement leader proved to be decisive in inculcating him with the necessary skills and tools to be part of the student movement. The role of peer-socialization in S150215's experience evolved over time and he described that the experience of four years in university and working with the student movement without the conventional mode of political socialization took place through those exchanges with his peers, in which learning by doing and learning from others of the same group was how he gained most of his mobilizational or political experience.

Ahmed Abu Zeid is a Muslim, male, engineering major who came from a family comprised of a father who is a senior bureaucrat, a mother who is a housewife and who were described as being politically neutral. The story of his involvement in the student movement was the most radical of all the other interviewees. And although he does not exhibit an extroverted or domineering personality, he showed an exceptional degree of empathy and idealism. Ahmed Abu Zeid is the student that was terminally expelled from the BUE, and who took the university to court (specifically the State Council and the High Administrative Court), that ruled in his favor, and issued a historical verdict and a crucial precedent, that the university had no right or authority to expel students without prior disciplinary action, and that the university's decision borderline violates the law.

The political career of Ahmed Abu Zeid was surprising in its development, as he explained that he was completely apolitical when he joined the BUE in 2010. He, like Tamer Hedayat, was an amateur photographer whose early excursions among the protesters served as a visual as well as personal discovery of what was happening. He credits these photographic forays into moments of conflict as the inspiration to join the student movement. By 2012, a few students, less than ten, created the Revolutionary

Movement Group in the university, as the name suggests the members of the group were interested to conveying the reality of the mobilization happening outside of the university to the students. They started printing out statements, distributing pamphlets and even creating a Facebook page. One of the founders of the group, would later run for student union president and win. Ahmed Abu Zeid credits this founder in instigating the student movement beyond pamphleteering and statements. Ahmed Abu Zeid used practical grievances of the students and framed it in those heavily politicized terms that characterize social movements. A significant example would be the 2012 protest of the petroleum engineering department (the major Ahmed Abu Zeid was part of). The BUE based a lot of its educational appeal, to the fact that the degree it offers is validated by other universities in the UK. Students pay up to 60,000 EGP as validation fees. However, the universities that are in partnership with the BUE do not have a petroleum engineering major, which implicates the university in fraud and practical theft from the students. The students protested, held a sit-in and eventually forced the university to pay them back the validation fees and extra money as compensation. That experience positively shaped the student perception of mobilization and contention, something that was reflected again by the end of that year when the results of the entire university was 75% failure in one course or more. The egregious numbers practically drove the students to occupy the main administration building in the university for a week, academic classes were suspended and a mass investigation was conducted to address the matter. The investigation revealed that there was an intentional drop in the grades to balance out the number of scholarships given to students that year. The university president and the provost were both dismissed from their positions. The success of this story raised the stakes for all the students who were part of the movement. Success necessitates higher sense of commitment and collective empowerment (Hirsch, 1990). This was aided by structural factors, such as the university administration being more amenable to student protests\*. Creating a feedback loop mechanism, where students protest, the administration responds, so students protest more and so on. The tragic turn of events, is when the board of trustees (comprised of former Mubarak politicians and crony businessmen) appointed a

former army major general, who ended up expelling more than 30 students in the span of a month.

The conflict with the new university president reached its zenith, in 2014 when the university accepted a large number of students while the necessary buildings and infrastructure was not finished and with scheduling and bus routes completely disorganized. The student Union then took advantage of this and explained to the students that they need the SU to be able to address these issues and they need to revise the constitution that governs that process. After repeated meetings and discussions the new president dismissed the demands of the students and singled out Ahmed Abu Zeid as "the source of the problem". The university president even threatened Ahmed Abu Zeid with terminal suspension. And in a surprise move he sent emails to the entire university explaining that the new constitution has been approved and that Ahmed Abu Zeid is terminally expelled from the university and five more students were also expelled for a semester. When other students protested on social media, another round of expelling took place. And when students physically protested, further students were expelled. At that point, Ahmed Abu Zeid took the university to court, and made his case public by appearing on several TV talk shows along with the university president who accused him and the student movement of ludicrous charges, such as smuggling arms from Turkey. The university even went and proposed in its argument before the court, that the students who were expelled were forcibly trying to get into the SU to open commercial establishments on campus to profit out of them.

Despite the fact that the court ruled in favor of Ahmed Abu Zeid, he was not reinstated back to his university and eventually had to give up going back. Ahmed Abu Zeid's experience is exceptional in its how it progressed and how it is an extreme manifestation of the price of engagement and participation. During his interview Ahmed Abu Zeid talked many times about the cost of defection or continuing in the movement, knowing very well that the stakes were very high. This negotiation between what is objectively reasonable and serves one interest and what is subjectively perceived as what is necessary and important is crucial in understanding Ahmed Abu Zeid's experience. Tamer Hedayat echoes Abu Zeid's empathetic response to the

student movement. He even shares the same familial background to an extent and the same calm, rational personal outlook. He is a Muslim, male, pharmacy major who came from a family of private business owners. He is a studious, methodical person, who seemed to deliberate on everything before he said it. He described his family background as "conventional" and even neutral. However, his elder brother was politically active and got arrested in the first week of the revolution. Tamer Hedayat credits this as a defining moment in his awareness. Tamer Hedayat's involvement in politics came through his interest in photography. He began to go down and just document whatever he witnessed. His use of photography would eventually make him involved in documenting many of the critical events at GUC and supplying the university newsletter, *The Insider*, with material. That methodological, inquisitive, personality is what garnered him attention in the first place from the student movement. He relayed a story where one of the groups of the student movement, asked a hundred of their members to create groups, randomly, to form committees as a way to shadow the student union. Tamer Hedayat voluntarily took the names, created tables with each group and tagged each member with their respective group. Tamer Hedayat initiative to offer logistical and organizational support would continue to characterize his involvement with the student movement. Even when he was doing an exchange academic program in Berlin he maintained his involvement by doing student marches in Berlin against the protest law. Tamer Hedayat constantly talked about "rational decision making", and logical thinking, and even when discussing something as painful as the death of a colleague he still insisted that as members of the student movement, it is his duty to maintain his calm and think rationally of how to better manage the crisis. He actually used the word "crisis management" a lot. This borrowing of terms from a more private business kind of discourse, vis-à-vis terms that better convey the students' reality is another interesting example how students with no formal political socialization experience are able to judge and develop terms that are indicative of what they are implicated in and how can they better deal with it. Continuing with the same perceived rationality was Fares Mohsen's interview. It showed him to be empathetic as Tamer and Ahmed, but it also reflected a certain critical stance He is a Muslim, male, pharmacy major, who came from a family comprised of a businessman father and a

physician mother. He had an unusual clarity of thought, which he managed to sustain over more than two hours of interviewing. Perhaps even more interesting is reflexiveness with regards his own political orientation and how his political socialization evolved. He serves as a typical example of a receptive subject to a universal social experience and the subsequent conscious decision to engage with this experience, even on a virtual level. Fares Mohsen began outlining his interest in the student movement even before he joined GUC. He explained that he actively followed the student protests to erect a monument for student Karim Khozam who died at the Port Said Stadium Massacre. The protests resulted in five students being expelled and effectively set in motion a wider interest in the movement and a demand for an elected student union. Fares Mohsen explained that he joined GUC by choice, although his academic score enabled him to join pharmacy at Cairo university, seen as a more prestigious choice than a private university. However, Fares explained that he found the student movement and the activism, the student life in general, inspiring and wanted to be part of that. He succinctly summed the main grievances for the students, that continually triggered "mass mobilization" as issues pertaining to safety on and off campus (students faced car theft, forced robbery and even kidnap in one case), the continuous increase in fees and final parking space and better bus routes (the tragic consequence of a seemingly "marginal" issue was the death of student Yara Negm, who precisely because the parking space and the bus routes are so hectically organized, was crushed to death between two buses 9 March 2015).

In a similar vein like Ahmed Abu Zeid, Fares Mohsen proposed that these three key issues constantly reintroduced themselves into the rhetoric of the movement even at times when students were mobilized for other reasons, such as the demand to commemorate students who died at football matches (Karim Khozam in Port Said Stadium Massacre and Mohammed Salah in Air Force Stadium Massacre).

This critical clarity encouraged him to run for student union president for 2015, which he lost by a slim margin. When asked if the student movement negatively affected his grades, he answered in a minimal way, it did. However, he too cited the "emotional and

psychological" attachment he feels for his fellow students that always pushed to continue participating in the movement.

The four students are interesting examples of "bounded" rationality concept in rational action theory (Opp, 2009). Each of them shows how individuals decide to engage with a movement through what they consider as a subjectively perceived good or incentive compared to what might be objectively detrimental to their interests or undermines their utility as observed by outsider or a third party. In the case of Tamer Hedayat or Fares Mohsen that is even clearer, since both while being involved in the movement still maintained a cordial relation with their professors and the administration and did not suffer the academic downturn that their colleagues did. Both articulated a subjective notion of what is "good" and what needs to be done without emphasizing any rhetoric or ideological fascination. Asfour Ahmed and Ahmed Abu Zeid demonstrate an even more radical position, one where the heavy involvement multiplied the risks of retaliation and "punishment" from the university and at the same time increased the cost of defection (Bennani-Chraibi and Fillieule, 2003). Both exemplify the problematic of conflation of institutional factors at play and subjective factors in determining how long can members sustain their involvement in a movement with escalating threat of retaliation (in the case of Ahmed Abu Zeid, the retaliation or punishment was most severe).

### **The Gendered Experience**

The final schema looks at the experience of two female students from GUC who were the only two female students that agreed to sit for an interview. Heba Ali, a management major and Lina Omar a pharmacy major were both introduced to me via Tamer Hedayat and both readily agreed to meet for an interview. It is an unusual position amongst female students especially that the only other female student I managed to meet, was another female student also from GUC, but eventually showed no interest in being interviewed (actual reasons were never disclosed). Heba Ali is a management major, unusually mature for her age, almost matriarchal in her presence, there was an undeniable charisma about her. She explained that she came from a regular upper-middle class family. Her father worked in Saudi Arabia and her mother

stayed with her and her sister in Egypt. She has a politically inclined family; her mother joined her in protests like Mohammed Mahmoud and constantly supported her political activities. Her sister was a founding member in Dostour Party and involved in almost every other political initiative since then. Despite the fact that the sister worked with a feminist collective, Heba Ali did not describe herself as a "feminist". She even went on to say that she did not particularly feel discriminated against and did not encounter practical situations where she was "marginalized" because she is a woman. Heba Ali embodies Somerville's notion of the limitation of the notion of "identity" (Somerville, 1997), in this case a woman, in explaining women's participation and involvement in social movements. Heba Ali's gender does not necessarily dictate her interest or her political affiliation but rather adds a layer of complexity to how she sees herself and how structural and cultural conditions play a role in her involvement and participation. She is an interesting example of interest not being defined by identity per se, but rather becomes constitutive of it. For example, she joined the Revolutionary Socialists at some point and was part of every leftist grouping in her university and repeatedly reiterated the statement, "I am always with the rights of the people". One can then argue that Heba Ali was not predisposed to a feminist agenda just for being a woman, but rather embodies a feminist position by constantly challenging the expected role a woman should play.

Lina Omar was also introduced to me via Tamer Hedayat. She is a pharmacy student; both her parents are also pharmacists. She described her parents as politically indifferent and not necessarily conservative, and not particularly liberal. Lina Omar was remarkably intelligent while talking throughout the interview, and even came across as being shrewd. The gender question was proposed to Lina Omar, and at first she said she could not exactly identify instances of discrimination or gender inequality. However, after two hours of conversation she said that she realizes that the ratio of females to males in the group that comprises many of the students involved in the movement is unequal. She explained that she never thought about it in terms of equality of representation or participation (something she never questioned, she said) but when asked repeatedly, it did become clear that there was certain disequilibrium.

Lina Omar's involvement in the movement reveals the participation patterns that are typical of the structural constraints to women's participation (Cable, 1992). She carefully outlined the parameters of her engagement, as stipulated by her father: she can join in a protest inside the university, she can join a sit-in but not stay the night away from home, she is not allowed to join any march or protest outside of the university. Lina Omar was not overly concerned with these limitations, and she revealed that sometimes she would join a march or a protest outside the university and not tell her father, as not to make him worry too much. What is interesting is that she spoke about her participation in terms of working on campaigning during elections and providing logistical and coordination support for her colleagues and peers. She did not necessarily regard this as being shaped by her gender. When asked why she did not assume more leadership roles, she answered that, "I am not averse to the idea, but the opportunity never presented itself".

Both Lina Omar and Heba Ali did not consciously view themselves as "exceptional" or as "challenging" prescribed gender roles. Their specific subjective conditions (personal disposition, social network, etc.) together with structural conditions (lenient/progressive families, accessibility and mobility, private university as a lesser of a conservative space, etc.) combined to make them able to respond to certain appeals for participation or moments of mobilization. Their unique status as being among the few female "visible" students raises the question of subtle mechanism of gender that operate in contexts or milieus that might be deemed as more gender progressive or inclusive (i.e. a private university).

### **Antoan Sameh Bridge**



The pedestrian bridge right by MIU University is one of the few models of success for the student movement if we ignore the largest and wide range socializing effects of the mobilization among students. The bridge came as a unique point of "polarization" between the students and the university administration. Polarization in the sense that existing institutional politics stand insufficient or ineffectual with regards a certain need or contingency, where the involved parties wish to disrupt these institutional politics to address such urgency or need (Hirsch, 1990). The road to the bridge itself and the cycles of mobilization that it went through remarkably echoed the cycles of political attention or instigation that characterized the general political atmosphere, where this affiliation and synchronicity was used to remobilize the students again and again.

The story of the bridge goes back to student Antoan Sameh, who was one day waiting for his father outside campus and was hit by a speeding truck that killed him immediately. The sudden and tragic death of a colleague prompted the students the very next day to organize a stand in commemoration of their colleague and demand that a pedestrian bridge be built to connect the two sides of the highway, namely the Cairo-Ismailia Desert Road, saving the students the danger of crossing a highway or even more, the untimely death like Sameh. The stand and the university reaction would be the blueprint for the next two years of student mobilization. The students decided to cut the main road for ten minutes and gave the university and the authorities three days to respond to their demand. The university never responded and after three days another silent protest took place, and the students tried to cut the road again but this time the university administration and students from the already preexisting social clubs (clubs organized and maintained by the university) tried to stop them resulting in clashes and four students from the student movement being expelled.

As this was the end of the semester, by the following semester the students decided to organize another stand to protest against the expelling of the students and the bridge that remained unconstructed. Within the same time frame, another student was hit by car incurring multiple fractures and nearly losing her life. The student, who came from a family of modest means, was studying at MIU on a scholarship. The university sent a

representative to her family to reassure them that the university will take care of her medical bills as long as she remains silent. However, the students become furious and Lotfy Gouda (who was among the students who were expelled), specifically, starts instigating the students to riot. The rioting picked up momentum and the students headed to the administrative building and started protesting right in front of the vice president's office. Revealing a typical pattern of 'collective empowerment' which comes with increased number of participants show desire to engage and even face the risk of being expelled or punished (Hirsch, 1990). The office had bodyguards surrounding it, and the vice president gave orders to his bodyguards to make sure no student "trespasses". The university decided to expel some of the students who were involved in the rioting and they decided to organize a sit-in which lasted for seventeen days.

The parents of the students tried to interfere and negotiation with the administration, which promised that it would only conduct procedural disciplinary hearing and that the students will be re-instituted normally. The students dispersed only to realize that the university expelled each of them for two weeks. The students tried to use that moment of injustice as a moment to demand that a new students union be elected and that the existing student union (which was handpicked by the university) be dismissed after being subject to public hearing as it why it failed in its mission to defend and safeguard the rights of the students. The bid to dismiss the existing SU gathered some momentum but eventually faltered and the students had to think of another tactic. This places the movement strictly within the paradigm of cycles of protest and political opportunity, in the classical sense of cycles of protest but in the absence of an organizational behavior/experience (Minkoff, 1997) or "social movement community" (Staggenborg, 1998) the movement is left to rely on external stimulus or spontaneous action.

This is clearly reflected in what happened next, when the students were at loss as to how to continue with their mobilization, up to the point when another business major student nearly lost his life trying to cross the highway and was overheard by the university guards insulting the university. The guards notified the university which threatened the student with expulsion. Although the students received assurances by

the dean of business that he will not be expelled. However, the student later received a call informing that he was expelled for a year. Again the students spontaneously mobilized and violent clashes between the students and the university guards lasted for over three hours. The students decided to stage a sit-in in front of the university and the administration sent an email that the university will be closed the next day. The following morning the students gathered to discuss how to address the matter of escalating their tactics to have their demands heard. What happened next was five hours of violent clashes between the university security staff and the students who gathered. The clashes resulted in over sixty casualties, six of whom were pellet-related injuries. The university has procured a security staff that was described by the students as a "bunch of thugs". The security used everything in their disposal, stones, tiles, water cannons, tear gas and eventually fired pellets. The students' outrage did not abate until they broke down the gate and entered the university campus. As they stormed the campus they encountered the remnants of the security staff and demanded the head of security resign (a retired army major general) -which he did- and that the vice president and one of the deans resign as well. However, this was not the case. Only the head of security resigned.

The students occupied the university; academic study was suspended for two weeks. After which repeated meetings with Minister of Higher Education and the Minister of Youth, along with the deans of each faculty were held (two meetings were held) but with no tangible change on the part of the university. The students continued their sit-in for two months. After repeated negotiations, construction on the bridge finally took place and the bridge was inaugurated on 28 March 2014.

## **Conclusion**

The students' movement in private universities that flourished throughout 2011 and up till this moment represents a unique phenomenon of what happens in the wake of a universally politicizing event, i.e. a revolution, and how that is paralleled across different contexts relative to the structural and circumstantial conditions of those contexts. The private universities were established as apolitical institutions of higher

learning, with the assumption that the children of the rich and wealthy do not have grievances and are uninterested in the world around them by default. This assumption of isolation, socially due to class and physically as most of these universities are located in the new suburbs of Cairo, defies the basic machinations of the permeability of social fabric. The universities by definition are spaces that engender collective action or patterns of behavior (Mannheim, 1972) and spaces where the physical presence of the students (6,000 students on average in each university) cannot be avoided. The interviews all showed that the students are not "isolated" from the overall social context they are part of. The fantasy that the rich and affluent have no relation with the outside world is misleading and misguided. In many instances the students showed acute awareness with their surroundings and even participated in a way or another in taking part in the ongoing cycles of protest.

The narrow definition of what grievance is or might mean to those who are financially affluent or economically well-off risked dismissing the entire experience of the student movement in private universities. Throughout the interviews with the students, grievance was a concept that was constantly being negotiated by the students, in reference to their reality and in reference to a more normative notion of what is justice and what is fair. For example, the absence of a representative body that mediates between the university administration and the students, might seem more of a political ideal, yet the university's violation of its own promised perfect condition (more parking space, a safer campus, etc.) is something that is completely anchored in the students' reality. Political idealization aside, there was a pressing issue, an urgency or contingency and the preexisting institutional means proved ineffectual in resolving it, hence the recourse to organize and mobilize (Hirsch, 2105). Another example would be the demand for student-written by laws governing the students. Again this sounds like a politically idealistic demand, but the reality is that students were called to disciplinary hearings and were penalized (by suspension or expulsion) based on those draconian bylaws that were put in place by the university. Demanding that the bylaws be amended and voted on by the student body, does appear as a political ideal, but one that is anchored in reality nonetheless.

The experience of the student movement in private universities poses interesting questions, to what factors (structural or political) are necessary for mobilization in absence of conventional mediums of socialization? What guides this mobilization? How can we analyze this experience with the limitations of social movement theories? Perhaps the work of Snow and Moss on spontaneous action in social movement might be an interesting venue for further research (Snow and Moss, 2014). At several points in time, the students engaged in “spontaneous” action to be discussed, I don’t think there is any kind of “spontaneity”<sup>\*</sup> in social movements, especially those with high duration and many times the interviewees reiterated the phrase "the students were always ahead of us". The fact that there were no preexisting effective structures of mobilization<sup>\*</sup>, the student movement is quite a novice and has not accumulated enough political experience to engender loyalty or ideological adherence, the fluid, horizontal nature of the movement and spatial factor of the university as a socially dense space, all contributed to creating a potential and a possibility for interactions that were informed by the notions of grievance and subjectively perceived narratives in relation to a wider context, as articulated by each student, giving us finally a vibrant and complex example of a social movement.

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\* “spontaneous” is placed between quotation marks as it signifies the use of a phenomenon seemingly “spontaneous” but not spontaneous in nature. The action appeared to the outside world as “spontaneous” but it is exactly the result of all those experiences and choices that the students made, based on the contingencies of their social realities. So rather the accumulation of these experiences that led to this action that an outside observer might see as “spontaneous”.

\* The lack of those structures does not preclude political socialization. The political socialization took place in that absence of these structures. The paper is contesting the structural prerogative and its role, and rather trying to look at experience and agency

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### **About the author**

Ismail Fayed is an independent writer and researcher. He has worked as a research assistant in the Political Science Department at the American University in Cairo and has written extensively on the relationship between culture and politics. His primary research interests include visual culture, dramaturgy of politics, performance theory and feminist and gender studies.

### **About ARSP Round II**

Through the Arab Research Support Program, ARI offers funding for scholars from the Arab region. The program aims to develop the research skills of the new generation of social scientists in Arab countries by funding, monitoring and providing training. It gives priority to innovative, evidence-based research related to the Arab democratic transitions, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria.

### **About ARI**

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading Arab Think Tank founded on the principles of impartiality, social justice and diversity. Our mission is to promote an agenda for democratic change through policy analysis and research, while providing a platform for inspirational voices.

- We partner with institutes on original research, analysis and outreach-across the Arab countries as well as globally.
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions.
- We mobilise stakeholders to build coalitions for change .
- Our goal is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge in the Arab countries.



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