CHAPTER 5

Private Universities and the State in Egypt at a Time of Social and Political Change*

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In 2008, Egypt celebrated the centenary of its first modern university, what is nowadays known as Cairo University, which was established as a private institution in 1908, became the State University in 1925, was later renamed Fouad the First (after the then king of Egypt), and finally became Cairo University after the revolution of 1952. The resonance this institution has in the Egyptian public imaginary is hard to overstate, for the university campus with its magnificent architecture constitutes, in national historiography as in cinema, in novels and autobiographies, a veritable ‘place of memory’, and it is usually an actor in – or at least a witness to – the country’s historical events (Farag 2006).

Historically, Egypt has had a highly centralised education system, central to the project of nation building and to the possibility of achieving progress (Farag 2009). This is associated with the pivotal role granted to it by the revolutionary power of the 1950s, which put education centre stage in the effort to create a new citizenry; in later years, attention to education resulted from the great number of people directly or indirectly affected by it, in a country that has been witnessing an amazing population growth for decades. In the past two decades, crises of the system and of reform have featured prominently in public discourse in the country, with privatisation being a particularly contested topic, as I will show. More importantly, the throughout interest in the reforms, whether applied or not, shows education’s “important influence in building the foundations of legitimacy of the political system” (Farag 2012: 83).

Education becomes an arena for playing out societal and political struggles,

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and this accrues its relevance in a country where open political debate has been largely repressed.

This relevance became apparent in the events that led to the resignation of former President Hosny Mubarak at the beginning of February 2011. Many commentators pointed to the fact that most protesters were rather young – not surprisingly in a country in which people below 24 years of age represent almost half the population – and educated, at the very least in using new media and in organising spectacular forms of demonstration. Protests have gained stronger recognition in countries with a rather solid educational background:

spearheaded by educated youth, the Arab uprisings have been brought to fruition by the masses of ordinary people (men, women, Muslim and non-Muslim) who have mobilised at an astonishing scale against authoritarian regimes in pursuit of social justice, democratic governance, and dignity.1

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Protests in Egypt, as in Tunisia and elsewhere, were fuelled by problems such as lack of political freedom and oppression, but a major factor has been the expansion of higher education without simultaneous growth in job opportunities, leading to graduate joblessness. Moreover, despite being spaces where one could hardly expect to find freedom of assembly or expression, universities are nonetheless spaces where critique emerges, as I have argued elsewhere (Cantini 2016). Despite there being spaces where one could hardly expect to find freedom of assembly or expression, as universities are as constrained as other institutions, they are nonetheless spaces where critique emerges, as I have argued elsewhere (Cantini 2016). There are now studies that clearly show the importance of earlier movements and civic actions (particularly since 2002) in allowing activists to acquire experience, and public universities had a central role in many of these earlier movements (Abdelrahman 2015).

Given the absolute centrality of youth and education in the Egyptian public discourse, as well as its renewed importance in wake of the 2011 revolution, continued in the following years, it is necessary to have a more grounded understanding of the actual meaning of ‘private’ in a country where state

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1 “Once the protests broke out in Tahrir Square, many of the cohort of civic-minded active young people that universities raised in the past years were quick to join in. As the protests gathered strength, the protestors soon became highly organized with medical stations, cleaning brigades, security checks to stop anyone bringing a weapon into the square or small stands where people could leave their mobile phones to recharge to give but a few examples” (Warden 2011).