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The Arab Spring:
The Higher Education Revolution That Is Yet to Happen

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The overthow of the Tunisian and Egyptian rulers, following widespread demonstrations for regime change—subsequently, spreading from Algeria to Yemen, as well as to Libya, Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain—has raised hopes for a new political dawn across the Arab region. Likened to a “volcano” by some observers, protest movements call for new forms of citizenship and for the establishing of new bases of state legitimacy. Commentators refer to a long overdue “political spring.” Others invoke the notion of a “renaissance” or a renewed “Arab awakening.” Others, still, refer to a watershed of “revolutions” ushering in new forms of politics, attuned to questions of human rights and public participation. In response, reform initiatives have been frenetically introduced by ruling elites in their attempts to contain and navigate the ensuing legitimacy crisis. At this juncture, one wonders how do the unfolding political upheavals across the Arab region and the reform initiatives introduced by besieged ruling elites affect state–higher education relations more particularly?

Higher Education and Regime Legitimacy

Higher education institutions in the Arab region play a key role in upholding a regime’s self-projected image of benevolent rule. They provide access to educational credentials to younger generations of high school graduates, particularly those originating from less-established socioeconomic strata and who desperately seek entry into structurally confined labor markets. Equally, they secure stable civil-service jobs to academics and intellectuals, affiliated with the middle and middle-upper classes. The latter represent a mount-
tal.” Emphasis is placed on measurable indicators of higher education performance, in terms of engaging labor markets, employability, and economic returns of graduates. At the same time, the political contexts under which higher education institutions may best thrive are neglected. Thus, questions pertaining to faculty and student participation in higher education governance, and their effects on the fostering of a research culture, are left entirely unattended—fuelling resentment, alienation, and disillusionment in relation to both the state and higher education institutions, alike. The subordination of higher education institutions further erodes the public respectability these institutions have traditionally enjoyed. It also lays bare—as sociologist M’hammed Sabour has shown in The Ontology and Status of Intellectuals in Arab Academia and Society—the marginality of the academic, who very often lacks the capacity “to speak truth to power” from within institutional platforms without risking the regime’s retaliation and reprisal.

**It is not yet clear what configurations of state higher education relations would emerge out of the current political contestation.**

With an overwhelming reliance of the Arab state on foreign consultancies and imported know-how, higher education institutions are further limited in their capacity to productively engage development challenges or contribute to the indigenization of knowledge through viable context-based approaches to research—particularly in the fields of the social sciences and education. Paradoxically, while the restructuring reforms preceding the current wave of regime contestation have expanded higher education opportunities beyond recognition, often over quite a brief period of time, these reforms have nonetheless exposed the reliance of both the state and higher education institutions on precarious visions of modernity and globalization.

**Reconstructing Higher Education from Within**

It is not yet clear what configurations of state higher education relations would emerge out of the current political contestation. Nor is it clear whether and how the contestation witnessed so far would affect higher education governance more particularly. What is clear, however, is that for the generative capacities of higher education to flourish, both the state and civil-society groups and movements must recognize that the political, cultural, and economic roles of higher education institutions cannot be approached separately.

What is equally clear is that academics need to turn their research tools inward, by critically unpacking the foundations of the higher education structures in which they work and by critically reflecting on their implication with state power. Such a critical engagement would help reclaim not only the centrality of academic work in development but would also connect the academic workplace with community engagement and social transformation. The prospects of this reclaiming are not solely contingent on governance reforms for greater faculty and student participation or on the overthrowing of despotic regimes, as important as these are. These outlooks are primarily contingent on the arduous struggle of academics involved in building an inclusive “knowledge culture” and in constructing a knowing self for whom the “capacity to aspire” and the capacity to differ are inalienable rights, which no regime nor other forms of power can “slip, nor break, nor overreach.”

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**Egyptian Private Higher Education at a Crossroads**

**Daniel C. Levy and Manar Sabry**

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The revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime opens the door to uncertain political, economic, and social futures. These futures will condition higher education outcomes. One important development to scrutinize is the fate of private higher education. Will the private sector see continued growth or be constrained by political populism or take some different course altogether? Revolutions have often been antithetical to private higher education.
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