

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Youth Mobilization in Egypt: New Trends and Opportunities

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Background Paper

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Youth in the Arab World

With a foundation of 30 faculty members at AUB, the Program on Youth in the Arab World acts as a meeting point, catalyst and central repository for Arab-international research and policy on Arab youth.

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The Series includes papers and analytical texts that were written during a consultative process undertaken by UNICEF MENA-RO and AUB-IFI to inform the themes explored and discussed in the report “A Generation on the Move: Insights into the Conditions, Aspirations and Activism of Arab Youth” between 2009 and 2011.

The papers discuss issues explored throughout the different chapters of the report, or brief youth situation analysis in specific countries. Methodologies used include reviews of existing literature, quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

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Contents

Introduction	4
New Forms and Channels of Youth Mobilization	5
<i>The NGO sector</i>	5
<i>New Social Movements</i>	5
<i>Independent Student Initiatives</i>	6
<i>New Media</i>	6
Understanding the Rise in Youth Mobilization	7
Youth in Egypt and the Region	8
References	9

Introduction

Civic participation among youth in Egypt is alarmingly low. According to a recent survey, which confirms the findings of various earlier surveys, only 2% of youth are participating in volunteer work, only 5% participate in youth centers and sports clubs, political parties, unions and associations and housing and school boards, and only 16% of all eligible young voters voted in a previous election (The Population Council, 2010).

In spite of these grim statistics, there are some indications that this condition is slowly being reversed and that an increasing number of young people are becoming more actively engaged and mobilized. However, such engagement is not taking place through conventional or formal channels of participation such as student unions, trade unions, political parties, or elections - all of which are subject to a large battery of legal restrictions. Rather youth participation is taking place through new and unconventional channels such as informal social movements and new media. I argue that the recent increase in youth participation can be detected in four principle arenas: the NGO sector, new social movements, independent student initiatives and new media. In the following, I examine youth mobilization in these four arenas, explore the reasons behind the proposed increase in youth mobilization, and conclude with a brief note on youth mobilization in Egypt and the Arab world.

New Forms and Channels of Youth Mobilization

The NGO Sector

There are some indications that youth participation in the NGO sector has been increasing. In recent years, there has been a visible increase in the presence of youth in the activities of human rights and advocacy NGOs, especially in election monitoring activities which were conducted by thousands of young activists during the 2005 elections. A more recent development has been the creation of human rights and advocacy NGOs by young activists who were previously active in some of the older and better established NGOs. New youth led advocacy NGOs include NGOs such as al Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies, the Egyptian Democratic Academy and the Union for Liberal Youth.

Moreover, new types of NGOs which are youth led or youth driven and which engage in community services and developmental activities have also begun to emerge. These include organizations such as Resala, which boasts 70,000 youth volunteers, Nahdet Al Mahrousa NGO and 3alashanek ya Baladi NGO. To date there are approximately 12 youth led NGOs, some of which have come together to create the first Egyptian Federation for Youth NGOs (World Bank, 2007). And while this number is still very small compared to the size of the Egyptian population and to the overall number of existing NGOs, it nonetheless highlights an emerging trend that is likely to increase in coming years.

New Social Movements

With the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada, and the creation of The Egyptian Popular Committee for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) in the fall of 2000, a new form of political mobilization began to take shape in Egypt. EPCSPI was formed by seventies generations activists from different political backgrounds who chose to adopt a horizontal and decentralized informal organizational framework and to rely on protest and direct action as a means of rallying support for the Intifada. EPCSPI was successful in mobilizing a large number of young activists, many of whom were participating in a political activity for the very first time. This new generation of activists has even been labeled by some observers as “the Intifada Generation.”

In 2004, the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) was established by some of the same activists who helped found EPCSPI in 2000. Kefaya focused on issues of constitutional and democratic reform and was able in 2005 to stage a large number of protest actions, which partially contributed to the conclusion of the first competitive presidential elections in Egypt. Youth were an active participant in Kefaya and they created a sub-movement within Kefaya called Youth for Change which at its peak had approximately 300 members and which was responsible for organizing many of the street actions held under the banner of Kefaya (Hassabo, 2009).

After the decline of Kefaya, some of the young activists associated with the creation of the Youth for Change movement came together in 2008 to create the 6th of April Movement. The creation of this movement coincided with large scale protests by textile workers in the city of al Mahalla which took place on the 6th of April 2008 and which drove youth in Cairo and other urban centers to come together to organize parallel protests in support of the textile workers protest. The 6th of April movement is now one of the most active and visible youth movements in Egypt and aspires through a series of protest actions and campaigns to promote large scale social and political change in Egypt.

Young activists are also a leading actor in the National Society for Change which was created in 2010 with the purpose of supporting the candidacy of Dr. Al Baradei for the 2011 presidential elections. In fact, young activists were the first to rally around al Baradei and to try to mobilize support of his candidacy by creating a Facebook group (which is now the largest Egyptian political group on the internet) and also by organizing a popular reception for him at the Cairo airport and last by helping to create the National Society for Change

Independent Student Initiatives

In addition to growing youth participation in the activities of NGOs and new social movements, youth are beginning to mobilize once again on university campuses. The university has traditionally been the principal site of youth activism in Egypt. However, since the early nineties, and as a result of growing state control and supervision of the activities of student unions and student groups, youth activism on university campuses declined precipitously. Starting the new millennium, youth activism on university campuses has been on the ascendant once again. But this time around, youth activism is not centered on the elections and activities of student unions which have fallen completely under the control of state and NDP representatives but rather thought a series of independent youth initiatives such as simulation models, parallel student unions and campaigns to lower university fees.

Simulation models such as the Model United Nations, and the Model Arab League and the Model People's Assembly have become an important vehicle for socializing and mobilizing youth who wish to become engaged in public life. Many of the youth who subsequently became active participants in the NGO sector and in the new social movements were first initiated into public life through their participation in these simulation models which have been taking place with increasing frequency in various Egyptian universities. Moreover, these models have helped to create an informal network among young activists which seems to have facilitated their subsequent collaboration in various social movements and NGO activities (Abdel Rahman, 2007).

The creation of parallel student unions and the staging of parallel student union elections is also a novel form of student mobilization that thus far has taken place in 13 different Egyptian universities with the participation of thousands of university students, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood and to a lesser extent the left. To protest state control of the formal student unions, students from the Muslim Brotherhood proposed the idea of forming parallel student unions and convening parallel elections. The first such elections were held in 2005-2006 at Cairo University and the idea was subsequently taken up by students in other universities (Suleiman, 2010). However, attempts to create parallel student unions met with strong opposition from the state and the university administration and many of the students that were involved in this experiment were persecuted and expelled from their universities. In some instances, attempts to convene elections were forcefully disrupted by the university guard, as was the case in Ain Shams University, forcing the students to convene the elections at the lawyers syndicate instead.

Other forms of student activism have also included campaigns to resist attempts to raise university fees. Students in Asyout, Cairo and Helwan Universities launched campaigns such as the "Resistance" campaign and "My Right" campaign to counter attempts to raise university fees. In addition to organizing protest activities on their campuses, students also resorted to the courts to contest the administrations' attempts to raise fees and were able to secure a number of court rulings in their favor (Suleiman, 2010).

New Media

Youth activists have made extensive use of new media as a tool for expression, organization and mobilization. In recent years Egypt has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of mobile phone and internet users and a parallel expansion in the number of blogs, email groups, twitter and Facebook users, most of them youth. New media have provided youth with new public spaces that are less subject to state regulation and control and youth in Egypt have made full use of these new spaces. According to recent estimates, there are 17 million internet users in Egypt, 2.5 million Egyptians on face book and approximately 200,000 blogs created by Egyptians, of these approximately 20% focus on issues of a political nature (Haddad, 2010).

The use of new media as a tool for mobilization and organization was demonstrated by the 6th of April movement which is one of the largest youth led movements in Egypt. The 6th of April movement began as a virtual movement formed on Facebook to support the protests of textile workers in Mahalla and later became an actual movement that organized a number of protest activities. Al Baradei for presidency of Egypt group which was also formed on Facebook by young activists served as the starting point for the subsequent creation for the National Society for Change which includes many leading political figures. Al Baradei for Presidency of Egypt group is the largest Egyptian political group on Facebook. In May 2010 the group had 240,000 members which probably exceeds the total number of all the members of all the opposition parties and movements in Egypt.

Understanding the Rise in Youth Mobilization

Youth in Egypt are mobilizing because they have multiple grievances, and because new opportunities and resources for mobilization have become available over the past few years.

As shown in many studies and reports, the grievances suffered by youth in Egypt are acute. Youth suffer multiple forms of exclusion and marginalization. On the economic front, they suffer from inadequate social services and education, wide spread unemployment and low pay, and job insecurity. On the social front, conservative social norms prevent youth from fulfilling their sexual needs and difficult economic conditions are forcing many young men and women to delay the age of marriage. Finally, on the political front, all channels of formal political participation including political parties, trade unions, student unions, syndicates, and to a lesser extent NGOs, are strictly controlled by the regime or a by a narrow circle of elites co-opted by the regime, forcing youth to withdraw completely from formal political participation (Assaad & Barsoum, 2007).

In earlier decades, the grievance of youth were often expressed through participation in Islamic movements, such as the Brotherhood and to a lesser extent in some of the more militant movements such Al Jihad and Al Jamaa al Islamiyya. During the second half of the seventies, eighties and early nineties, youth joined these movements in large numbers and helped them, especially the Brotherhood, achieve important successes such as representation in parliament, student unions, and professional syndicates. However, the growth of the influence of these movements and their increased militancy during the late eighties and early nineties provoked a strong backlash from the state. For most of the nineties, the state waged a war of repression on these movements, significantly raising the cost of participation in these types of movements. And while the Muslim Brotherhood continues to have a support base among youth, particularly among university students and recent graduates, it no longer represents the only or preferred vehicle for youth mobilization.

In recent years, new opportunities and resources for mobilization have become available to youth and have encouraged the emergence of the new forms of youth mobilization. The emergence of new privately owned newspapers and television channels along side the old state-owned media has significantly expanded freedom of expression in Egypt and has given previously marginalized voices in the opposition, including youth, the opportunity to communicate with mass audiences. Similarly the significant expansion in internet usage, especially among youth, has allowed youth to express themselves more freely and directly than ever before and has provided them with new resources to build networks and to organize events and to create new public spaces that are less subject to state control and repression.

Other developments which seem to have encouraged increased youth activism is the overall increase in levels of societal mobilization and the emergence of new forms of organization and mobilization introduced by movements such EPSCPI and Kefaya. Increased youth activism has to be considered in light of a general trend towards increased societal remobilization in Egypt. This trend can be dated back to the Palestinian Intifada and the creation of EPSP and the subsequent emergence of Kefaya, which then paved the way for the emergence of hundreds of other movements representing the interests of a broad range of social actors such as factory workers, civil servants, consumers, slum dwellers, youth, etc. (Shehata, 2010).

Movements such as EPSCPI and Kefaya have contributed to the general increase of societal mobilization and youth mobilization by introducing new forms of political organization that bypass the legal constraints that the state has imposed on all formal channels of political participation. By organizing informally and horizontally and without seeking official license or recognition and by relying on direct forms of collective action such as street protests, these actors were able to create news spaces and forms of organization that youth were able to emulate.

A final factor, which may have encouraged the recent increase in youth mobilization, is the declining capacity and/or political will of the state in Egypt to exercise repression on a wide scale. Unlike the 1990s, when the Egyptian state repressed youth mobilization and other types of societal mobilization; since the new millennium the Egyptian state has exercised more restraint and tolerance vis-à-vis new forms of societal and youth mobilization. This change may be attributed to new reformist tendencies within the state, to a general decline in state capacity, and/or to greater scrutiny by the international community and by the local and international media.

Youth in Egypt and the Region

In most of the countries of the Arab region, youth have become the largest demographic group constituting in some places more than 50% of the general population. And in spite of important regional variations in levels of social and economic development, youth seem to share some of the same problems across the countries of the region, namely inadequate education, unemployment and underemployment, delayed marriages, and political exclusion.

Youth marginalization in the region has expressed itself in different ways including apathy and withdrawal, atavism and extremism, and less frequently positive engagement in public life. Recent developments in Egypt indicate the beginnings of a movement away from the former two tendencies, which tended to predominate in preceding decades, and a movement towards renewed mobilization and positive engagement in public life.

Such a trend is still nascent but can be detected in some of the countries of the region where extremist movements are on the retreat in favor of more moderate democracy oriented movements. However, whether this trend continues to grow will depend primarily on how regimes in the region respond to growing demands for inclusion and participation. Should ruling elites continue to block peaceful and democratic channels of political participation, youth are likely to revert to withdrawal or to more radical forms of mobilization. If on the other hand, regimes in the region create broader opportunities for youth mobilization and participation, their energies could be harnessed to create more peaceful, democratic and developed societies.

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