

Universities as Sites of Mobilization in North Africa: Insights from Egypt

Farah Ramzy

This article examines transformations of student politics in Egypt since the Arab uprisings. While neoliberal restructuring of higher education and intensified political repression weakened conventional protest forms, it enabled the emergence of alternative spaces where students formed political awareness. During the brief political opening around 2011, student political action took on various forms including protests but also more institutionalized competition through student unions.

As soon as the Arab uprisings broke out in the 2010s, they were associated with “youth.” Urban, educated, connected activists in their 20s and 30s were seen as the main actors of unexpected revolutions. While this interpretation has since been criticized for overly simplifying a diverse phenomenon—by centering it on figures of modern, Western-oriented youth and attributing it to megacorporations such as Facebook and Twitter—the idea of a youth revolution remains prevalent in accounts of the “Arab Spring.” Notably absent from this representation of youth is their status as university students or recent graduates. Although there were student mobilizations on many university campuses in the years that followed, they were far from being at the heart of the uprisings. More recently, university campuses were central sites of pro-Palestinian mobilizations in North America and Europe; they did not, however, play a comparable role in North African countries. This absence is even more striking when we consider the historical role of university students at the forefront of national mobilizations in many countries in North Africa in the 20th century. Where, then, were the students in 2011, and what has become of student activism in the region?

The Egyptian case provides insight into how the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, combined with intensified political repression, weakened historically dominant forms of student politics, nonetheless leaving space for new, more subtle forms of political consciousness to emerge. It further shows how, in the period of political opening, putting forward the student status in a protest could function as a strategic mobilization frame—sometimes placing student protests at the center of national contention or, conversely, distancing them from national politics. Accordingly, capturing contemporary forms of student politics in authoritarian neoliberal contexts requires moving beyond the legacy of 20th-century student protests and opening the lens to a variety of political practices.

From the Nation's Leaders to Its Unemployed Graduates

Throughout the 20th century, the construction of a modern higher education system in Egypt resulted in university students being seen as leaders of the struggle for national liberation and as an intellectual avant-garde speaking in the name of the nation. As in other states in North Africa, students carried a political charge, reflecting their position as members of an emerging educated national middle class. Student-led uprisings confirmed their centrality as political actors, including after independence, as they continued, despite state restrictions, to challenge the authoritarian consolidation of postcolonial regimes, especially during the 1970s.

As early as 1974, Egypt—followed by Tunisia and Morocco—launched programs of economic liberalization and subsequently worked with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on structural adjustment and economic reform programs. In this context, Egypt implemented higher education reforms involving partial privatization of the university sector alongside quality assurance and accreditation procedures. Similar reforms were pursued in Morocco and Tunisia.

This neoliberal shift led some scholars to argue that universities lost their relevance as sites of political mobilization, with their mission shifting from forming national youth to producing employable graduates. Rampant unemployment reinforced this perception, as discourse across countries presented students as future unemployed graduates—frustrated and prone to radicalization. The emphasis shifted to professionalization and the acquisition of skills necessary for integration into a competitive private job market. A combination of surveillance and co-optation ensured control of student unions and reduced protests, with the exception of political Islam groups, which articulated charity, religious teaching, mobilization for regional causes, and intermittent critique of authoritarian regimes.

Far from complete depoliticization, accounts from students in Egyptian universities prior to 2011 reveal, alongside intermittent

resurgences of mobilization around regional causes, new forms of political action—or pre-political practices—that would later be activated in a more open context. New student clubs emerged, organizing simulations of the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as development initiatives and international exchanges.

Entirely managed by students, these clubs offered collective learning experiences centered on international and regional institutions as well as local social engagement. While consistent with the neoliberal ideal of skill development, student appropriation of these spaces fostered critical consciousness and a sense of legitimacy in learning and speaking about politics. These spaces contributed to a sense of agency: the capacity to see oneself as an actor in one's professional future and to engage in collective action. Some participants later joined the 2011 uprising; others went on to positions within the counterrevolutionary government or international organizations. These clubs nonetheless constituted a (trans-) formative experience, generating professional and interpersonal resources and offering a distinctive pathway to engaging with politics in an authoritarian context.

Student Mobilizations in a Context of Failed Democratic Transition

Between the 2011 uprising and the 2013 military intervention, political effervescence marked campuses. Fieldwork in Egypt shows that protests reemerged but were one form of collective action among others, alongside student unions and electoral activity affiliated with new political parties.

In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, mobilizations focused on removing university leadership affiliated with the Mubarak regime and organizing free student union elections. Activists framed these protests not as student-specific issues but as a continuation of the revolution within universities. The following year, during mobilizations against repression in the transition period, student protests moved to the streets and merged into broader discontent. Paradoxically, many activists describe this episode as the “true return of the student

movement,” as it revived historically recognizable forms of protest.

The 2011–2012 elections saw new political parties and more structured student groups transforming the relatively informal networks that had characterized student organization. Growing critique of the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) year in power among non-MB students reflected national polarization and was expressed through competitive student union elections rather than street protests, which focused mainly on campus conditions.

After 2013, universities became sites of contestation for MB students opposing regime change, and repression intensified. Non-MB groups mobilized against police violence on campus, framing it as a nonpolitical issue affecting ordinary students. Emphasizing their distance from MB, this strategy sought to preserve limited space for mobilization. As repression eliminated protests and reasserted state control, activists attempted to maintain elected unions. Ultimately, however, political activity from both MB and non-MB groups declined under the crackdown, ending the brief period of mass mobilization in Egypt.

The End of Student Politics?

While the brief parenthesis of political opening closed, the privatization of higher education has continued—and even accelerated—over the past decade, while the state has incorporated the neoliberal imperative of professionalization into a more systematic youth policy. In such a context, it might be tempting to conclude that student politics has reached an endpoint. Today protests are virtually absent from campuses, student unions have lost the power they briefly held, and, to ensure their continuity, student clubs have developed strategies to distance themselves from politics.

Yet rather than marking the end of student politics, this article calls for continued attention to the evolving configurations of student politics, as higher education systems in North Africa are reshaped and, with them, the social and political experiences of students themselves.

Farah Ramzy is an associate professor at the University of Strasbourg (France). Email: hanygeorgeramzy@unistra.fr