

Student Activism in Israel: The End of a Naive Dream?

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In order to understand a nation's higher education system, one must understand the ideology underlying it. There is a basic consensus that the universities are best equipped to help the country deal with its main challenges. The first two universities were created even before the state of Israel was created. In 1948, when the state of Israel became independent, these two universities had an enrollment of 1,600 students. Forty-five years later there were over 90,000 students in over 20 institutions of higher education, and during the last five years, the number has almost doubled to almost 180,000 students. During the 1990s, a number of new institutions have been accredited. There have been enormous pressures for greater access to higher education. Many applicants have been unable to gain admission in spite of having good educational backgrounds because of the intense competition for available seats. Some foreign universities, mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom, took advantage of the green light that was tacitly given to the expansion of the higher education system and have opened branches in Israel. At these branch universities, the prerequisites are lower and the tuition is more than twice that at the public universities, which are subsidized by the government.

Traditionally, Israeli students have differed in a number of ways from European or American students. Because in Israel military service is compulsory for men and women, Israeli students are older—rarely starting college before the age of 22. They are more mature and more pragmatic, and very often already have families to support. Students enjoy public sympathy. The shift in attitude in other countries toward higher education as a private rather than public good has fortunately not taken place in Israel.

Until now, Israeli students have paid little attention to issues involving student life and student rights. Thus, it was quite surprising and encouraging that this year students from all the public universities and colleges decided to go on strike and asked for a 50 percent reduction in the tuition fees in return for community work. Students stated that their goal was not only to win a lowering of tuition rates, but also to challenge the priorities in budget allocations. They called for a decrease in funding of nonproductive sectors of society, which enjoy public funding for political reasons; this was a reference to the ultraorthodox population that does not work but nevertheless receives money for studying. The students were acting as “the conscience

of their generation, speaking for significant segments of the population” (Altbach 1994). The striking students represent all walks of Israeli life: Jews and Arabs, secular and moderate religious groups, poor and rich, men and women, left and right, from the center or the periphery, from different countries of origin, Israeli-born and new immigrants, etc.

During the strike, campuses were closed, and the students started street demonstrations, framing the debate, making use of the media to focus public attention on issues and attempting to work with other social groups. The professors expressed their sympathy for the students, but for the most part did not go out of their way to support the students in a more tangible manner. Some even questioned whether the students intended to start a genuine revolution, suggesting that regardless of the militant rhetoric all they really cared about was tuition rates. In order to break the unity among the students, the treasury tried to portray the leaders as being politically oriented against the present government. The police reacted from the beginning with excessive force, arresting hundreds of students during the demonstrations.

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On November 27, the students began a hunger strike. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu came under a lot of pressure since the hunger strike took place at the entrance to his residence. He decided to start negotiating with the students himself. After marathon talks lasting almost 10 hours, the gap separating the two sides seemed to be narrowing, and it was hoped that the strike would end in a matter of hours. The students stressed the changes they want to see in education in general and not only the tuition problems and were glad to hear that the prime minister seemed to agree with them on these issues. Netanyahu was on his way to a planned trip to Europe and put a lot of pressure on the students to sign an ambiguous agreement before he left. The students, on the other hand, were reluctant to sign a document with too many questions left unresolved and agreed to continue the talks upon the prime minister's return. As a goodwill gesture, they halted the hunger strike. They did continue with the regular strike, which included peaceful demonstrations and shut down universities. Another week passed, yet Netanyahu did not resume the talks. With each passing day, the students came under increasing pressure to end the strike somehow and

to go back to classes, so as not to lose the entire school year. Six weeks of strike and no prospects of success forced student leaders to end the strike without any written agreement.

The students had wanted to achieve the following goals:

- a 50 percent cut in tuition in exchange for four hours of community work per week from any student interested in doing so—an arrangement previously available to only 10 percent of the students;
- subsidized loans covering both tuition and living expenses;
- 12,000 additional beds in the dormitories; and
- setting up a committee to deal with reforms in the Israeli higher education system.

In spite of the fact that no document was signed, the students did obtain the following promises during their negotiations with the prime minister:

- a 50 percent cut in tuition in exchange for five hours of community work—not discussed was the number of students who would be able to take advantage of this program and therefore there is serious doubt about the outcome;
- nonsubsidized loans for tuition only (not including living expenses), to be repaid one year after graduation; and
- a committee to deal with the building of additional dorms—with no date for completion specified.

A special committee will be created, not be headed by professionals but rather by the prime minister himself, to deal with major reforms of the Israeli higher education system. In past experience, this is a sure way to bury the issue for a very long time.

In mid-December, the students came back to campus, and the semester started. After a six-week strike, we are back to square one. I am pessimistic about the chances of Israeli students launching another ideological fight any time soon. I worry when I see their sad faces and and sense their disillusionment. Their window of opportunity for reform has been shut in their faces by cynical politicians who were willing to go along for the ride but unwilling to fight the students' fight. The chair of the National Union of Israeli Students expressed these sentiments when he said: "we feel deceived because the prime minister did not keep his promises to us. . . . We found ourselves facing a government that refused all our demands. We feel bitter and let down."

I believe the students deserve our admiration for standing up to an uncaring government and for having the decency and the integrity not to sign a fake document that would only have offered them more empty promises. It is a sad ending for a naive dream of changing society for the better. This fight was lost, but the students have promised that the war is ongoing and that they will continue their struggle from within their campuses. It is up to them to do so, and it is up to society to help them. ■

Higher Education in Uganda

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In Uganda there are two types of institutions providing higher education today: universities and other tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and institutions of higher education. In the first category, we have both state-owned and private institutions, the latter of which have emerged since the late 1980s. Among the state-owned institutions, Makerere University is the oldest and was once one of the most prestigious institutions in Africa. The origins of the private institutions are varied; some are commercial ventures, whereas others are institutions with a clearly defined mission. As a result, the situation is rather confused and there is an urgent need for clarification and guidelines from government regarding the setting up and running of all institutions of higher learning.

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Overview

One can say that there are enormous differences among the various universities. Most private universities rely heavily on part-time staff (generally from Makerere), except for Uganda Martyrs University, which has a current residential staff of 28 academics for 250 students. The fact that Makerere University has admitted privately funded students has brought with it specific problems. Last year Makerere admitted 6,000 privately sponsored students. The main problem is a lack of facilities and staff to cater for such a large number of students. One wonders what is going to happen in the forthcoming academic year when another 6,000 privately funded students will be admitted. Although Makerere suffered tremendously during the civil unrest of the 1970s and 1980s, it remains the choice institution for aspiring university students. It is situated in the capital city of Kampala, and city life holds an attraction for young people, no matter what their material circumstances may be.

In an attempt to control this situation, the Ministry of