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The Arab Spring:

The Higher Education Revolution That Is Yet to Happen

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For let Philosopher and Doctor preach
Of what they will, and what they will not—each
Is but one Link in an eternal Chain
That none can slip, nor break, nor over-reach.

—Omar Khayyam (translated by Edward Fitzgerald)

The overthrow 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 mounting political force, disposed to engage a range of political ideologies not always aligned with regime orthodoxy. Not least, they offer ruling elites a space from which they can recruit or co-opt state ministers, senior professional cadres, and policymakers from among the professoriate.

Ruling elites regulate appointments to leadership positions within higher education institutions. Some “reforms” were undertaken in view of limiting faculty and student participation in governance and containing opposition groups. For instance, in Egypt, law 142 of 1994 added deans to the list of senior university officials who are appointed by the minister of higher education. Consequently, university councils included members who were largely

ministerial appointees, with little (if any) space left for nonappointed voices, such as faculty members and students.

CONTRADICTION OR COMPLIMENTARY POLICY AGENDAS?

The state's involvement in the political subordination of higher education occurs alongside policies that seek to realign higher education with labor market "needs," through increased accountability and economic liberalization, in an attempt to foster innovative academic and administrative leadership capacities and improve governance. Egypt's Higher Education Enhancement Project (funded by the World Bank), and Syria's Quality University Management and Institutional Autonomy framework (as part of the European Union's Tempus Project) are pertinent examples. Policymakers also invoke the low ranking of universities on international university lists as an additional "evidence" to justify higher education restructuring.

Thus, political subordination and economic liberalization feed on each other. On the one hand, the state's political subordination of higher education institutions subverts the emergence of an authentic academic leadership and emphasizes authoritarian modes of decision making. On the other hand, reforms seeking to promote the economic contributions of higher education introduce layers of accountability and new conditions of academic work, without ensuring academic freedom or questioning existing authoritarian modes of governance. Viewed as part of the building of a so-called "Arab knowledge society," liberalization reforms (part of fiscal restructuring schemes) introduce new forms of higher education provision—such as private, international, and for-profit institutions, in an attempt to create alternative options to state-sponsored higher

education. This has been the case, for instance, in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council states—differences between these contexts notwithstanding.

Ruling elites and policymakers reconcile these ostensibly contradictory policy discourses by limiting discussions on higher education to issues associated with “human capital.” 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.

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.”