

of Coverage..

Out



The Student Unions' election in Egyptian Universities
during a decade 2011-2020

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Methodology of the Paper

The paper tries to analyze the transformations that occurred in student union elections within Egyptian universities during the decade that followed the January 2011 revolution, through a reading of AFTE's publications in the unit of Academic Freedom and Student rights, as well as some reports published in the media.

Introduction

It has been a decade since the outbreak of the January revolution in 2011, in which the Egyptian universities was at the epicentre of the scene on many occasions, whether inside or just outside the universities, or through the young generations who studied and graduated then, while becoming involved in the public sphere and demanding change of the status-quo.

As the general context was rather dominated by weak organization and not being entrenched in democratic practices, student unions have a double importance that is more than just a tool for organizing student activities and student representation, as they contribute to consolidating democratic practices in new generations and changing the traditional equation of authoritarian rule, through engaging the public's participation in governance. This is reflected in the broad sectors of students within their universities.

Despite this, and January's revolution success in altering the scene within the Egyptian universities, as well as making progress in many issues related to academic freedom and student rights in its first months, it was soon followed by a backlash. Yet, the elections of student union in universities since 2011 have provided us with a fertile ground with many interactions worthy of research and study, to identify where the upsurge of students' activity began and where it ended.

As the new political authority of 3 July 2013 sought, since it first took over, controlling the public sphere, and in the midst of which the student movement began suffering in a battle for survival, as it witnessed a strong escalation after the January 2011 revolution that aimed at empowering the Student Unions, which was followed by a state of conflict over putting together a new regulation for the Student Union, passing through a strong and effective participation in student elections, with all of this coming to an end following a series of violations and violence against student activists, resulting into student unions becoming less effective in influencing universities.

This paper summarizes the different experiences of student union elections and the accompanying controversies and tug-of-war battles between the authorities and the various student activists over the student regulations. The paper reviews the course of student union elections during a full decade, beginning with January 2011, starting from the second half of the 2011/2010 academic year, through the period of the Brotherhood's rise to power in the 2012/2013 academic year, and ending with the military authority and its impact on the Student Union elections from the 2014/2015 academic year until the 2020/2021 academic year.

This paper is issued within the framework of AFTE's interest in student activism, and the right of students to organize themselves and express their aspirations and ideas, as student unions defend the rights guaranteed by the student regulations.

The First Phase: Elections without Regulation:

The second half of the 2010/2011 academic year began in February following the January revolution, which prompted students to demand - among many matters - that the existing student unions be dissolved at that time as they were “affiliated with Mubarak’s regime” and that another student elections be held. As a result, the Supreme Council of Universities headed by Ahmed Gamal Al-Din, Minister of Higher Education and Education at the time, issued a decision to dissolve all student union councils and all committees emerging from them and hold elections within 60 days of the beginning the second semester of the same year¹.

The elections were actually conducted in accordance with the regulations in place at the time, with some guarantees in place, such as: not dismissing any of the candidates, allowing electoral campaigning, and preventing security interference in the electoral process. However, some college administrations bypassed this and conducted the elections according to protocols agreed upon with the student movement². The first elections following the revolution witnessed a slim participation of students, as some of the student activists objected at the time to holding the elections before drawing up a new student regulation representing the revolution³.

An initiative was launched to revive the Egyptian Students’ Union after it had ceased for over 27 years, as soon as colleges and universities unions were formed, and accordingly, 64 presidents and deputies of the unions of 20 governmental universities and 12 private universities met at the German University in Cairo and agreed to hold the first constituent conference of the Egyptian Students’ Union⁴. The founding conference of the Egyptian Students’ Union was held at the American University in Cairo from 18 to 20 August 2011, it concluded with the formation of the Executive Office of the Egyptian Students’ Union (seven members) with the task of drawing up a new student regulations list⁵.

Although a preliminary draft was concluded, the attempts of the first Egyptian Students’ Union following the revolution to pass new regulations were unsuccessful. Most of the student activists at the time accused the executive office of trying to unilaterally draw up the regulations list without real dialogue about its provisions and philosophy with them or with students in general.

 1. Al-Ahram, February 27, 2011, “Student unions dissolving in universities and new elections within 60 days,” last visit date: March 25, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2PCIBRw>

2. AFTE, April 2014, “Approval of the new student list between the legitimacy of its approval and its legal problems,” last visit date: March 25, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3ft7WZ0>

3. AFTE, 2014, “Retreat of Brotherhood Students and the Rise of New Student Activists,” last visit date: March 25. <https://bit.ly/3sFlzba>

4. AFTE, approval of the student list ... “, Ibid.

5. Ibid.

A group calling itself the “unified student activists”⁶ issued a statement denouncing the “hidden conversation in closed rooms, excluding Egyptian students from amendments to the student regulations.”⁷

Within the same context, another problem arose related to representatives of private universities’ student bodies, as they felt excluded from the entire process, as the right to vote on the list had been withdrawn from them. This led to the withdrawal of representatives of the private universities unions and the representatives of the Cairo University Union.

This division within the Egyptian Student Union on one side, and the intense pressure exerted by student activists, whether in the media or through demonstrations organized in some universities on the other side, led to the failure of the union followed by the Ministry of Higher Education’s approval of the new student regulations list despite the minister’s statements at the time. The list was reviewed and sent to universities to be used as reference in organizing the elections that were about to take place, which instigated a wave of objections by students and activists, as the minister was not authorized to issue the regulations list.

As a result of failing to issue a new bylaw, the second student elections were held after the January revolution, the 2011/2012 school year elections, in March and April 2012, according to the 1979 and amended 2007 regulations, which prompted the majority of students to boycott the elections, like they did in the last elections in the previous academic year. The students who opposed holding the elections at the time did not only announce their boycott, but they also organized several protests that began with demonstrations inside Cairo University and some other universities, ending with holding a sit-in inside Cairo University⁸.

The only political force that participated in the elections was the students of the Muslim Brotherhood, along with former members of student unions and students of extracurricular activities. Therefore, the Brotherhood students, despite not winning the majority of seats in the unions’ committees, were able to control the upper councils of most student bodies, as rising through the elections in these councils depends on good coordination and organization, which

6. This group included students of the following political forces: April 6, the Popular Alliance Party, the Workers’ Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Revolutionary Socialists, the Nasserite Thought Clubs, the Islamic Work Party, the Youth Movement for Justice and Freedom and other movements in different universities.

7. Ibid.

8. AFTE, March 2012, “Report on the Consequences of Conducting Student Elections According to the Old List at Cairo University,” Last visit date: March 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3m9hmtX>

Sada al-Balad, April 11, 2012, “Calls to boycott the Cairo University elections,” last visit date: March 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/31BSeTm>

distinguished the Brotherhood students during this stage. The Brotherhood's students' control of the Egyptian Students' Union allowed them to control the process of drawing up a new regulation.⁹

The juncture in which these elections took place, due to the nature of the political phase, was marked by instability, as drafts were agreed upon and later retracted. Sometimes the Egyptian Student Union invited political forces to participate in writing the regulation and then decided to set it aside and dominate the entire process. In a press release, the Ministry of Higher Education announces that the elections will be conducted according to a new regulation, and in a subsequent conference, it announced retreating and that the elections were to be held as per the 1979 regulation.

All this was not far from the general political scene the country was going through, which was characterized by instability and divergent political pressures on decision-makers. In the end, the Muslim Brotherhood students were able to control the Egyptian Students' Union and thus control the process of drawing up the Regulation. Despite the student activists' objections and their attempts to restrain Brotherhood students from passing their draft, the latter were able to finally approve it on February 18, 2013, by Ministerial Resolution 451/2013.

Despite the many shortcomings of that regulation,¹⁰ it was largely good when compared to the ones that preceded or those that ensued. It was also, in one way or another, written by the students themselves. The most important thing is that it was a turning point in the way the student union elections were viewed, as it paved the way for student elections based on competition and pluralism.

9.The Egyptian Students' Union was not of an official status at the time, as regulation 79 did not stipulate the existence of such a student organizational level.

10.Freedom of thought and expression, student list from preparation to approval, last visit date: March 27, 2021,<https://bit.ly/31Boy8Q>

The Second Phase: Students Take Control

At the beginning of March 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood was in control, and its student representatives controlled the student unions. As a result, Brotherhood students felt the advantage, as student elections that were about to take place were being held according to the regulation that they wrote themselves. However, contrary to what is expected, by the end of April, the Egyptian Students' Union was under the control of a coalition of students opposed to the Brotherhood.¹¹

A coalition of independent students and liberal and leftist political forces defeated the largest student bloc on the scene. In fact, there were three main blocs fighting the electoral battle in universities: Brotherhood students, liberal and leftist students, who finally decided to participate in student elections, and there were also students independent of all, including members of previous student bodies with experience in the electoral process and students of extracurricular activities.

The third bloc was the most likely bloc to win this election, the Brotherhood was able to attract some independent students in some universities to compete through their lists, but the majority of the members of this bloc preferred to coordinate with the political forces opposing the Brotherhood at this time. But these alliances were not in this direct form but were characterized by fluidity, for example, students of the Constitution Party may ally with students of Strong Egypt Party in some universities while they competed in other universities, they would ally with independents affiliated with the old unions at times or compete alone at other times. The alliances depended on the strength of the political movement within each university as well as the historical levels of coordination between these blocs.

Mohamed Badran, president of the Benha University Student Union supported by independents and civil movements, won the presidency of the Egyptian Students' Union by only two votes over the Brotherhood's candidate and President of the Mansoura University Union, Mustafa Mounir (24-22 votes). Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's candidate, Ahmed Al-Bakri, won the vice president's seat after winning 24 votes against the independent candidate, Mohamed Asran, president of the Assiut University Union. Despite losing the seat of the President of the Egyptian Students' Union, Brotherhood students managed to win the majority of seats in the Union's Executive Office, where four of their candidates won against three of the civilian and independent candidates.¹² Naturally, the result of these elections was affected - as is the norm - by the general political situation in

 11. Al-Shorouk Newspaper, April 19, 2013, "Egypt Students' Union ... Democracy is at stake" <https://cutt.us/FUBQR>

12. Freedom of thought and expression, "The Brotherhood's students retreat ...", Ibid.

the country, as political polarization was dominating the street in Egypt at this time, and this polarization became the main driver in student elections as well.

The impact of this polarization continued until after the election, just as the country was divided politically between supporters and opponents of the Brotherhood's authority, the Egyptian Students' Union appeared to have been contradictory with divergent positions. At the time, Muhammad Badran, President of the Union, supported the June 30 demonstrations - which were behind ousting Mohamed Morsi, while his deputy and the majority of the members of the executive office declare their support for "legitimacy". In fact, this discrepancy was not strange, but rather it embodied the condition of university students as an extension of society at that time.

Three months following electing the Egyptian Student Union, on July 3, 2013, the army ousted the Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, member of the Muslim of the Brotherhood, after demonstrations that broke out on June 30 of the same year. The President of the Constitutional Court became the interim President of Egypt until a new president was elected.

In the context of its attempts to eliminate the voices opposing it, the new authority targeted the student movement, as the latter was one of the most active groups against it. The authorities' targeting of the student movement took several levels, the first level being the security crackdown, as the authority released the hand of the security forces and later the army forces in Egyptian universities to suppress the demonstrations of students supporting the Brotherhood, so the authorities arrested thousands of students over the next two years. The second level was epitomized in administrative arbitrariness, as university administrations - as a result of amendments in the university regulation law - dismissed thousands of students, either permanently or for a specific period, due to their participation in political activities inside universities¹³.

As for the third level, which pertains to this paper, it was at the level of student unions. Initially, the state did not welcome opposition within the student union at this time, so student elections were suspended for two consecutive years without any legal basis. After that, during this period, It tried to lay the grounds for conducting elections with guaranteed results, accordingly, two successive ministers of higher education, Sayed Abdel-Khalek and Ashraf Al-Shehi, introduced amendments to the financial and administrative regulations of student unions that clearly aimed at controlling student elections. On top of these amendments was adding some conditions that must be met by candidates for the student union elections, the most important of which were: that the candidates were not to be affiliated with a terrorist group and that they must have had former student activity.

13. AFTE, "Besieged universities", 2018, <https://bit.ly/3sG99Qx>

These two provisions were very general and impossible to hold up in fair application. So how does the university administration - which is the body authorized to filter candidacy tables - to know if the candidate student belongs to a terrorist group or not, or if he has had significant previous student activity or not. In fact, these two amendments were introduced to fully control candidates for the student union elections.¹⁴

After a two-year suspension, the 2015/2016 academic year elections were held in November 2015. The electoral process withstood serious violations, as the Ministry of Higher Education officially announced the dismissal of 2,273 students from the election rolls.¹⁵ As a result, many seats in some colleges were decided through acclamation. Universities have also suffered numerous cases of harassment of candidates in the election campaign, in addition to some university administrations and representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education supporting some lists affiliated with the state.¹⁶

Despite all this, the election results disappointed the Ministry of Higher Education and the state, as two independent students, who were in favor of university independence and freedom of student activity, won the positions of president and vice president of the Egyptian Students' Union, in addition to students who adopt the same approach winning the vast majority of seats in the executive office of the Egyptian Student Union (12 out of 14).¹⁷ Following this result, which seems to have shocked the Ministry of Higher Education, it refused to acknowledge the results of the election of the Executive Office of the Egyptian Student Union and froze it completely without any real legal basis.¹⁸

Accordingly, after freezing the Egyptian Students' Union during this academic year, the state suspended student elections again in the following academic year to draw up a new student union regulation.

14. AFTE, April 2016, "Breaking the Collar", last visit date: March 27, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2PM5YrK>

15. AFTE considers that these figures announced by the Ministry of Higher Education are far below reality. For more information, see: AFTE, Breaking the Collar.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. AFTE, December 2015, "Are the Elections for the President and Vice President of the Egyptian Student Union Invalid?" Last visit date: March 27, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Po7VLh>

Third Phase: The State Reassumes Power

On August 19, 2017, the Supreme Council of Universities headed by Khaled Abdel Ghaffar announced adopting a new student regulation, which has been in effect since then and until now. The new regulation completely abolished the student union at the national level and contented itself to colleges and universities unions similar to the 1979 regulation that was amended in 2007.

The conditions for candidacy in the new regulation included arbitrary clauses, including: that the student is a newcomer in his division, that he has documented student activity, that he be of good conduct and reputation, that he has not been subjected to disciplinary punishment, and that he has not been sentenced on account of a criminal punishment prejudicial to honor and dignity, unless he has been rehabilitated. Also, he should not be affiliated with any terrorist organization, entity or group established in contravention of the law.¹⁹

These conditions were characterized by arbitrariness, broadness, ease of interpretation, and the impossibility of fair implementation, as the university administration can adapt them as they wish, and thus write off any student who may be in opposition or of an independent political line at the very least. There is also an impossibility to apply the condition of non-affiliation to a terrorist group, as no party can describe someone as belonging to a terrorist group unless a court ruling confirms this, and of course it is impossible for colleges and universities administrations to verify the judicial records of thousands of students who apply to run in elections. The clause regarding non-disciplinary sanctions against the candidate is considered arbitrary, as students belonging to political forces who have been subjected to disciplinary sanctions are prevented from running.

The state sought two main matters from the new regulation; The first was to cancel out the Egyptian Students' Union and thus completely avoid the possibility of opposition students or even students enjoying a degree of independence winning in an entity that is considered the legitimate representative of Egyptian students. As for the second matter, it is rigidity regarding the conditions for candidacy and thus facilitating the ban from the very beginning for any student who may show signs of opposition or independence.

The government's endeavors have indeed succeeded, as the elections in the 2017/2018 academic year came after the student's regulations amendments that had approved setting legal obstacles to the conditions for candidacy, and made the youth welfare departments in universities the body responsible for assessing the fulfillment of the candidates of all the conditions set by the new student regulation, which in turn ostracised a large numbers of students in all universities from

19. AlYoum AlSabea, August 19, 2017, "We publish the details of the new student list", last visit date: March 28, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3maXEOI>

the final lists of candidates, under the pretext of breaching one of the conditions for candidacy. The condition most of the candidates could not fulfill was that of “the necessity of having documented activity in the committee to which the student is nominated,” even if the candidate was a former member of his college association, the Youth Welfare Department would reject his candidacy.

The results of these elections reflected the state of impediment of the public sphere within Egyptian universities, as there were no longer any student groups practicing political activity, even the activity of “student families” that provided service activities to students was significantly affected, which ultimately led to the deduction of large numbers of student union seats by acclamation. Since the elections of that year, there has been no student activity that allows the creation of student cadres willing and able to run for positions within the student unions, which the amended student list defined as “legitimate organizations that express the opinions and aspirations of students in universities, colleges and institutes, and through which they practice all student activities within the framework of the university’s authentic traditions and values, which caters for their interests, and is based upon organizing student activity and ensuring its practice, and representing students before the concerned authorities.

At Ain Shams University, elections were held on seats of thirteen student groups in eight colleges only, out of a total of 15 colleges and two institutes affiliated with the university, namely, the first year students in the College of Arts, and the first year students in the College of Sciences, and the first, second and third year students at Al-Asun College, and the second, third and fourth year students at the College of Medicine and Dentistry and the second year students of the College of Nursing, and the first, second and third year students at the College of Girls. With the exception of the Faculties of Agriculture and Engineering, in which elections were held for all academic teams, except for that, the seats were decided by acclamation.

At the University of Alexandria, they held run-off elections because the legal quorum stipulated in the student regulation was not completed by 50% +1, in 10 colleges, namely colleges of Commerce, Law, Engineering, Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, Saba Pasha’s Agriculture, Fine Arts, Veterinary Medicine, and Matrouh’s branch of the Girls College.

The results of the rest of the universities were similar in this way, as the committee overseeing the elections at Assiut University decided to rerun the elections in 16 colleges and institutes, due to the lack of a quorum, and the elections of 9 other colleges ended by acclamation. At the University of the Suez Canal, acclamation also took place in the elections in eight faculties: commerce, engineering, medicine, dentistry, science nursing, and tourism. Voting took place in some academic divisions in the university’s remaining eight colleges.

These results represent a sample of four universities out of the 22 public universities in which student unions were elected in December 2017, the electoral process were largely similar, which clearly showed the reluctance of Egyptian university students to participate in choosing their representatives in the Student Union, the entity that organizes their activities and the students' voice that is to represent them before the university administration, which is the opposite of the state of student activity in universities in the first elections that took place after the January 2011 revolution, where there was extensive participation and competition from student groups with different political orientations, which was what the Egyptian authorities represented in the Ministry of Higher Education and security services have intervened to change.

In the 2018/2019 academic year, the elections were held in November 2018 and the same status of recommendation and appointment continued as a dominant feature of the elections, albeit the elections were not held in 5 faculties of Cairo University. Alexandria University administration also appointed student unions in 18 colleges, while elections were held in the faculties of dentistry and veterinary medicine only. At Ain Shams University, the Student Unions of 11 colleges came by acclamation and appointment. As for Mansoura University, student unions have been appointed in all faculties of the university, due to the lack of a quorum, according to the announcement of the Supreme Committee supervising the elections headed by Reda Sayed Ahmed, Dean of the Faculty of Arts.²⁰

Students were not given sufficient time to prepare for the elections this year, as running for candidacy opened up on the first of November for only one day and another day for publicity.

The candidacy of a large number of students was rejected by the youth welfare departments in universities and the committees supervising the elections, without reasons based on the student regulation. This is what happened when Muhammad al-Degwi, the vice president of the Menoufia University Students' Union, applied for elections, he was dismissed, according to the statement of the Director of Youth Welfare at Menoufia Engineering to Mada Masr, out of concern for the "public interest";²¹ after receiving instructions from the University's Youth Welfare Department to exclude some students who had been active in the previous union. According to al-Degwi, the exclusion did not affect him alone, but rather impacted nearly 90% of the members and leaders of his university's unions who decided to run²²

 20. The Student Regulations in Article (329) states that: "The presence of the absolute majority of the number of students who have the right to vote in each school year separately from one another is required in order for the elections of student unions to be valid in the committees of the colleges and institutes. If this quorum is not complete, the elections will be postponed to the next day, and for their validity the presence of (20%) or 1000 students is required for those who have the right to vote in each school year separately, whichever is less. If this quorum is not complete, the competent authority shall issue a decision appointing the representatives of these committees."

21. Mada Masr, Instead of Elections ... "Public Interest" Universities Federations Form, November 15, 2018. Last visit: April 14, 2021.

shorturl.at/prwBH

22. Ibid.

The Fourth Phase: Elections Out of Coverage

In the academic year 2019/2020, the press coverage of the university's student unions elections differed, as the press did not publish the results of the elections in detail explaining the stages of conducting the elections since their inception and whether the quorum was completed from the first round, and how many colleges ended with the result of acclamation or appointment of the student union by the college administration, while most newspapers were satisfied with monitoring the results in the final stage in which the president and vice president of the union are elected at the colleges and university levels.

The inability of the various press websites to obtain the detailed student election data negatively affects the ability to analyze and monitor the features and characteristics of the electoral process in universities. The results that we were able to obtain were the appointment of the Union in the faculties of Law and Dentistry at Cairo University due to the lack of a quorum. Acclamation had the final say in eight other faculties: Commerce, Agriculture, Veterinary Medicine, Computers and Information, Specific Education and Early Childhood Education, Medicine, and Nursing.

As for the University of Alexandria, union councils have been appointed for 6 colleges because their quorum was not complete, and recommendations have been decided by the elections of 13 other faculties at the university: Commerce, Education, Tourism and Hotels, Agriculture, Engineering, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Nursing, Physical Education for Boys, Physical Education for Girls, Fine Arts, Early Childhood Education, and Specific Education. The same status applied to the 2020/2021 academic year elections in terms of the coverage and monitoring of the details of the electoral race in universities, also the results were almost identical to the previous year.

Conclusion

It becomes clear after this demonstration of what took place during the past decade that we have witnessed a momentum in the public sphere, in which universities and student unions were at the heart of it, with free elections in which various blocs competed, in addition to independent students in 2011, to student unions whose members were appointed, and others who won by acclamation. The press and media coverage is absent, and the results are not clear, until they became out of range by the end of the decade, especially in the student union elections in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

This result demonstrates the extent to which student freedoms and rights are currently withstanding constraints and violations after mobility and signs of openness and development during the January revolution, when eight years have passed since closing in on the student movement, we find that the time has come to create spaces for students. The importance of this is not limited to the right of students to exercise their constitutional and legal rights, the right to a good and developed education, in addition to the right to organize and engage with the public sphere, but this is also reflected in the current system's vision to build new cadres, especially with their pursuit of digital transformation and development.

Protecting the right of university students to express themselves freely, as well as protecting their right to organize, is a necessary imperative, in addition to the importance of monitoring and following up on student affairs and making information and data available about the elections so that we can analyze in a deeper and clearer way what is taking place in universities.