Higher Education Policies and Welfare Regimes in Egypt and Tunisia

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This paper offers a comparative analysis of higher education policies in Egypt and Tunisia in the context of the ongoing retrenchment of welfare policies in both countries and in the Middle East more generally. The paper adopts the concept of an "insurance-based egalitarian regime" to designate the historical development in Egypt and Tunisia of differential employment-based welfare benefits with egalitarian components. It argues that even though the social protection components (food subsidies, pensions, cash transfers, and productivist initiatives) of the welfare regimes in the two countries have been restructured along similar patterns, they have pursued distinct higher education reforms in recent years. The paper also makes the larger argument that scholarship on the welfare state should incorporate comparative analyses of the design and evolution of social policy in the developing world and should include education and higher education as a domain of the state's welfare responsibilities.

First signs of strain in welfare policies were evident in the 1970s and 1980s, the decades marked by attempts to cut subsidies, declines in public wages, rising higher education fees, and delays in public employment. Following the fiscal crises in the late 1980s, the welfare regimes in Egypt and Tunisia entered a systematic phase of retrenchment. Paradoxically, this did not undermine the foundations of the two countries' insurance-based welfare regimes; policy frameworks governing pensions and subsidy systems, for instance, were preserved. However, the pursuit of the neoliberal development model in both countries was underway—what the paper refers to as a process of "hidden retrenchment" in both places.

In the context of limited fiscal space, increased integration into the global economy, and internationalization of education, emerging governance models for higher education reflected tensions between alternative ideological views on the role of the state versus the market in direct provision for education. In many countries in the region "hidden shifts" occurred in the rules of access and, to varying degrees, the advent of new private providers.

A comparative analysis of the political economy of higher education expenditures in Egypt and Tunisia and the evolution of the rules of access to education places the two countries close to "conservative welfare regimes" by OECD standards. These regimes extend moderate levels of decommodification to their citizens while preserving traditional class divisions and maintain the significant contribution of the family and the market in higher education provision. Nonetheless, Egypt's ratio of public spending for education (in relation to total tertiary education spending), the existence of numerous private postsecondary educational institutions, inequitable access to public institutions, and a highly segmented structure of the higher education sector render its system less egalitarian than that of Tunisia. Although Tunisian governments did not go as far as the Nasser reforms in Egypt in the 1950s in universalizing access with its subsidy program, it has performed better overall in decommodification, access, and standardization of its higher education. Further, the restructuring of Tunisia's education system has reinforced its superior performance in vocational training, which flexibly allows for progressive attainment of both general and occupation-specific skills without imposing strong stratification.

Higher education reforms played out differently in the two settings. Whereas Egypt employed competitive financial incentives and accreditation by newly created "independent" structures (the National Authority for Quality Accreditation and Evaluation of Education and the Higher Education Enhancement Project Fund), Tunisia adopted decentralizing contract-based arrangements with the Ministry of Higher Education to encourage programs relevant for the labor market and improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The recent uprisings in the region brought to the forefront youth grievances over the increasing inequity of the system and the mismatch of university education and the job market; they also highlighted faculty members' concerns over academic autonomy and freedoms. University autonomy from the state has continued to be the subject of struggles in both countries. In Egypt, the March 9th movement helped achieve greater administrative autonomy in the aftermath of the January 25 Revolution, but its success was limited and short-lived. Decisions over promotions, enrollment, and the beginning and end dates of academic years have remained to a large extent outside the university's purview and in the hands of government agencies. Tunisia's historically centralized governance system has also been increasingly contested by on the one hand, faculty and students who seek to increase autonomy, and on the other by radical religious groups on campus who threaten to curb academic freedoms.

Efforts to enhance academic accountability in Egypt have failed to introduce viable long-term monitoring mechanisms, all the while falling short of reinvigorating faculty performance. In Tunisia attempts to link funding to performance proved insufficient in the absence of an effective quality-control institution and a broad consensus over the reorganization of university-state relations. Whereas stakeholders in Tunisia are beginning to formally organize on campuses and are struggling to exercise their voice in decision making, Egypt's formally inclusive university structures continue to be hijacked by heightened security concerns that undermine nascent participatory practices. In both contexts, despite more than a decade of market-oriented reforms, emerging governance practices on university campuses do not formally engage private actors.

One can conclude that the future of higher education governance in both countries is increasingly uncertain. In both contexts, developments after the uprisings show that the sustainability of reforms is in question due to the lack of resources, long-term reform vision, and political will, in addition to political instability as well as opposition from within the government, faculty members, and broad segments of society. With ongoing recentralization, reluctance of private actors to channel investments, and deteriorating economic conditions, the state's hegemonic role in the sector seems likely to be maintained in the short to medium terms.