

**Forms of Protest and University Governance:  
The Case of the American University in Cairo, 2008–2012**

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This paper examines the changes in forms of protest and of university governance that emerged at the American University in Cairo (AUC) between 2008 and 2012 and in light of two major events: the university's move to a new campus in New Cairo in the fall of 2008 and the January 25 Revolution in Egypt in 2011. Through a series of fieldwork observations and interviews conducted over two phases of research, this article traces the debates and reactions that these two events provoked among three of AUC's constituent groups—students, workers, and administration. The paper argues that in the year and a half following the Revolution, a shift in the role of these groups was perceptible as they engaged in efforts to shape administrative decisions, echoing nation-wide calls for increased democratization in various institutions. It is important to note that changes in forms of protest and governance at the university were not a direct result of the Revolution; rather, they should be seen as ongoing processes to which this historical event gave momentum.

AUC was founded as an English-language institution in 1919 by Charles D. Watson, an active member of the United Presbyterian Church. It opened its doors to male-only students in 1920; the first female students joined eight years later. Due to its high tuition fees and language requirements, in its early years AUC was restricted to an elite minority at a time when Egypt's population was mostly rural with limited access to higher education. Today, AUC has the sixth largest student body among private universities in the country. In Fall 2013, it had more than 6,500 students pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees, with female students slightly predominating. The large majority of students, 92%, are Egyptian coming from different social and religious backgrounds. There are 505 full-time faculty, of whom 51% are Egyptian, 30%—American, and 19% of other nationalities. AUC has been accredited in the United States and Egypt. According to its mission statement, it is “an independent, not-for-profit, equal-opportunity institution” that “offers exceptional liberal arts and professional education in a cross-cultural environment.”

Originally, the university was located around Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo (which became the epicenter of the protests leading to the Revolution), but in 2008 its campus was relocated to a \$400-million, 260-acres area in New Cairo. Among the official explanations for this move the university administration cited the problem of overcrowding, the need to upgrade classrooms, labs, and lecture halls with modern technology, and the desire to improve social life on campus. But many saw this move as a sign of AUC's commercialization as corporate presence became more visible on campus and the university relied more heavily on outsourced workers while neglecting labor rights. Students and faculty also feared that by distancing itself from the realities of Egyptian social life, AUC is losing its political edge and that students will withdraw from participation in matters of national import—a concern that proved misleading as the events of the Revolution showed.

After the move, tensions arose between the AUC students and administration over issues related to food outlets on campus, accommodation, parking availability, and class schedules. Students were concerned with the increase in tuition fees and private firms' monopoly over food and transportation. They organized a series of demonstrations, notably the food strike during which they called for the provision of more affordable food options on campus.

The issues around which AUC students mobilized changed after the Revolution as national concerns superseded their local grievances. The students were active during the uprisings—maybe not in the name of their institution and not exclusively on campus, but by being part of a larger youth movement that constituted a significant segment of the protestors. Many brought their experience from Tahrir to AUC and continued to engage in their wider communities around issues of political and social change. AUC students expanded their circle of activities forming networks not only with groups on campus, such as those of workers, faculty, and staff, but also with student groups at other private and public universities in the country. In September 2011, they formed the Leftist Student Movement with the aims to protect students' right to practice politics on campus and to raise awareness about university workers' demands and labor conditions.

Pre-Revolution protests organized by students and workers at AUC increased in intensity after the Revolution, leading to the biggest strike in the university's history in September 2011. Students initiated it and workers joined in solidarity, while faculty members supported both groups and mediated between them and the administration. The effects of the revolutionary events—increased public awareness, citizenship maturity and engagement—were evident in the way students put forth their demands and negotiated with the administration. The demands concerned a variety of issues—from transparency of the university budget to student representation at administration meetings—and most of them were granted. Then, in February 2012, when the country was under the leadership of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, students and faculty organized a three-day strike in response to a nation-wide call by student unions in the aftermath of a football match during which more than seventy fans were killed in what is now known as the Port Said Massacre.

AUC workers—whether salaried or contract employees—also emerged as visible and influential actors in the governance matrix of the university. Their grievances before the Revolution concerned the lack of clear system for remuneration and promotions and for the filing of complaints. They went on strike in October 2010 asking for an increase in the minimum wage, a meal allowance, and a two-day week-end. After the administration failed to meet their demands, the workers staged another strike in September 2011, this time run jointly with the students. One of the most important outcomes from this strike was the formation of the Independent Worker's Union, which, in the words of one interviewee, marked the start of a real workers' movement on campus.

On its part, after the Revolution, the administration showed greater engagement and willingness to negotiate with the different groups on campus. As a result of its disposition to review its policies and as a response to the continued efforts of students and workers to initiate change in university governance, the administration drafted new policies or altered existing ones, moving closer to a shared model of governance by involving the different university stakeholders in decision making. The most notable changes that took effect after January 25 are allowing student representatives to attend all administrative meetings, drafting AUC's Freedom of Expression Charter, appointing an ombudsperson, and relaxing some of the security restrictions.

Thus, largely shaped by, but not exclusively due to the Revolution, various actions in response to the changing political environment in Egypt were undertaken at AUC. Even though it is too early to assess the long-term effects of these changes, one can argue that the Revolution expanded the opportunities for politicization of AUC students and workers and their interaction with society beyond campus gates, even if only on a small scale and temporarily.