

A Vision For 2020
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Socio-political Inclusion of Youth:

A year passed over the Egyptian revolution yet many of youth aspirations for an inclusive political system is far from achieved. This paper although written in 2009, it remains strikingly relevant to the context we live today. The political will and an enabling environment that nurtures citizenship and allow for its exercise must exist if youth are to have an equal voice in social and political affairs or to have a sense of community, a national identity and are seen as equal among community members.

The Pretext of Citizenship: School Education

An enabling environment for youth to integrate in social and political life in Egypt starts in schools. Youth cannot feel that they are citizens — with rights and responsibilities— unless they practice this starting in early education. Although Ministerial Decree 203 for 1990 states that student unions must be set up in each school, with the participation of all levels, in practice, elections do not take place at schools. There appears to be no awareness of the importance of this process and no serious intent in instilling principles of rights and responsibilities among students. The budget allocations for student unions are persistently allocated to other activities, with no say from students, although the law states otherwise. An aspiration for 2020 is that while minimal changes are needed in the legal context, enforcement and honesty in applying Decree 203 should take place.

A school's responsibility in raising student awareness on their rights and roles in student unions should be overseen, and regulations publicly declared to all students. However, a further improvement would be to incorporate students' voices in school decisions, even at the national student union level, and in any change that affects the school education system in Egypt. It is through collective work and participation in decision making that the foundations of citizenship are developed. By 2020, credible student unions would have created good citizens with the right to argue and defend opinions, willing to engage with reality and be critical of it.

Fragmentation Dissolved

Youth in Egypt nowadays although feel empowered and overwhelmingly engaged in public affairs, the outlets that would enable them to come together are minimal, especially those that promote political and social debate to nurture civic awareness and interest.

The sanctioned contribution to youth activities has been the creation of youth clubs across Egypt, the focus of which has been on sports alone, despite the fact that the National Council of Youth classifies sports as only part of their activities. In 2009, on the official website, successes of this initiative covered mainly physical accomplishments: for example, number of swimming pools built, playgrounds developed, gym halls in operation and wrestling mats newly purchased.¹Till the day, the focus hasn't changed much.

However, according to National council decision 120/2010 that restructured the main statute of all youth centers in Egypt, these centers should train youth in leadership and life skills, vocational and IT skills. Needless to say, these centers didn't play such role prior to the revolution; however, so far it hasn't reached the minimum of its potentials also.

The refocus of youth centers on social and cultural activities would reorient and reemphasize feelings of citizenship. It would give room for girls — at present largely excluded, especially in Upper Egypt — to engage in enriching pursuits outside of the home. Volunteer work, educational and artistic activities can allow girls and boys to interact, under socially acceptable conditions, although, in conservative areas, it does not preclude regular hours for girls alone to socialize and practice sports.

Also for the Copts, where nowadays churches are filled with all kind of activities, social and cultural activities for the community at large through these centers can be a good stimulus to bring Copts more outside of churches and be more integrated with their communities. These centers offer vast opportunities that should be consciously seized to attract all Egyptian youth -Muslims and Christians- and make them realize their common belonging to a bigger identity that they should work on its development and progress.

The potential activation of youth centers in transforming their activities cannot be overlooked. Young people by 2020 should be more vigorous in centers' general assemblies, where they could elect board members and help decide on important issues such as budget allocations. Presently, these are rights guaranteed by law but not reflected in the norm.

The legal system covering youth centers appears at variance and is often stifled by laws that need more precision. Such is the case of Law 77 for 1975. This concerns youth and sports institutions, and clarity is especially needed given the current division between the National Council of Youth and National Councils of Sports. In addition, in relation to the National Youth Council decision 120/2010 that tackled many of the problems of the old statues, some amendments are yet required and their application ensured. For

¹ The official website of the national council for youth:
http://www.alshabab.gov.eg/AR_Youth_Clubs.aspx

example, Article 46 should be amended for no board member is to be assigned by the government but must be elected by the general assembly. Also the right of the minister in article 60 to dissolve the board can be maintained but not for a year and immediate call for general assembly has to take place for a new board election. And finally aside from enacting article 46 that states 50% of the board should be less than 30, of which two are females, the managing director of the center in article 56 should never exceed 35.

Practicing citizenship reinstated:

For a vision where youth are educated on citizenship and enjoy the social space to formulate opinions and be politically socialized, there is first the need to establish the right to practice politics. Two domains are still important where this is applicable:

University Campuses:

In University Campuses, political activity and right to engage with social realities should be respected for all students. The Uncensored University life was a rich source for political socialization and stimulating a sense of belonging and concern to public issues among Egyptian youth throughout history (see Box 1).

University independence has to be maintained putting a stop to any security interference in students and faculty choices. This independence should also be reflected in student unions, which must be created and managed by students in consultation with faculty members, more importantly with regards to their financial resources. The right of students to express their political views should be liberated from university administrative domination and political committees in student unions should be reinstated. Allocation of time for student activities should be freed up, and there should be no obstruction to students choosing the activities they prefer.

By 2020 it is hoped that the university administration would have revoked the clause that bars membership to unions councils of students whose freedoms were previously restricted — or at least amended to include the exception of exposure to the same penalty for political reasons. Also, an umbrella student union representing all universities could be created to work on strengthening the relationship between diverse universities, and help break the present fragmentation of students. Regulations for student union elections should be widely publicized with adequate time for students to nominate candidates. At least 50% percent of registered students should take part for elections to be valid. They should never be scheduled to take place on holidays. Finally all students should pay 3% of the fees for union activities, to increase union revenues and act as an incentive for greater participation in activities.

The recent revival of a student movement across all Egyptian universities, both private and public, indicates that youth will defend university independence and freedom relentlessly.

The Public Space:

The practice doesn't stop on University campuses but should extend to the street (i.e. public space) that is free from an emergency law or military trials that restricts civil society' ability to organize and campaign freely. Although one of the key successes of the revolution is instating the freedom of parties' establishment, yet a free environment is not reached. Civilians have been trialed in front of military courts and still get recalled to them. The emergency law hasn't been removed to date, being limited to the loosely defined thuggery crime.

In 2020, Political parties have to learn how to identify potential new constituencies among Egyptian youth and bring them into the organization². Parties have done little to mobilize constituencies within the range of freedom they have³. In 2020 they also have to respect democratic procedures in their inner workings and allow youth leadership unlike now.

Elections:

The vision stands complete when an enabling environment for youth to vote and elect themselves is guaranteed. This enabling environment should ensure equitable elections laws that encourage youth to run as candidates. Enforcement of laws that puts ceil of funding, designate equal areas for publicity and prevent campaigning on elections day is quite essential. Transformation to decentralization should also take place as it's the only incentive for youth to actively engage at the local level especially in marginalized communities, knowing that they can impact decision making and take part in it. Finally, realizing the gender gap in youth political empowerment is a must. Sexual harassment and a lack of a safe space for girls should not be undermined in any strategy that needs to engage youth in political life. Young girls in 2020 should enjoy a safe environment that enforce laws against sexual harassment and assign female officers that can encourage women to report on these acts that is exceeding immensely.

Youth responsibility:

Youth in 2020 should base their opinions on facts rather than oral culture or parents opinions. Illiteracy eradication for youth is needed as it reached up to over 20%. Youth has to think of opportunities and assets to integrate socially and politically rather than be stifled by focusing only on needs and what's missing. Youth in 2020 have to realize that youth integration is not a linear path in any country but always a power struggle especially with adults who never wishes to let go of their authority whether in opinion, knowledge or power.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Box 1: Recollections from a Freer University Era

An account by a former student at the University of Menia recounts how he started university with no interest in politics and the extent to which that changed. His description of his first day was as follows;

“I walked through the university gates, and everywhere, the wall magazines surrounded me. They were posted all over the walls so that there was little space for anything else, and they hung off pegs from ropes stretching from one end of the courtyard to the other. They spoke of politics, poetry, holy scripts, and swayed as they did in the air, confronting and challenging each other ...

The university was charged with life, energy and ideas; it was as if I had just stepped into the world!”

**An extract from M.A. thesis. 'Youth Movements in Eevpt' by Alia M. Mossalam*