

Egyptian Private Higher Education at a Crossroads

Daniel C. Levy and Manar Sabry

Daniel C. Levy is distinguished professor and director of the Program for Research on Private Higher Education, State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY. E-mail: [dlevy@albany.edu](mailto:dlevy@albany.edu). Manar Sabry has worked in international and Egyptian policy agencies. She holds a PhD from the University at Buffalo. E-mail: [msabry@buffalo.edu](mailto:msabry@buffalo.edu).

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The revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime opens the door to uncertain political, economic, and social futures. These futures will condition higher education outcomes. One important development to scrutinize is the fate of private higher education. Will the private sector see continued growth or be constrained by political populism or take some different course altogether? Revolutions have often been antithetical to private higher education.

The Egyptian Revolution comes amid a period of national and general regional growth of private higher education. Indeed, the Middle East is the last region to establish the private sector across the breadth of its countries. Apart

from a few precursors such as the American University in Cairo, the private sector is basically a creation of the last two decades. Egypt first allowed private universities through a 1992 law. As in many matters—social, cultural, and political—Egypt can be the most influential country in trends in the Arab region.

#### **PRIVATE SIZE AND GROWTH**

Reflecting their recency, private universities' share in Egypt is still small. They have just 4.2 percent (2010) of the country's nearly 1.8 million university enrollment. However, that level is more than double its share over the last five years, while the number of private universities has risen to 20 out of the country's 39. Several of these private universities are new and not yet tallied in enrollment, but they hold potential for private-sector growth. The private sector already maintains some 83 percent of nonuniversity enrollment. Although these total enrollments are short of half a million, the private nonuniversity share is so high that, all in all, the private universities account for 19 percent of Egyptian higher education enrollment.

Such a private share is below the global private higher education proportion of 31 percent, but not unusual for the Arab region. Although nonuniversity private higher education existed in many Middle East countries, until the 1990s public education was the norm in all countries except Lebanon. But the private sector—including private universities—has spread to almost all Arab countries, though enrollment varies by country. The private share reaches 66 percent in Bahrain and 55 percent in Lebanon, 36 percent in Jordan, 28 percent in Oman, and 21 percent in Yemen. But Syria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and

Tunisia are among countries with under 10 percent private at least on the university side.

On the other hand, gauging private enrollment in Egypt and many other Arab countries is confounded by the phenomenon of “private” students in public universities. In effect, the budget for public higher education fails to meet the heavily increasing demand for higher education, but political or constitutional commitment to free education prevents universities from charging tuition fees to increase revenues. One outlet is growth of private institutions. A second is the fee-paying students in “parallel programs” in public universities. Preferring public universities for their quality, status, and legitimacy, many students who fail to make the regular quota are willing to pay substantially more than their student counterparts within the same public institutions. These parallel programs have been under attack for their low quality and charges often leveled against private universities, as well.

In Egypt, the parallel programs have recently been abolished. This does not represent a revolutionary attack on any private higher education, however. In fact, the decision was made in the Mubarek administration and carried over by the interim government.

## **REGULATION**

But what policy might be directly challenging private higher education? The interim government has not done much but, to the chagrin of the opposition, has done rather little in higher education overall. The just-appointed minister, former vice president of graduate studies and research at Cairo University, has also been a vice president at the British-related private university and a consultant to its

French counterpart. This seems no portend of imminent anti-private higher education policy. What might happen next under an elected government is of course speculative, but some general perspectives are worth considering.

For one thing, there is no sign of a revolutionary attack on private higher education, in general. The idea of that sector is accepted (except on the Marxist left). Furthermore, the private sector is not high on any party's education agenda, at least for the time being. Most of the reform rhetoric about higher education is vague, cherishing ideals of "justice," "equity," and "transparency." Nonetheless, such ideals often lend themselves to regulations that undercut private higher education, even if without hostile intent.

Prior to his appointment, the new minister had spoken of the challenges facing private universities, regarding the low qualifications of admitted students. He emphasizes the need for explicit admissions criteria as well as research and graduate study. But the question is how to accomplish appropriate admissions criteria and maintain or expand enrollment? Additionally, research is rarely a major undertaking in private higher education outside the United States. In fact, regulations already on the books deal with admissions scores, maximum enrollment, and minimum percentages of full-time faculty. Yet, a vital question for the private sector is often how (and how much) such regulations are *enforced*. The minister also calls for private higher education to rely less on public university professors.

What will public policy insist upon as far as private distinctiveness from public? On the one hand, the new minister says private universities should be distinctive, not "duplicating" public ones and thus offering new programs—perhaps an unfriendly view to the idea of direct intersectoral competition. On the

other hand, given revolutionary concern with equity and the privileged social background of most private higher education students, regulations about access cannot be ruled out nor can caps on the amount of tuition rises. Already evident is a public policy orientation to discourage for-profit private higher education, the installation of which is popularly associated with the Mubarak regime's cronyism with business. Again, the new minister encourages the expansion of nonprofit private universities. Notions of appropriate participation might conceivably also lead to regulations about representation on university bodies.

Regulation will of course not be the only determinant of private higher education's prospects. Will broad public policy swing much away from the capitalist road that had brought wealth but heightened inequality? Will economic growth resume, with the favorable prospects it held for private higher education expansion, or will today's economic uncertainty cloud the prospects?