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Freedom And Reform At Egypt's Universities

Underfunded, understaffed, and suffering from opaque governance and political repression, the public higher education system that Egypt's new civilian government inherited from the Mubarak era is deeply flawed. Yet change in this area has stopped far short of a revolution.

Higher education reform has not been a priority during Egypt's tumultuous transition.

A few dramatic improvements took place at universities —free elections for student unions and administrative positions were held, and the hold of police and intelligence services on campuses was broken. But the status quo remains largely intact. Many incumbent administrators

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were reelected and although the police and security forces are no longer directly intervening in campus affairs, they are still monitoring them. Plans to replace the restrictive law governing universities, as well as student bylaws, have also stalled in the face of instability and conflict between Islamist and secular forces.

The situation will not improve until the political will exists to create a more transparent and equitable system. Universities need to be given oversight and control over their budgets, and an open and informed discussion about the distribution of public resources should begin. Egypt must also overhaul the way its national universities hire faculty and admit students, and develop new programs that provide students with degrees that are useful in today's job market. And despite the political delicacy of the issue, the state's commitment to providing a free university education for all citizens needs to be reevaluated.

Egypt must undertake a number of fundamental and difficult reforms to improve its overburdened, underperforming public university system. This is necessary for addressing the aspirations and tapping the potential of young Egyptians.

On February 17, 2011

—six days after the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was ousted from power

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—several thousand faculty members met on the campus of Cairo University for a long, passionate public meeting to discuss the future of Egypt’s universities. “Expectations were very high and everyone demanded something different,” recalls mathematics professor Hany El Husseiny, a founding member of the March 9 Movement, which was created in 2005 to fight for academic independence and an end to police interference on campus.

A year and a half later, expectations are considerably less sanguine. University reform has made little progress. A few dramatic improvements have taken place, such as the holding of free elections for student unions and for administrative positions at universities. The oppressive presence on university campuses of police and intelligence services has also decreased. But these changes have not shaken up the status quo as much as some had hoped. Many incumbent administrators were reelected; the cowed police and intelligence services, meanwhile, wait in the wings. They monitor campus life much more discreetly but are by no means gone. And gains have yet to be institutionalized. Plans for a new university law and new student bylaws to replace the old restrictive ones have been bogged down by the endless instability and cyclical crises of the transition period,

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questions of legitimacy, and disagreements between Islamists and their secular counterparts.

At the February 17 conference, organized jointly by the March 9 Movement and the Islamist Academics for Reform (**gamaa'un men agl el-islah**), the discussion was focused on how the university could support the ongoing revolution, rather than on particular reforms to implement on campus. Participants felt “reform will be easy when the revolution is victorious,” says El Hussein.

But the change in Egypt has stopped far short of a revolution, despite Mubarak's ouster. The fundamental and difficult reforms that must be undertaken to improve Egypt's overburdened, underperforming public higher education sector have yet to be broached. Universities still lack oversight and control over their budgets. New limits and criteria for faculty hires and promotions are needed along with better, more sophisticated admission standards. New programs and departments that match current developments in various academic fields as well as job demand must be introduced. Investment in higher education and in scientific research must be increased. And the state's supposed commitment to providing a free university education for all citizens needs to be reevaluated, despite the political delicacy of the issue.

Egyptian higher education has struggled for many decades. Underfunded and overpopulated, suffering from

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opaque governance and repressive police monitoring, the system Egypt's current government inherited from the Mubarak era is deeply flawed.

A massive influx of students in recent years has not been matched by a commensurate increase in funds. The number of university students nearly doubled between 1997 and 2007.

Today, there are at least 2.5 million post-secondary students in Egypt, and that number is expected to increase by about 3 percent a year (or 70,000 or so students) for the foreseeable future.

The vast majority of students attend one of Egypt's eighteen public universities or public vocational colleges or are enrolled in the university system of al-Azhar, an ancient and sprawling institution that is the voice of official, mainstream Islam in Egypt. There is also a growing number of private universities and private higher education institutes.

Egypt's public universities have swollen to unmanageable size. There are about 300,000 students at Cairo University today, with tens of thousands of students enrolled in each department, such as commerce and law. Al-Azhar University, which has two campuses in Cairo as well as many regional branches, serves close to 500,000 students. Egyptian university auditoriums do not always

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have the capacity to hold the thousands that attend some classes, and in many departments, there is no opportunity for labs or seminars.

University education also eats up a great deal of funds. The higher education budget represents a significant portion

—over one-quarter

—of Egypt's education budget. In 2011, according to the Egyptian government, higher education spending amounted to a little over 11 billion Egyptian pounds (\$1.83 billion) out of a state budget of EGP594 billion (\$99 billion). Meanwhile, the funds are being stretched thinner, as the education budget has decreased in recent years, both as a proportion of the overall budget and of GDP. Spending on higher education accounts for about 1 percent of GDP, which is not below the world average, but the constant increase in students in Egypt means the investment delivers continuously declining returns. Student-to-teacher ratios continue to increase, facilities deteriorate, and the investment per student drops. All understand that halting the steady decline of Egypt's public university system requires thoroughgoing reform as well as a significant increase in funding.

Even though the vast majority of spending goes to paying teachers and administrators, professors' salaries, like

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those of all public employees, remain quite low—a few hundred dollars for the younger faculty members. Many academics resort to long leaves of absence in which they teach in Gulf countries or private institutions or work in the private sector to make ends meet. The lack of proper compensation has exacerbated problems of corruption, with professors requiring students to buy new editions of their own textbooks and offering private tutorials, for instance.

Meanwhile, spending on scientific research and development is quite limited. According to a 2010 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Egypt,” that budget amounted to 0.2 percent of GDP in 2006, with the government hoping to raise it to 0.5 percent by 2012. Much of the government’s funding goes to a network of overstaffed government research institutes with uncoordinated and outmoded research agendas, rather than to universities. Very little applied study and almost no genuine research and development takes place at universities. In fact, Egyptian professors who have pursued graduate degrees or careers abroad and return to work at national universities are often shocked and discouraged by the situation there. This has real effects on Egypt’s international competitiveness. It lags behind many other developing

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countries in indicators such as the number of patents registered or the number of scientific articles published per researcher. And the situation only seems to be worsening. According to a government report, the flight of Egyptian scientists abroad has increased since the 2011 uprising.

On top of all these challenges, universities have suffered from decades of political interference and repression on the part of the security services. University campuses were seen as potential sources of political activism and opposition and were accordingly dealt with as security threats as much, if not more, than as engines of national development. Police units were stationed inside universities, and they forbade all forms of campus activism. State Security (now known as National Security), the domestic intelligence service, interfered in all aspects of university operation, from faculty promotions to student elections. Meanwhile, for professors and administrators, cultivating relations with the regime and the ruling party and showing loyalty to the system was one way to secure advancement and small professional perks.

Unfortunately, the higher education sector suffers from the same shortcomings as most of the overstuffed, underpaid, and in some cases unqualified state bureaucracy and offers little incentive and few avenues to propose reforms.

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Universities operate under centralized and nontransparent governance.

The Ministry of Higher Education and the Supreme University Council, which is chaired by the minister and staffed mostly by university presidents, make all important decisions.

University budgets are determined and managed in a highly centralized and inefficient manner by the Ministries of Higher Education, Finance, and Planning and by university presidents

—who are often the only ones to have a full picture of their institutions' finances.

Departments do not have their own independent budgets

—they must request funds for every extra expenditure

—and they have little power to change curricula, programs, or admissions standards.

Moreover, despite widespread complaints about the quality of higher education in Egypt today, there is significant resistance to change on the part of some faculty and administrators. They fear losing their meager privileges and prerogatives

—perhaps even their positions

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—if the system is made more competitive and meritocratic.

Well before the revolution, many lamented the state of higher education in Egypt. Professors complained of untenable working conditions and students of degrees that were of no use in the job market. In fact, university and vocational training school graduates make up a disproportionately high percentage of the unemployed

—a 2006 survey by the Center for Mobilization and Statistics showed that university graduates, while constituting 9.6 percent of the population, made up 26.5 percent of the unemployed.

There have long been calls for reform and greater investment in the higher education sector. Yet under the Mubarak regime, universities were tightly monitored and collective organizing and public debates (let alone overtly political activity) of every kind proscribed. Student union elections were rigged. Deans and presidents were vetted by the intelligence services and appointed based on their political loyalty to the regime. And all appointments, conferences, invitations to visiting speakers, and travel to academic events abroad required a security clearance from those services.

Constant monitoring made pushing for change of any kind very difficult. The March 9 Movement was a unique initiative launched by relatively small groups of academics

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with the aim of publicizing and agitating against the services' encroachment on higher education. Student activism, meanwhile

—carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood and new secular groups, such as the April 6 Movement

—was clandestine. Even such simple acts as handing out flyers and putting up posters could lead to students' expulsion, criminal prosecution, or even physical assaults and torture. In fact, in the fall of 2010, as the Mubarak regime held scandalously rigged parliamentary elections and prepared for an eventual power transition from the eighty-two

-year-old and ill president, repression of student activism of all kinds intensified.

So it is little surprise that in the aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, there was an explosion of activism and demands of all kinds on campus. The Egyptian uprising was driven, to a great degree, by the indignation and aspirations of young people, by their sense that Egypt should be managed in a more equitable manner that offers them greater opportunities to participate politically and economically in the development of their country. While the uprising included Egyptians from all backgrounds, many of its young leaders and organizers were university educated and middle class.

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Since February 2011, universities in Egypt have been rocked by recurrent protests. Almost immediately after Mubarak left power, students and some faculty began holding regular demonstrations in favor of the removal of senior administrators closely associated with the former regime and accused of corruption and political repression on campus.

Those focused on this issue tended to be opposition groups that were already politically active before the revolution. Their activism led to heated, sometimes physical, confrontations in which students (who were at the forefront of the protests) locked administrators in meeting rooms, held sit-ins and sleep-ins, and were attacked by campus security and military forces called in by university administrators.

One famous case took place at the Media Department at Cairo University. The dean of the department, Sami Abdel Aziz, was a senior member of the former president's ruling party and wrote laudatory columns about Mubarak. For months, the department was paralyzed by protests, divided between Abdel Aziz's supporters and his detractors, who covered the building with graffiti messages like: "We Hate You Dr. Sami" and "I Want to Be Free." At one point, students locked Abdel Aziz and other senior administrators inside a meeting room for several

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hours. The dean called in the army, and the soldiers' behavior in removing the protesters

—beating and tasing them

—caused an uproar. Abdel Aziz reportedly submitted his resignation, but it was refused by the university's higher council, which is made up of fellow deans. "It's against the law and against tradition" to remove a dean this way, another dean argued at the time.

There have also been recurrent protests targeting the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In spring 2012, for example, academics marched on the ministry and parliament and staged a mock funeral

—carrying a coffin labeled "higher education"

—to protest the lack of reforms and the appointment of Mohamed Abdel Magid El Nashar as minister of higher education. El Nashar, who had become president of Helwan University after his superior resigned, was accused of being close to the former regime and the military leadership. The protesters had a long list of demands, including an increase in faculty salaries across the board. They rejected the existing law governing universities and called for a new law drafted with the full participation of the academic community. Protesters demanded the achievement of truly free higher education

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for all and an end to waste, corruption, and privatization, that is, the creeping increase in parallel, fee-based education programs at national universities. They also called for new student bylaws to be drafted by students themselves.

Alongside these political demonstrations, faculty and graduate students (who at Egyptian universities all hold assistant teaching positions and are considered university employees) have also agitated for reforms related to their working conditions. Delegations of students and academics from a number of different universities and vocational colleges, inspired by the events in Tahrir Square, have traveled to Cairo to hold protests, sit-ins, and sleep-ins outside the Higher Education Ministry, clamoring for the resolution of particular grievances at their institutions, or

—once again

—for the removal of particular administrators.

However, these protesters, many of whom were engaging in political activity for the first time, rarely coordinated or pursued broader reform agendas. There have been at least four different attempts to create independent academic unions

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—none of which have yet come to fruition. The focus of these new groups is often on quite narrow professional concerns

—what the military leadership and part of the Egyptian media has come to dismiss as “sectoral” (read: self-interested) demands.

While the criticism is clearly intended to stifle demonstrations and especially strikes, there is some uncomfortable truth to it. Everyone agrees that professors’ salaries are too low, but many of these demands seem to be designed to entrench or expand quite narrow interests that come at the expense of much-needed, broader reform. They include, for example, demands that Ph.D. students be allowed to pursue their degrees for an unlimited number of years; that assistant professors be allowed to take unlimited leaves of absence (to work outside Egypt); and that professors be allowed to continue working past the age of retirement.

Private universities, meanwhile, also saw their fair share of campus activism, belying the idea that it was only at government institutions that there had been problems of governance or instances of repression. At the American University in Cairo, students objected to a conference hall named after former first lady and alumna Suzanne

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Mubarak and questioned the administration about its relationship with the former regime. Throughout the 2011

–2012 school year, students and custodial workers also joined forces to hold a series of protests demanding better working conditions; a cap on tuition hikes; and greater transparency regarding the university’s finances. The administration met some of the workers’ demands and took a number of steps designed to make students and faculty feel more included in decision-making, including the drafting of a new freedom of expression on campus policy, the creation of an ombudsman position to address staff complaints, and the inclusion of students on a finance committee.

At the German University in Cairo

—one of several new, private, foreign-language universities

—student protests against the military authorities following the death of 71 soccer fans in a tragic melee at the Port Said stadium (the dead included one student from the university) led to a serious, months-long confrontation with administrators. Two students were expelled from the university for “verbally abusing and insulting” the head of the disciplinary committee, a former Mubarak minister. The students were reinstated after a hunger strike and sit-

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in. But the administration continued to resist demands for an independent student union.

One of the main demands of reformist groups inside Egyptian public universities is that senior administrators be elected rather than appointed as they were under Hosni Mubarak's regime. Then, presidents and deans were overwhelmingly chosen for their political loyalty to the ruling party.

At first, the demand for presidents and deans to step down and for elections to take place was resisted by university administrations, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. They argued that a new university law was required to govern the elections, that students should not be allowed to pressure the administration, and that patience was required to prevent universities from descending into chaos. A few senior administrators stepped down, but most stayed in their positions. Some departments invoked revolutionary legitimacy and held elections

—but administrations often refused to acknowledge the results.

Students and faculty continued to mobilize around the demand for elections and there was widespread support from various political parties for the idea of direct representation.

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After faculty threatened to launch a general strike in fall 2012, many universities held elections for the positions of presidents and deans.

The deans were elected directly by faculty, with the votes of professors, assistant professors, and teaching assistants weighted differently.

Faculty committees elected from within each department chose the presidents, a system that was meant to lead to a more deliberate selection process than a direct, university-wide election would.

Free student union elections were also held for the first time in decades, and Egypt's National Student Union was resurrected in the summer of 2011, after being banned for thirty-two years.

What is worth noting, though, is that in quite a few cases these elections either returned incumbents to their positions or did not lead to the victory of reformist figures. Faculty often elected as deans and representatives the most senior members of their departments, out of a sense of deference and obligation. These older academics, while more responsive to the demands of colleagues and students, are protective of the status quo. In many cases it is they who voted incumbent presidents

—or their immediate deputies

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—back into office.

Some observers have also pointed out drawbacks to the election of deans and presidents. They argue that campaigning for the positions might lead to influence-peddling and to wealthy faculty members using their money or position to garner support. It also most likely reduces academic mobility, which is already quite low at Egyptian universities, because it is unlikely that deans or presidents would ever be elected from outside a university.

Another clear change has been the apparent withdrawal of police and intelligence forces from campus.

Their presence at universities has never been, strictly speaking, legal. In fact, shortly before the revolution, academics had won a court order explicitly banning them. In October 2010, after years of litigation, an Egyptian court rejected a government appeal and reiterated that the presence of Ministry of Interior units on campus violated the principle of universities' independence. At the time, the ruling's impact was far from certain, however, with then minister of higher education Hany Helal saying its implementation would need to be studied and asking in an interview: "If we implement the ruling ... and the next day Cairo University goes up in flames, who will we hold

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responsible?” And in fact, the forces maintained their presence on campuses.

It took Mubarak’s ouster to change the political atmosphere in a way that has led to the genuine withdrawal of police from universities. Today, Egyptian universities are much freer than they were in 2010 and students and faculty can express and organize themselves to an unprecedented degree.

Civilian security employees man the gates of most campuses now, students are no longer harassed, and both students and faculty can freely organize exhibitions, conferences, and marches on campus. Students have been able to organize events directly criticizing the military leadership of the country, such as screenings of documentary footage showing military brutality against protesters

—although such events have not always taken place without controversy, and some administrators have invited military representatives to visit campuses and give their version of events.

It is too soon to assume a complete victory on this front. University administrators continue to ask faculty to fill out various security forms to travel to conferences or take leaves of absence, although nowadays when professors refuse to do so there appears to be no consequence.

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Students have noticed some familiar faces still present on campus, with security officers dressed in civilian clothing and keeping a much-lower profile. There is little doubt that although the police and security forces are no longer directly intervening in campus affairs, they are still monitoring them, maintaining contacts with some administrators, faculty, and students, and gathering information

—and likely putting that information to use. Last year, when Cairo University faculty were competing for the positions of deans, an Egyptian newspaper published leaked reports, which it said had been commissioned by the university administration, on the political leanings of the individual candidates.

Further complicating the situation, the entire university system is not united against having police forces on campus. Kholoud Saber, the deputy director of the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, a nongovernmental organization that monitors academic freedom, says that quite a few deans are arguing that the police need to return to securing university campuses. Saber, a graduate student and teaching assistant at Cairo University, believes administrators are purposely making no effort to specify the responsibilities and procedures to be followed by untrained and underpaid private security

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guards so as to bolster their arguments for a return of the police.

In an interview with an Egyptian newspaper in May 2012, former higher education minister El Nashar called for bringing the police back to universities, arguing that:

Throughout Egypt there were shortcomings in the means of the police and of faculty and of employees in all government institutions; we should respect the revolution and all engage re-evaluate ourselves, but we shouldn't blame the campus police and consider it the reason for the collapse of the academic process. Campus police needs to come back but on condition that they treat students respectfully and that their role is limited to protecting university property. . . . We tried after the revolution to rely on civilians to guarantee security inside the university, but guarding the university is not a civilian's role, because the university has millions [worth of equipment] that if stolen will harm the students, and we need police that will deal forcefully with criminals and deviants.

Those opposed to the return of the police to campuses argue that it is the first step toward a return of the former repressive regime, since the police coordinate with the intelligence services.

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Everyone in Egyptian academia agrees that there is a need for a new law governing national universities and for new student bylaws (la'iha tulabiya) that will introduce much-needed reforms in governance and protections for academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus. However, in the year and a half since Mubarak's ouster, students and academics have been unable to reach the necessary consensus to write these new laws and get them passed. The academic community has faced the same fundamental political problem that many other groups have in the chaotic and deeply contested transition period—the difficulty of agreeing on who speaks in their name and on finding someone in power they can speak to. One factor has been the polarization of groups on campus, with Islamist forces on one side and secular forces on the other. Although secular and Islamist groups collaborated in the months after Mubarak's ouster and share similar goals of ending corruption and carrying out reforms, when it came time to compete for positions on campus and to formulate university policy, they faced divisions quite similar to those that characterized the political process on the national stage.

Observers say that during student and administrator elections, campaigns devolved into simplistic “Muslim Brotherhood or not” contests and that votes were overwhelmingly cast on that basis. Altercations have

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broken out between Islamists and secular students during elections, but they have generally been successfully contained or mediated.

When it came to drafting a new university law, an advisory committee

—intended to present the recommendations of faculty

—was created under the post-uprising government of Essam Sharaf.

But there were endless disagreements over the composition of the committee. After the dissolution of Sharaf's government, the higher education minister in Kamal al-Ganzouri's government (appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in November 2011 in response violent street clashes) formed a second advisory committee. But many faculty members boycotted it, both to oppose the Ganzouri government and because, they said, the suggestions of a previous advisory committee had been ignored.

Muslim Brotherhood

—affiliated academics did join the advisory body, however. Over the objections of their boycotting secular counterparts

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—who argued that a wider consultation process should be put in place

—they drafted a new university law. But when that law was forwarded to university departments across the country for approval, it met with widespread criticism. Some objected to the fact that it set aside a quarter of the seats on university council

—advisory boards drawn from inside and outside the university

—for “figures from civil society” whose qualifications were unspecified. Critics suspected that this would be a way of stacking university councils with Islamists.

Others noted that the law set no qualification criteria for candidates for the positions of university president. The law reportedly included generalities about academic rights and obligations

—such as a code of honor for faculty members—but left many of the actual details to be determined by administrative rules set in the future by the Ministry of Higher Education.

In the absence of any progress or agreement on a new university law, in the spring of 2012, parliament agreed to pass six amendments to the existing law, formalizing the procedures for the election of deans and presidents and

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stipulating increases in the salaries of teachings assistants, assistant professors, and professors to range between EGP1000 and EGP3500, or \$165 and \$575. But even that small step forward was blocked. Egypt's High Constitutional Court ruled on June 14 that the parliamentary electoral law was unconstitutional and that the parliament should be dissolved. The Muslim Brotherhood, which held the largest share of seats in the parliament, has challenged the need to dissolve the entire body.

Still, it is quite likely that the university law, like many other pressing legislative projects, will remain in limbo until new, as yet unscheduled, parliamentary elections are held.

New student bylaws have suffered a similarly tortuous and unsuccessful fate. The bylaws would govern student union elections and political activity on campus. Students have argued that they should write the regulations themselves and approve them by referendum.

They have run into difficulties, however, in determining a representative process by which the drafting might take place. Politicized student groups have challenged the right of the National Student Union alone to represent them, for example, despite the fact that the union was freely elected last year. This does not appear to be primarily related to the secularist-Islamist rift that dominates Egyptian politics.

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Rather, in this transitional phase, elections alone are often not enough to ensure complete legitimacy or widespread consent. Many groups (whether in the field of higher education or elsewhere) clamor for greater representation through outside channels, such as street protests and the media.

Not only has the academic community wrestled with questions of representation and of the legitimacy of the electoral process (which have also dogged the formation of Egypt's parliament and Constituent Assembly), but the political ambiguity and instability of the transition period also has undermined reform efforts. Again and again, students and faculty have been distracted from attempts to organize and implement campus reforms by larger national crises to which they have felt compelled to respond. Such events range from the army's killing of Christian protesters in October 2011 and the street fighting that broke out between protesters, police, and soldiers between November 2011 and January 2012 to the parliamentary and then presidential elections and the break-in and confrontations at the Israeli embassy. Many faculty members have been involved in the creation of new political parties and in debates like those surrounding the timing, drafting process, and content of Egypt's new constitution.

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