JRMC 202 STORY CORP PROJECT

Political Activism in AUC

How it changed, what happened in the recent September 2011 Strike, as well as the importance of the Student Union.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Maha Soliman

Interviewee: Ahmed Abu Hussein

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Professor: Kim Fox

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Persons present: Maha Soliman (M)

Ahmed Abu Hussein (A)

M: What’s your name?

A: Ahmed Abu Hussain

M: When did you attend AUC [American University in Cairo]?

A: From 2004 to 2008 and currently I’m doing my master’s.

M: What did you major in?

A: As bachelor’s degree Political Science Middle East politics, and currently public policy and administration with a thesis on governance of political parties

M: How do you think AUC political activism has changed?

A: I think it changed drastically especially after the latest events of the latest AUC strikes. As I told you I have been here since 2004 but I actually had a lot of friends and relatives who have been in AUC before that. And maybe I guess these years, or maybe this year specially, resembles a lot the years in 99, 2000, 2001 where political activism was really high in AUC. During the period that I witnessed like the student activism in AUC from 2004 to 2008 I don’t think it was the best years, but I think they were building up for the current years. Student activism can be
divided into a lot of things, activism toward the outside, outside the AUC walls and student activism inside the AUC wall. By that I mean that there are some activities that have been done by the students towards the circumstances facing our lives as Egyptians mainly or as citizens of the world could be as such as well. So for example you find the peak in 2000, and 2001 and 2002 and 2003 as well at the beginning of 2003 after the Iraqi war, and you'd find that a lot of AUCians were involved in demonstrations against the policies of the United States, so this is kind of external activism.

But lately and specially and since the years 2008 I guess and after the move to the new campus a lot of internal issues have stirred up and a lot of people have started to question more than in the past the capability of the administration of managing the institution as a whole. And with the increase with the student activism in AUC you start to find that the old school of political camps that mainly emerge before and after the student union elections they start to merge or start to have a common idea which is that they need to work together to confront the administration.

But what happened this year, I guess it was a buildup on due to what happened last year, is that you find the workers and the security hand in hand with the students working on a certain purpose. And I guess this is the most genuine, authentic thing that happened during the years that I’ve seen or heard about that covers more than 12 years or something like that. So this is something really different, really rare, and really unique. The question is how much, how much is this going to affect the future, and whether it’s going to be sustainable or not?

Because the administration has as we say, we use to say this a lot in the past, the administration has a longtivity of life. They live more than student, students graduate after five years, if they’re very successful they'll graduate in eight years, (laughing) stuff like that but that administration
will continue more than the students. So they can do something today, they can give the students something today but they can take it back tomorrow. And this sustainability is always the question that the students have to face.

**M: You said during your four years there wasn’t much activism, why do you think so?**

A: I guess we came in a period where there was a huge decline in the student's morale. Mainly, I personally, I believe because of the student politics. The student politics inside AUC disgusted a lot of people. And the camps, and the political camps, just turned off a lot of people from participating and trying to figure out their issues, because it was a very trivial fight between the camps. For example they would fight about how many parties should be done in a year, they would fight about the subsidies of food a lot of these things, a lot of these issues are not really important for students, and definitely they’re not important for the workers or the any employer who is working or any employee who is working at AUC.

The real issue is to find issues that matter with the students, and not only that but to make them trust that their leaders will fight for their rights till the end. And we saw a couple of sort of uprisings or evident activism in these four years or five years. There was one, there was at I guess 2005. Yes 2005, when Walid Salaab was the president of the student union and the administration by that time decided to divide the commencement to science and non science and to graduate AUCians at two different days. As much as this might sound trivial but it was an issue because definitely when you graduate you'll feel the same you want to graduate with all of your friends you don’t want to graduate like with the non science friends only or something like that. So it was the first time that you'd see like four hundred students gather around the SU president demanding
something fighting for, they threatened to expel the SU President. But they fought for what they believed in, and they got it.

So basically if we go back to the reasons you would find out that there wasn’t so much belief in the leadership. And I guess what happened this time, and it's definitely inspired by the Jan 25 revolution, is that you don’t need to have a leader, you don’t have to have a leader, you can do it yourself. And I think this is what made the huge change; we didn’t have that back then. Back then it was all about leadership and it was a fight for leadership, so nobody won.

**M: Do you think the importance of the SU changed in those years, like were they more important before or are they more important now?**

A: La2 (no) in the past they were more important. Right now the Student Union lost its value, because it's about, from the couple of words themselves; it’s the Student Union, a unity of students. And currently there is no unity among the students. And supposedly the office and the executive office of the Student Union should represent the unity of the students but they are not united in an organized way it’s more of an organic way, it's not institutionalized way. And I've worked in the Student Union for more than two years. Personally what I think is that the whole model should be destructed and rebuilt. The problem is that we are following the American system too much. And it became more of a student government than a student union, and it became a model, like MUN and MAL, and this won’t work.

What you need to do is that you need to change the Student Union to become a student union, a great student union. And I guess the whole constitution should be rewritten, I think it’s worthless, and it’s actually not suitable for today for the current circumstances. And you need to change the
whole governance of it, a more parliamentary like student union would be much better to include more voices. One man show to rule the whole thing it's not working, it's not working. You need to create a system in which even the people who lost can have a place. But in order for the American morale of the "winner takes it all" it’s not working for us.

**M: It was the first time that workers and staff and students joined in a strike together right?**

A: Yes, this is the first time I guess that I've personally witnessed that's the first time. We usually had that the workers would have some problems and the students definitely all the time had problems. But I guess nobody really cared to understand the problems of the others until this year. Because let’s be honest the workers use to think that the fees issue for the students it’s not a big deal. And the students really didn’t know what are the problems of the workers, and to be honest they did not really care.

But I guess this confrontation, and the fact that a student can stand and listen that there’s a worker who is paid peanuts and is not allowed to use the bathroom and works 16 hours daily and with no vacation during the week it kind of shocked them. And on the other hand the workers started to understand that yes maybe most of them are rich, maybe they can afford the education, but maybe this is not, it’s not worth it, the education is not worth it. You're paying a lot of money, maybe you can afford to pay a lot of money but you're not getting what you paid for, that’s the problem. So this kind of mutual understanding that happened that’s unique that’s the first time to happen, definitely.
M: Also a lot of people were talking about how the way they were striking or like how they did it wasn’t the right way. Do you think it was the right way?

A: I think a lot of people are just too pathetic to try to get their own rights, so when someone volunteers to get their rights as a whole, all of them, instead of supporting they find what’s easier is to criticize and try to trivialize what the others are trying to do, I think this is extremely stupid. You measure what the strike, you measure the value of the strike with what, the things it accomplishes and the price it paid. And honestly what I saw, I saw something very organized, I saw something very peaceful. Nobody was offended, nobody was attacked, no injuries, nothing happened, no there’s not a single chair that was broken, so I guess it was done in the best way it could have been done.

But the problem is that some people do not understand that in order to get your rights you have to fight for it. Some people think that someone will just like give you your right as if it was charity, and this won’t happen. You have to grab your right; you cannot just wait for it to be given to you, this won’t happen. And I guess what also the revolution taught us, and I guess what other revolutions taught us, and I guess what the civil rights movement in America taught us, is that there will be people who will fight for their rights and there will be people who just criticize them for doing something good, that’s normal. And I honestly I don’t think that those who just criticize by just sitting on their butts doing nothing, I don’t think they deserve the attention. Like who cares.

M: Alright thank you so much Ahmed

A: You’re more than welcome