Will A-U-C reflect the society’s Islamic affiliations?

Lead-in: The Egyptian society is getting more and more religious oriented and the Islamic movements are taking more power after the 25th of January revolution. But is The American University in Cairo going to be affected? Is the elite’s school, the so called “bubble” going to reflect these affiliations?

“Hassan and Morkos intro” fades in and plays for 1:27 sec

Islam and Christianity, the two major religion poles in Egypt that have always had a mysterious kind of relationship throughout the history of the country, a complex relationship that teeters between love and hatred.

Do people become less accepting and liberal when they get more religious? Or is it the complete opposite? And why do we still witness tough conflict in Egypt if we are getting more religious? Are we even getting more religious? Showing your religious identity and being categorized by it is something totally normal and acceptable now in Egypt. Muslim women wear veils and nikab, Muslim men grow bards; Christians wear crosses and so on. It’s even becoming unacceptable not to show your religious identity.

For the past 30 years and even before, many sects of the Egyptian community were oppressed and were not allowed to express their views. Among these groups were the Islamists as The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Islamists, during the previous regime, were put in detentions where they faced torture and continuous threat. But now and after the overthrowing of Mubarak, oppressed sects began to gain power.
Islamists are now taking about 75 percent of the parliament and running with three candidates for presidency. More and more people in Tahrir chant for the Islamic state; growing support for this stream among the Egyptian society is highly suggested.

However, is the American University in Cairo witnessing similar changes? A-U-C has always claimed that it doesn’t have anything to do with religion or politics. However, historical records and archives contradict those claims. The acting dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences gave a speech in 1951 calling for the believers in Islam, Judaism or Christianity to devote some time for God’s remembrance during the assembly hours which by then were on Mondays and Fridays. He even stressed saying, “this is a Christian institution, and I have the privilege to call on some Christian members of the staff to lend these devotional periods.”

A-U-C’s new campus, as well as the old one, had specific spaces for praying. But these spaces were given the name “meditation areas”, a generic name so as not to specify it to a certain religion or group.

Mr. Sayed Omar, a student organization specialist in the office of student development at A-U-C thinks that we have praying areas.

OMAR: “But we are not allowed to establish or to build a mosque or a church because it’s a liberal education, if you build for Muslims, you have to build for Christians, you have to build for other religions.” (:20)
However, this was not the case 50 years ago where the map of the university marks a site for a chapel on campus. A religion free campus wasn’t also the case where records show professors and staff members were categorized in official documents based on certain criteria, religion was one of these criteria.

Many people don’t know A-U-C was intended to offer liberal arts education within a Christian frame work. Right now, the school is actually playing on the border line of not having any religious orientation at all. With the Egyptian community going towards Islamic affiliations, the question is will The American University in Cairo adopt a similar course to the society in which it’s based? Will we shift from insisting on non religious orientation to an Islamic orientation?

Towards the end of the 90s some clubs began to form, that were said to have religious affiliations. All would speak this way but none would have a proof.

OMAR: “We have this kind of thoughts in AUC but it is behind the sides. If you are aware about the student activities we can find the Help Club, which is the image of the Help Club that they are Muslim Brotherhood. On the other side, DCC, Discover Culture Club where most of the student go to Coptic places. We have two student organizations, if you’re out of the loop, you can see we have two ideas, Muslim and Christian.” (:36)

“Once in a red moon” fades in and plays for 2 min

The Help Club is a community service club established in 1995 and is considered the oldest club of its kind at A-U-C. As Omar mentioned, the Help Club was always perceived by A-U-Cians to be part of the Muslim Brotherhood for many reasons:

OMAR: “most of the people think the Help Club doesn’t accept any Christian students, which is not the truth. Most of the students are very conservative,
Mohammed Yassin, a mechanical engineering junior and a former Help Club member says his opinion about this subject.

**YASSIN**: “If people are talking about the Help Club to be like this, then for sure something happened to make people call it like this. What I know, from 2005 and 2006 that may be the upper board of the Help Club, someone told me before that it was directed by Muslim Brotherhood students and I’ve known one of them before. I joined Help Club for three semesters and I resigned for another two semesters and I’m just working with them with charity nowadays. But to answer to last question, I met people who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood and I also in other clubs, other than the Help Club, I met Brotherhood and I met Salafis. I know there are no non Muslims in the club but this has nothing to do with the constitution. The constitution of the club doesn’t oblige anyone to be a Muslim or non Muslim to be accepted, I heard before that non Muslims applied and got accepted but I don’t know till now anyone who was non Muslim inside the club.” (1:13)

“**Hob Wa Ounf**” fades in and plays till 10:45

In an article published in the Caravan, A-U-C’s student newspaper, issue of 2007, many students were complaining that they were being exposed to what they called offensive religious preaching from other students. Several cases were reported where some students approached others convincing them to be veiled and to do other religious practices.

Also in an email sent out to all A-U-C from the policy administrator in 2001, a clear statement was made that face veiling is prohibited on campus. The email was sent after a number of face-veiled girls appeared in classes and it explicitly stated that, “A-U-C continue to expect all students to dress decently and to exercise common sense in their behavior.” The email left students, faculty and staff to figure out the implications of its speech.
Yet back at the day, not much freedom was exercised. Students weren’t allowed to invite certain figures on campus, who were seen controversial. But now, A-U-C’s current policy allows for more freedom of speech.

OMAR: “According to the new freedom of speech, there is not any kind of rejection to start this kind of organization...as a student you’ll be responsible for this kind of activities, any group, any students, any staff or faculty can invite any people on campus.” (:30)

According to a 2011 issue of The Caravan, the old policy dates back to former President Richard F. Pedersen. The previous policy states that: “The AUC protocol with the Egyptian government mandates that all the AUC activities must respect the laws (specifically law 49, article 332 for the year 1992) in force in Egypt. This law states that universities shall not establish organizations or formations on the basis of a sectarian or ideological or political subdivision.

And this policy was the main reason why A-U-C didn’t permit religious based groups on campus. But we had rather hidden groups.

But even if the university doesn’t ban religious based organizations, even if it was allowed to have announced religious groups, are A-U-C students interested enough?

Natural sound of students praying in the plaza after Omar Mohsen’s death for 4 sec

Yassin, who used to call for the Azan on the roof of the new campus and who used to lead the students during the times of prayer thinks that not enough A-U-Cians are doing their prayers and that he never saw the prayer roof filled.

YASSIN: “I don’t know if there are people who are willing or up to organizing a religious group, I don’t know why then it would be called religious, it has something to do with activities.” (:17)
Saad El Shater, son of Khairat El Shater, is an A-U-C business major student. Khairat El Shater is a prominent Muslim Brotherhood member who ran for Egyptian presidency but was soon disqualified because of his previous imprisonment. Saad believes A-U-C has no group belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood because not enough A-U-Cians are interested.

MARIAM: “So there are some members of them Muslim brotherhood that are on campus?”
EL SHATER: “Yea there is one or two”
MARIAM: “Only one or two?”
EL SHATER: “Yea”
MARIAM: “Aren’t they thinking of forming a group or aren’t they having already a group?”
EL SHATER: “Actually their low number doesn’t let them do so; they cannot form a group of two so they don’t think of forming any group or anything.” (:20)

Saad recalls his first semester at A-U-C and how he perceived the Help Club

EL SHATER: “First semester I was introduced to the club but there was a common agreement between me and them, a hidden agreement not clearly mentioned that I don’t need to enter the club because I don’t feel interested and they don’t need me in the club because they say that it may make other people link between the club and the Muslim Brotherhood so they’re afraid of applying what people are saying so it wasn’t formal but most of them are my friends so we were joking: no we don’t need you in our club and I wasn’t interested in this club at all.” (:50)

A-U-C mostly includes elite students whose parents have enough money to spend on the liberal education and who have enough money to keep them somehow, isolated from the suffering community with all its concerns.

Sayed Omar thinks A-U-C students are special case.

OMAR: “I think that the mentality of an AUCian is not as the mentality if other universities, student here in AUC, they don’t have this kind of challenges that face other universities in Egypt. Students are not aware about politics, I’m sorry to say it, although we have political activists graduated from AUC but still students are not interested about politics or
religion. I think students have other issues to look at, they don’t have any kind of problems like other students… they have everything.” (:44)

“Heila Heila” fades in and plays till the end of the documentary

Are A-U-Cians really interested in this stream or not? Is the Muslim Brotherhood going to seek elite students’ support or not? And will we witness an announced religious or political group for Muslim Brotherhood or Salafis on campus? These will remain questions with just speculated answers until we see solid evidence for the first announced Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi group on campus.

Mariam Rizk, A-U-C news.

Credits:
Special thanks to Sayed Omar, Mohammed Yassin, and Saad El Shater for giving up their time and their valuable information

Historical component was gathered from A-U-C’s library archives

Music tracks used in this documentary are

1- “Hassan and Morkos intro” by Yasser Abdel Rahman

2- “The end of the World” by Robert Kral

3- “Once in a red moon” by Secret Garden

4-“Hob wa Ounf” by Omar Khairat

5- “Heila Heila” by Basata band

Natural sound from Caravan's YouTube channel