

Political Science in Egypt: Talkin' bout a Revolution

by Jan Claudius Völkel

Abstract

The article describes the experiences of a German DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) long-term lecturer who started to teach Euro-Mediterranean Studies at Cairo University's prestigious Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS) in February 2013. Though political science – as well as all social sciences – came under increasing pressure by the Egyptian authorities, particularly since the military coup in summer 2013, the author still collected many positive memories with students who were seriously interested in analyses of the European Union, the political developments in the Middle East and North Africa, and the mutual relations between both. Yet, the fundamental differences in how political science is understood in Egypt and in Europe, especially in Germany after 1945, led to some crucial challenges: While in Egypt political science is primarily used for educating future members of the public administration and the state institutions, less emphasis is put on the ability of critical thinking and an independent perspective on narrated truths. In consequence, students and colleagues who dare to criticize the government and its actions are endangered of facing legal consequences, instead of receiving scientific rewards for further developing the quality of Egyptian political science. Hence, many students and professors have lost their initial enthusiasm for the subject in the course of the 2011 events, and are rather scared of defending their opinion in public. Under these conditions, a competitive and fruitful coexistence between state officials and critical social scientists – which would be crucial if Egypt was seriously working for more democracy – will never be established.

Academia in Transformation

This Working Paper is part of a series of publications in the project “Academia in Transformation”. A collective volume of all project papers will be edited by Florian Kohstall, Carola Richter, Fatima Kastner and Sarhan Dhouib and published by NOMOS in 2017.

Suggested Citation

Völkel, Jan Claudius (2016): Political Science in Egypt: Talkin’ bout a Revolution. Arab-German Young Academy – Transformation Group Working Paper No. 4/2016.

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About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact, not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between Europe and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional but reflect and accelerate global trends. The importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance are not limited to the MENA. Through a transcultural perspective the Working Group Transformation of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to better understand these trends. The Working Group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA can be improved.

Political Science in Egypt: Talkin' bout a Revolution¹

“Today Egypt’s educational system both reflects and augments the social unrest of its own people – and of those it has influenced. Historic conflicts between religious and secular leaders, between tradition and innovation, and between foreign and national interest, influence contemporary Egyptian education.”

(Cochran 1986: 1)

The job description was promising: the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) was looking for a long-term lecturer for political science in spring 2012 to teach at Cairo University’s “Euro-Mediterranean Studies Programme” (EMSP) for the following five years. “Given the revolutionary changes in the country”, as stated in the call for applications, the successful candidate should offer courses on “societal transformation, development of civil society structures, democratization, crisis and conflict resolution” (DAAD 2012, translation from German to English by the author).

This sounded like the perfect position to me, as I had been closely following the contemporary political and economic developments across the Arab world since my early academic years. I had also been dealing with questions of democratization and transformation for a considerable time. So I submitted my application for this position in summer 2012, and excitedly received an invitation for a job interview at the DAAD headquarters in Bonn, Germany, in September 2012.

The interview took a surprising turn when one of the selection committee members asked whether I would also be able to teach more courses on the EU, and less on transformation and democratization. I confirmed that I would also be very familiar with the EU and that I would be happy to teach about it once in Cairo as well.

Some weeks later I received the positive decision, and by February 1, 2013, I started my new job at Cairo University’s well-known Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS). I was excited to work and live in Egypt, the epicenter of the famous uprisings that had shaken almost the entire Arab world, and to become part of this unique process that has dominated the regional analyses in academic publications and discourses since its outbreak.

From the beginning, I have been teaching European Studies and the relations between Europe and the MENA region in a team of excellent and sympathetic colleagues, and with students who have been interested and interesting. Yet, I did not teach a single session on transformation and democratization – as it was initially intended for the position advertised in 2012. Hardly a year later, the demand for these issues had mostly vanished at Cairo University.

In the following discussion, I will present some personal observations as a political scientist living in Egypt during the last six months of former President Mohamed Morsi (who was ousted on July 3,

¹ The author is grateful for critical comments of Bassant Hassib (British University in Egypt) and Ahmed Abd Rabou (University of Denver). The accuracy of all information given is, however, his sole responsibility.

2013) and then under the subsequent rule of interim President Adly Mansour and the acting President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. I will discuss consequences of the restoration of suppression on political science at Egypt's most prestigious state university, and draw broader lines for the overall understanding of what political science, and academia in general, should achieve. The article will argue that the current developments in Egypt are also a missed chance to further develop political science into a meaningful discipline that does not only prepare students for the job market, but that also improves the overall quality of Egypt's academic landscape.

► Political Science, Here and There

Despite the fact that there are many similarities between the classical political science offers in Egypt and Europe/North America regarding the content, there is one important difference. Similar are the typical sub-disciplines that are studied, such as political theory, international relations, and comparative politics. Classes in international law or political economy are offered south as well as north of the Mediterranean. Different, however, is that academic discourses in the Arab world mostly reflect a positivist perspective, with very little openness towards ideas of constructivist approaches. The strict belief in norms and values leaves little room for diverting opinions and critical questioning of "eternal truths".

Another difference applies to the *working conditions*. While in liberal democracies, despite some dependency on state resources, institutional autonomy is widely guaranteed for academia (Hage 2013), social sciences across the Arab world "face notable obstacles due to institutional fragmentation, high levels of bureaucracy, and political restrictions" (Amer 2016). In many regards, researchers in the Arab world are not free in what they do. Lengthy administrative procedures are only one obstacle; research restrictions are another. For each research initiative, scholars need a security clearance from the authorities, which usually takes months, if not years, and even some inconspicuous proposals are turned down for security reasons. Empirical research on the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the military is almost impossible inside Egypt, particularly since al-Sisi has become president and the security state has been reinstituted. Even topics such as irregular migration, public health or civil society engagement can be studied, if at all, only under close surveillance by the security forces. In addition, basic research is often perceived as unwanted competition to CAPMAS, the state's statistical office that imposes additional hurdles on the approval of research applications.

An important difference also exists regarding the *purpose* of social sciences, among them political science. Until 2011, political science in Egypt as well as in many other Arab countries served primarily the aim of raising and training new experts for the political system. Graduates were keen to get a job primarily in public administration, the state party, the diplomatic corps, intelligence agencies, or state-owned media outlets. The popularity of political science in the Arab world before 2011 was

mainly “based on a fake assumption held by many students that it is the highway to get prestigious jobs in the government” (Hassan 2009: 8). Yet, hundreds of thousands failed to get a job after university graduation (Abdel-Moneim 2016: 15ff.), particularly if they had no privileged family bonds with the elite circles. This led to massive personal despair and frustration, and eventually to the popular uprisings of 2011 (El-Said 2014: 65).

Across the Arab world, the regimes were closely connected to political science and interfered sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly into its teaching. In Egypt, this was particularly strong from the beginning: Legend has it that it was President Gamal Abdel Nasser himself who ordered the establishment of FEPS at Cairo University, as his daughter wanted to study political science back then. Indeed, Hoda Gamal Abdel Nasser did so and became a respected professor at FEPS later.

Yet, Nasser’s involvement in Cairo University’s new teaching offers was more than just helping his daughter to realize her dreams: 1960 was the time to bring Egypt in line with Nasser’s comprehensive ideology. The press became nationalized (Völkel 2008: 158), and social sciences were perceived as useful for spreading Nasser’s version of Arab socialism that later became known as “Nasserism”. In order to give widespread legitimacy to this comprehensive populist ideology, Cairo University had to “spell out, justify, and spread the nationalist and socialist goals of the regime” (Reid 2002: 200); higher education “functioned as a tool to train future party leaders, state cadres, and bureaucrats” (Abd Rabou 2016: 55).

This important charge notwithstanding, Cairo University, like the whole educational sector in Egypt, suffered from chronic underfinancing, as state allocations had by far not been enough to equip universities with sufficient resources to properly conduct their tasks. Consequently, Egypt’s educational system until today remains at the world’s lowest levels, ranking 139 out of 140 countries in the “Quality of the education system” category of the 2015-2016 Global Competitiveness Report.

The FEPS, as one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in Egypt, has, from its beginning, been closely connected with Egypt’s policy circles and state bureaucracy in particular. Its purpose was never simply to raise promising academics, but rather to prepare students for a later position in the country’s political system. This “structural interconnectedness” was part and parcel of FEPS’ self-understanding since its inception until the end of Hosni Mubarak’s rule. A graduate student of political science, who wished to remain anonymous, remembered that until 2011, the main content of her research was to recapitulate the achievements of the state and the government. Whilst thinking about writing a paper on the 2005 presidential elections – the first ostensibly competitive elections in the country’s history after Mubarak agreed to have an official competitor, Ayman Nour – a professor advised her to “simply evaluate the electoral program of President Hosni Mubarak and his development plans for the country” (FEPS post-graduate student, personal communication, May 2016).

This is the opposite of the so-called critical academia, i.e. scientists who refuse “to be enslaved” to official politics (Hage 2013). After 2011 there has certainly been a boost for more independent and

² See their website at www.theacss.org. The creation of ACSS was financially supported by the Ford Foundation and the Canadian International Development Research Centre.

more professional social sciences throughout the Arab world, illustrated for instance by the creation of the Arab Council for Social Sciences (ACSS) in Beirut in August 2012². However, social sciences remain “the ‘poor cousin’ of Arab research” (UNDP 2009: 202). On the eve of the Arab Spring, Schlumberger (2010: 10) identified in diplomatic words a “sometimes problematic and less than conducive relationship between the political sphere and the social sciences” across the Arab world. Moreover, the Arab Social Science Monitor published in December 2015 still describes Arab social sciences as weak because of “the ever-increasing control and censorship practiced by political authorities over all aspects of civic life in the Arab world in the period preceding the ‘Arab Spring’” (Bamyeh 2015: 9). In addition, religious dogmas also pose serious limits to social research; topics such as atheism, existentialism, sexuality or anything that is declared “sensitive” are still widely underrepresented in most curricula. As a consequence, “social science in the Arab world is doubly delegitimized – from above by the political leaders and from below by religious leaders” (Hanafi 2014: 202).

Strong state and pressure group control over social science across the Arab world is in sharp contrast to the specific German understanding of social science, where much still depends on the developments after the Second World War and the denazification of higher education and university offers back then. Since political science was rather understood as a theory of the state (“*Staatswissenschaft*”) before 1945, it were particularly the scholars who emigrated from Germany during the Nazi period and who brought ideas of democracy as core element back to Germany when the war was over. Scholars like Ernst Fraenkel, Franz L. Neumann, Karl Loewenstein, Arnold Bergstraesser or Eric Voegelin spent years in exile in the USA and developed the idea that political scientists would also have the obligation to contribute to the liberation of Germany from the Nazi ideology (Porsche-Ludwig 2009: 68).

Therefore, political science in Germany is to a huge extent understood as “democracy science”, meaning it has the particular normative focus that democracy is the best political system possible, and that studies in political science should not only provide the necessary tools and knowledge to analyze respective problems, but should also contribute to build democratic societies (Alemann 1994: 15f.). This fundamental character has been stressed even more after the reunification in 1990 and the comprehensive replacement of political science chair holders at East German Universities from former representatives of socialist paradigms with the graduates from West German political science departments (with all negative consequences this also had for the universities’ internal dynamics and the often very negative consequences for individual scholars) (Arnhold 2003: 103ff.).

For me as a graduate of the Freiburg School of Political Science with a decisively normative-ontological background in the tradition of Arnold Bergstraesser, Wilhelm Hennis and Dieter Oberndörfer, this has always been a very strong element of my own understanding of political science: political science cannot be apolitical. This has become a major challenge when things in Egypt started to unfold as they did from summer 2013 on.

► Cairo University in its Search for Itself

The changes of 2011 have not only thrown universities in Egypt into new legal and political frameworks, with many revised syllabi and newly created courses (Sharobeem 2015: 117ff.), but also challenged the longstanding purpose of the way they understood and offered science to their students. Suddenly, it was no longer the support of the regime through ideological compliance and technical expertise that marked their *raison d'être*; students and parts of the faculty also demanded a fundamental re-orientation of seminar styles and teaching contents. During 2011, universities became places of open and heated debates about the political process, students developed high levels of motivation for contributing to the change for a better Egypt, and those professors and teaching assistants who wholeheartedly supported the ongoing transition processes, felt free and liberated to finally do what they wanted to do: critical teaching and research instead of educating graduates to conform (Abd Rabou 2016: 61; Kohstall 2016).

Cairo University has been the place where political, economic, societal and diplomatic leaders received their training and their higher education. Besides its Faculty of Law, FEPS is perceived as a particular cadre factory that many important members of Egypt's elite have gone through. Since its establishment in 1960, FEPS has occupied a unique position in Egypt's university landscape, being the only institution that offers programs in Economics and Political Science, as well as from 1963 on Statistics under one and the same roof. In 1990 and 1994, the Department of Public Administration and the Social Science Computing Department were also added to FEPS, respectively.

Throughout history, many FEPS professors have held high-ranking positions in the political or economic system, and former representatives of Egypt's top circles have often taught classes after their tenure as well. The faculty offers study programs in Arabic, English and French, with the first being offered almost free of charge and the latter two requiring relatively high study fees, though still low compared to what particularly the private American University in Cairo (AUC) demands. After enjoying an almost monopoly in Egypt (except for AUC and some sporadically offered courses at various universities, such as the Faculty of Commerce at the Alexandria University, for a long time there was no other place to study political science), some new political science departments have been founded in recent years in public as well as private universities, where many of the staff members are FEPS graduates.

The year 2011 brought an important change to Egypt's law on higher education, namely the introduction of elections to student and university representatives: for the first time, students were allowed to elect their own representatives, faculty members, faculty deans and university presidents (Abd Rabou 2016: 62). This was not only perceived as an (overdue) emancipation of universities from state interference, but also brought discussions about the candidates' professional and personal merits into the university hallways and classrooms (Sharobeem 2015: 119f.). Instead of showing loyalty to the political system, students and professors suddenly discussed possible solutions to the universities' multiple problems; "competitiveness became a significant principle in the university" (El-Said 2014: 62).

This legal change was just a visible manifestation of a deeper internal challenge: the search for a new *raison d'être*. The times when universities simply produced valuable new members of the country's elite seemed to be over. Those students and professors who believed in the ideals of the revolution pushed for a new orientation of curricula, syllabi and teaching styles. In parallel, those feeling close to, or who were members of, the Muslim Brotherhood, lobbied for more influence of Islam on university life. Until the end of Morsi's presidency, public events and panel discussions at the Cairo University saw representatives of all parts of the political spectrum openly exchanging their positions and frankly criticizing each other's attitudes.

With summer 2013 and the renewed change in Egypt's polity, this diversity of voices and opinions came to an abrupt end. Those sympathizing with political Islam quickly disappeared from public events. If they did not receive teaching bans or arrests, they either silenced themselves – partly out of frustration about the Islamists' ignorance and eventual failure during their short period in power – or went into exile. A similar fate befell many of the democratic activists; thousands of them, including many students and professors, got arrested for participating in unapproved demonstrations, for insulting the judiciary, or for simply expressing their opinion (Accorsi & Siegelbaum 2014).

► Euro-Mediterranean Studies as a 'Vehicle' for Discussions about Democratization

The increasingly repressive climate had massive effects also on the universities, who had become focal points of the societal disputes and clashes after 2011. Since 2013 the state's ongoing "violation of academic freedom in Egypt has been institutionalized in an unprecedented way, causing deterioration in university education and creating a great educational recession" (Abd Rabou 2015). A presidential decree revoked the newly gained freedom of universities to elect their leaders themselves in June 2014 (Maher 2014). Ever since then, professors may again be hired or receive promotions less due to their academic merits, but rather according to their pro-governmental attitudes. Besides, university professors who wish to attend conferences abroad need prior security clearance from the Egyptian authorities as of January 2015. Hundreds of students have been referred to military trials or disappeared without further notice (Saleh 2016). Notable AUC professor Emad Shahin received the death penalty for alleged collaboration with foreign secret services. FEPS professors such as Amr Hamzawy and Ahmed Abd Rabou left the country in order to escape the rising pressure against their liberal utterances and repeated pro-democracy statements.

The "Euro-Mediterranean Studies Programme" (EMSP), created in 2002 with the initial support of an EU Tempus grant, went through all these ups and downs as well. In 2007, a long-term DAAD lecture-ship position was established at the program in order to enrich its study offers with the perspective of a European visiting lecturer. Additionally, it draws its instructors from the existing professors working in the faculty's different departments³.

³ See the program's website at <http://euromedstudies.net>.

⁴ The fees are no lump-sum amounts but depend on the number of courses the student takes and the length of his/her studies, see <http://euromedstudies.net/en/masteruromed/fees.php> and <http://euromedstudies.net/en/doceuromed/fees.php>.

The EMSP follows the idea of Foreign Language Instructed Programs (FLIP) that became possible and popular in Egypt after a legal change in 1990 that allowed public universities to also offer privately-paid study programs (Gamal Eldin 2016: 59ff.). For ca. LE12,000 (€1,200; \$1,350) and LE16,000 (€1,600; \$1,800) respectively⁴, students can enroll in M.A. and Ph.D. study programs which are offered completely in English. Studying in English is widely believed to be advantageous for being included in the labor market after graduation (Gamal Eldin 2016: 72), or reaching a higher position within the country or abroad, including international academia (Hanafi & Arvanitis 2014: 725).

The fees, still moderate in comparison to private universities in Egypt, go along with advanced study conditions: M.A. classes have hardly more than 30 students, Ph.D. classes not more than ten students. State-of-the-art literature is available in the program's own library, the "documentation center". The multidisciplinary character of EMSP leads to a range of accepted students with different backgrounds such as economics and law, languages and literature. This diversity of knowledge is great in class, but some students need extra efforts to understand theories of European integration or of international relations, since they never studied them before.

The EMSP's M.A. and Ph.D. programs both follow very similar patterns: After two semesters of mandatory classes (four or five per week), students start writing their thesis under the supervision of a full professor from the faculty. Thesis proposals have to be approved regarding their academic content by the department councils (for FEPS: political science, economics, statistics, public administration, computer science). After positive evaluation, the thesis can be registered with the faculty, leading to an administrative process involving the faculty council and the university council, which need to approve the proposal. There is at least one year between the thesis registration and its defense.

There is also the request that once theses have been registered, the wording of their title can be changed only after the same administrative process, requiring the approval again from the faculty council and the university council. This strict rule reflects the traditional understanding of political science: students are not expected to develop own, critical thinking, but rather to fulfil the job that their supervisor had assigned to them. This fundamentally conflicts with the alternative understanding that content of research and students' attitudes on certain phenomena might (or better: should) change, the deeper they dig into the topic. The "Humboldtian Freedom", though admittedly never more than an unreached ideal (Karran 2009), clearly finds its limits if even titles cannot be changed after students have started their research. It is also in fundamental contrast to international practices where preliminary "working titles" are standard procedure.

A second controversial, and in my view a counterproductive rule of Egypt's strict higher education law is the requirement that exams make up 70 percent of students' final grade, both at the M.A. and the Ph.D. level. For the remaining assignments, which in my case were an oral presentation, in-class participation and an essay of ca. eight pages, only 30 percent can be assigned. In my view, this reduces students' motivation to engage in those activities that do not require as much memorizing of facts as exams do. By this, creativity and critical thinking remain underdeveloped.

Making students the core of teaching and university activities

Only few professors, mainly the younger, understand their job in such a way so as not to feed students their own knowledge, but to encourage them to develop their own competences and interests. The concept of “learning facilitator” (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows 2006) has only slowly started to gain ground at Cairo University. Therefore, the “Euro-Mediterranean Studies Programme” set up a three-year cooperation project with Freie Universität Berlin from 2012 until 2015, starting an exchange of faculty and students with workshops and conferences that also triggered fresh ideas about modern teaching methodologies at FEPS.

Despite the restrictive external conditions, in-class discussions in my seminars could so far be conducted in a very open and confidential manner. Though it usually takes some time at the beginning of each academic year until students build trust with each other and their instructor, after four to six weeks vivid discussions start to take place. In our case at EMSP, it is a real blessing that Europe’s history is full of discontinuities. Notwithstanding that (Western) Germany successfully embarked on the path of democracy despite the fact that the young federal republic was a “democracy without democrats” (Lepsius 1990: 64); the importance of the economic upswing for the overall breakthrough of political stability in Western Europe after the Second World War; the role of external superpowers like the USA and the USSR in Europe; the end of the military juntas in Greece, Spain and Portugal and the subsequent process of democratization in the 1970s and 1980s; the overthrow of autocratic regimes after yearlong demonstrations in Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe; the failure of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of civil war on European soil in the 1990s. All these topics can be discussed without explicit reference to Egypt and the Arab countries; but still everybody is aware of existing parallelisms and the meaning for Egypt’s own destiny. The active involvement of students in the preparation and conduct of seminars is not very common in Egypt yet, but students quickly appreciate that their opinions are not only tolerated in class, but even requested.

Teaching is currently also undergoing a fundamental change in Egypt (at least at the M.A. and the Ph.D. level), from the traditional style of having the professor stand in front of the class talking about a certain subject, and students trying to keep pace when taking notes and memorizing, to the interactive form of the teacher being part of the class on a more eye-to-eye level with the students. Being the norm in German universities during my own studies, students giving own presentations and their fellow students reacting to them in form of discussions, group works or other forms of interactive learning are somewhat new to Egypt, though many, particularly younger colleagues have also embarked on this new way of teaching.

A similar change is happening in the way papers and essays are written. Many of my students were not used to developing their own research questions or thinking about an appropriate structure for their paper themselves, as they were used to being told what and how to do it. This is a thorny learning process for some of them, even at the M.A. and sometimes also at the Ph.D. level, but it is an in-

dispensable practice if students are to be brought into a position where they do not only repeat existing knowledge, but also create new expertise and new perspectives through critical thinking and alternative approaches. A fundamental problem is the still underdeveloped habit of giving feedback on papers; it happened more than once that M.A. students reacted with “This is the first time I receive any comments on my paper” when I returned their essays with detailed comments and invited them to discuss their papers in case they had questions.

Of particular relevance in this regard was a student conference on “Euro-Mediterranean Relations: A View From Egypt” that our program organized in December 2015 in cooperation with three professors from the University of Dundee, Scotland. This conference explicitly did not target experienced scholars, but exclusively current and former EMPS students. The aim was to make students familiar with the proceedings of typical political science conferences. Therefore, a call for papers first invited students to submit abstracts and then, upon positive evaluation, elaborate a full paper, which they then presented on panels during that full-day conference. 15 students participated in this conference and presented their papers, and the international professors, besides Christian Kaunert, Bert Schweitzer and Patricia Bauer (University of Dundee) also Kevin Köhler from the American University in Cairo, discussed each paper and gave thorough feedback on each student’s performance. Certainly, this practical hands-on experience is what students of social sciences in Egypt are missing.

Fear as Factor at Egyptian Universities

Surely, placing students at the center of teaching is an important contribution to improving academia in Egypt. Yet, active participation in class discussions or during university events cannot be taken for granted, since the state security services are fiercely controlling the universities again (Kirkpatrick 2014). The current government sees students as a potential source of uproar, so the control on campus has become particularly tight (for a historic account of student-state relations in Egypt, see Abd Rabou 2016: 59ff.; Pratt 2008: 59ff.). Already the entrance to the university resembles access to a high-security sector, with heavily armed policemen at each campus gate and thorough control of persons and bags with the help of x-ray machines and metal detectors ever since the clashes in the summer of 2013. Admittedly, the fatal attacks at universities in Garissa (Kenya, April 2, 2015) or Bacha Khan (Pakistan, January 20, 2016) give good arguments to those who support heavy security measures, but at the same time the measures constitute an illustrative picture of restrictions under which academia has to operate.

Fear has become a dominant driver in Egypt’s society, including academia. Professors risk a job ban if they defend their critical opinions about the government’s actions too openly; some of them receive personal threats in order to bring them back into line with the regime – sometimes only for discussing texts critical towards the developments in Egypt. Also, some students have been banned from university, and thousands have been arrested (Abaza 2016; Abdelrahman 2016).

Particularly difficult was the situation between summer 2013 and summer 2014, when various places in Cairo, and among them Nahda Square just in front of Cairo University, became the sites of violent clashes between supporters of former President Morsi and his opponents. Over months Nahda Square witnessed mass demonstrations of thousands, particularly on Wednesday afternoons; they often turned violent with throwing stones, shootings or tear gas use. Several times these clashes also spread to the campus, when police stormed the university in order to dissolve student demonstrations (Rahim 2013). More than once our faculty building had to be evacuated, I found myself in tear gas twice, and frequently we heard the use of rubber bullets and live ammunition while in class. Often classes had to be cancelled on short notice as students were not able to come to university, and the semesters started late and ended early. No doubt, the external conditions for studying and concentrating were extremely harsh at that time, and it was an extraordinary achievement of Cairo University as an institution, as well as of its faculty and staff members and of course the students, that those semesters were brought to a successful end, with exams written and assignments handed in, so that students could at least get their certificates and celebrate their graduation.

However, one thing I have learned – that certainly cannot be learned by reading books – is what it means to live and work under repression. Although I never experienced personal interference with my work, I felt how fear paralyzed me when demonstrations again turned violent, attacks against state targets intensified in terms of numbers and casualties, activists got arrested in increasing security raids, and hundreds of detainees received collective death sentences.

A colleague disappeared for days from public, with even his Facebook page being down, so that some teammates and I feared the worst. Indeed, he had been addressed by the security services that he should reduce his public presence, and in order to stay safe, he preferred to be completely offline for a while so that nobody could find out about him. In a workshop in Cairo on March 6, 2016, some colleagues admitted that they would truly become scared once they had published a new piece, fearing potential consequences instead of being happy about the good achievement they had reached.

It is no wonder there is high demand among professors and students for fellowships and scholarships for going abroad. Famous political scientists like Amr Hamzawy have left Egypt indefinitely for personal safety reasons. Two of my closest colleagues from Cairo University are now in Germany and the USA, and it is unclear when they will come back to Cairo. The identified problem of “researchers who publish globally but perish locally” (Hanafi 2011; Hanafi & Arvanitis 2014) due to the language dichotomy between Arabic and English gets drastically elevated onto an even higher level: If researchers stay local, they are at risk of disappearing – not necessarily because of imprisonment, but at least because of blocked career chances or complete loss of job (Mostafa & Shaban 2016). The resulting exodus of researchers is not only a loss of knowledge and expertise for the country as well as a loss of important teachers for Cairo University. It also brings massive hardships for the persons in exile and their families, as often spouses and children are not able to follow, and parents, siblings and other close relatives stay back in Egypt. This forced dividedness poses an important emotional

challenge for the affected colleagues and should not be forgotten when discussing the situation of academia in today's Egypt.

For students, the emotional situation is often different, as for them in their age between 20 and 25 the idea of going abroad is usually marked more with feelings of "adventure" and a "once-in-a-lifetime chance", as well as a desire to escape societal and cultural repression, if not abuse (FEPS post-graduate student, personal communication, May 2016). Student activities have been become widely apolitical, if not completely silenced (Abd Rabou 2016: 65). As DAAD long-term lecturer I provide students with information about scholarship opportunities in Germany, and I also support those who wish to apply for offers from the Fulbright Commission, the Chevening awards scheme, or similar institutions. Many of them are interested in studying abroad not only because of the promising perspective, but simply to escape the repressive situation in Egypt.

► Conclusion

The years since 2013 have brought lots of difficulties for Egypt's academia in general, and for political science as well as related disciplines in particular. While the country is still struggling to find its internal stability, universities struggle to find their position in post-2011 Egypt.

Many students and professors alike have lost their original enthusiasm about the initial changes in 2011. For them, going "back to business" is the order of the day, i.e. concentrating on their studies and teaching without being overly involved in sensitive debates or suspicious activities. A colleague once told me in 2014: "I will stop being engaged in TV talk shows and newspaper columns, and just concentrate on my academic activities" (FEPS professor, personal communication, fall 2014).

From the universities' perspective, many ambiguities result from the stiff legal framework or unclear expectations. On the one hand, article 21 of Egypt's constitution guarantees academic freedom and independence of academics from state interference. On the other hand, President al-Sisi's decrees have made free teaching and research impossible, as everything that might be understood as critical towards the government or one of its policies might be labelled as relevant for the state's security, bringing scholars into serious risk of facing negative consequences for their actions. There "is an attempt to indirectly prohibit politics on the university campuses" (Sharobeem 2015: 120).

The murder of Italian Ph.D. researcher Giulio Regeni in January 2016 has brought another fundamental problem for free research to light: the mistrust of state authorities towards researchers. Particularly when coming from abroad, researchers often encounter much suspicion. The typical imputation is that researchers might work as spies for foreign secret services, one of the many flourishing conspiracy theories in Egypt (Kirkpatrick 2015); as a consequence, foreign researchers' homes are occasionally searched by the authorities – that is, if they are not banned from entry at Cairo airport at the outset. However, I should clearly stress that I personally have never experienced any negative reaction from neither my students nor my colleagues towards me.

Researchers are also increasingly mistrusting the authorities. The statements from governmental representatives are usually followed with great suspicion, whether they deal with the high number

of activists that get arrested without proper legal procedure (“There are no forced disappearances in Egypt”, Essam El-Din 2016), the crash of the Russian airliner over Sinai in October 2015 (“terrorism was not responsible,” Calamur 2015) or the reasons for the devastating floods in Alexandria in the spring and fall of 2015 (“Interior Ministry blames Brotherhood for Alexandria floods”, Mada Masr 2015). All this is coming from the regime that insisted once that it had found a “complete cure” against Hepatitis C and HIV (Loveluck 2014), and that imposed strict rules for media coverage for its anti-terror operations on the Sinai and after the army’s fatal shootings of Mexican tourists in the Western desert in September 2015 (O’Grady & Dreazen 2015).

This mutual mistrust is certainly one of the biggest obstacles for Egypt at the moment. If continuing, there can never be a fruitful coexistence between state officials and critical social scientists.

In their struggle for independence from governmental interference, university representatives often act on a razor edge, as they cannot risk the anger of the authorities. This is even more urgent as much of the universities’ fiscal aspects are regulated by the Supreme Council of Universities, and not the universities themselves. This council, chaired by the Minister of Higher Education, is responsible for “[d]elineating and planning the general policy and guidelines for higher education and scientific research in universities, with a strong commitment to realizing the State’s needs and meeting its national, social, economic, and scientific objectives” (El-Said 2014: 60). Many defendants of universities’ independence see in the Supreme Council’s dominant position the biggest obstacle for improved university performance, and call for the fundamental redesign of its purpose and role,⁵ if not even its complete dissolution (El-Said 2014: 66).

Besides these external constraints, universities struggle to find their core reason of existence. The question has remained unanswered so far whether Egyptian universities are primarily responsible for raising good academics, educating qualified candidates for the labor market, or producing conforming members for the system. This debate is not openly held, but particularly the younger generations of professors and lecturers try to come closer to the first potential goal. This is still in contrast to the rigorous university laws and rules, as well as those professors’ preferences who benefitted from the old regime and who have nothing against the restoration of the former situation. However, this struggle will continue, and it might well be that Egyptian universities will experience another revolution quite within.

⁵ So Prof. John Adams, British University in Egypt, in his keynote speech at the “The University and Social Transition” conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, organized by Mansoura University, 17 April 2016.

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