5. YOUTH & REVOLUTION

A Call to Reform Higher Education in Yemen

Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn’t have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of human mind.

(Rancière, 1987)

The youth bulge in a country like Yemen in which a quarter of its estimated 25 million population is between 10 and 19 years of age, 46% of them under 16, has raised many societal challenges and played a central role in the country’s revolutionary transition since 2011 (Ahmed, 2013). The Yemeni government in the past few decades has invested in education to accommodate this rising youth rate. The country has witnessed a rapid growth in higher education since the 1990s, from two universities at the time of North-South unification in 1990 to 16 universities (eight public and eight private), each hosting various colleges and programs. The eight public universities in Yemen include 105 colleges divided into 45 applied sciences and 60 humanities and social sciences. The number of students enrolled in the Yemeni universities increased from about 35,000 students in 1990 to reach 266,096 students (including private universities) in 2010, more than 7 times the original number in ten years. The enrollment of females in university education increased from 16% in 1990 to 30% in 2010. The enrollment of students in private universities also increased from almost 0% of the total enrolled in university education in 1993 to about 23.5% in 2010. In 2005–2006, there were about 174,000 students in public universities and about 12,000 in private ones. In 2009–2010, the number of enrolled students in public universities reached 203,497 students with 62,599 students in private universities in the same year (National Information Center, 2015).

This unprecedented growth in the number of university enrollees has forged a space for students to play a viable role in challenging Yemeni status quo politics that produced unbearable conditions of corruption, unemployment, and disenfranchisement for 30 years. It was not until the revolutionary fervor of the Arab Spring that this role faced its first serious test. In February 2011, students emerged out of the country’s post-secondary institutions as a contending voice invested in the country’s transformation process. For the first time in Yemen’s contemporary history, university students energized public squares in Taiz, Sana’a, Aden, Hodeidah, and
other governorates with slogans filled with aspirations for a new era defined by social responsibility, inclusive representation, and governing accountability. This revolutionary moment was, however, short-lived. It was immediately disrupted through partisan, sectarian, and tribal negotiations, often mediated by regional and international power players. A few years later, the two-year transitional dialogue came to an abrupt end, leading Yemen into a chaotic civil war that called for a Saudi-led coalition of military assault on the country since March 2015.

This chapter investigates the failure of the Yemeni university students in sustaining their demands for change. Although the complexity of the country’s political order transcends any single social or cultural site of critique, this inquiry pays close attention to the paradoxical role of the Yemeni higher education system in producing active yet docile citizens with a sense of agency defined by [rather than defining] the existing sociopolitical forces. The momentum produced by the youth during 2011 failed to offer an alternative political consciousness, and was soon redressed through traditional political outlets, further exacerbating the trend of socio-political instability and uncertainty in the country. To capture the contours of this paradox, we propose an engagement with three policy-oriented dimensions in the current higher education system, i.e. admission policy, teaching methodology, and campus politicization. The totality of such dimensions, we argue, is instrumental in undercutting the ability of the youth in proactively producing necessary conditions for peaceful and lasting change.

ADMISSION POLICY

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a seat for every student who wanted to continue his or her post-secondary education. The policy was in effect in light of post-revolutionary efforts in the two countries, i.e., Arab Republic of Yemen (North) and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South), to re-define their educational philosophy. The institutional focus was, however, directed to quantity rather than quality of education, i.e., increasing number of enrollees rather than paying attention to the learning process itself (Ba Abbaad, 2004). Admission criteria were virtually nonexistent at the time. Since unity of the South and the North and the birth of Yemen, the admission process in postsecondary institutions established a minimum requirement of a high school Grade Point Average (GPA) of 60%. The number of students coming to the university drastically increased since that time to reach about 272,130 students in 2010 compared to about 35,000 students in 1990 (Higher Education National Strategy, 2009). In 2001, the Yemeni government resolved the challenge of admission capacity by setting the minimum requirement for admission at a high school GPA of 70%.

When the number of high school graduates seeking university education exceeds the capacity of postsecondary institutions, various admission criteria are often set to sort out students with the appropriate credentials in order to determine their potential for success in their relevant undergraduate learning experience. Deciding
which criteria to enforce is usually contingent on their accuracy in predicting academic success in postsecondary institutions, which remains to a large extent a complex task and is subject to curricular evaluation, institutional capacity, and political intervention. Traditionally, cognitive factors (e.g. standardized tests), argued (Pentages & Creedon, 1978), are considered the most reliable in determining the likelihood of academic success. In Yemen, postsecondary institutions select promising applicants solely on the basis of their performance in high school Grade Point Average (GPA). In an attempt to predict the students’ ability to perform at the undergraduate level while reducing competition in the fields of science, medicine, dentistry, pharmacology, and foreign language, college entrance tests were required as an additional criterion (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).

Some scholars advocated the practicality of using high school GPA as an institutional admission criterion. Willingham (1974) indicated that the criterion is readily available, quantifiable, equitable, and fair. High school GPA is also assumed to measure desired behaviors like intelligence, aptitude, and achievement, required for students’ subsequent studies (Gottheil & Michael, 1957; Hirschberg, 1977; Humphreys, 1962). Using GPA to make important decisions about the students’ future academic career still raises questions about their validity in predicting future academic success and producing highly qualified graduates. Ebel (1978) argued for the relevance and reliability of using standardized entrance test scores, along with high school GPA, in the admissions process. They provide admission committees with a standardized measure of academic achievement for all examinees (Ebel & Frisbie, 1991). The results of Al-Hattami’s (2012) study revealed that high school GPA demonstrated a poor predictive validity for both the GPA of college freshmen as well as their cumulative GPA in Yemen. Requiring universities to administer their own entrance tests, he concluded, enhances the predictive power of students’ college performance.

In Yemen, GPA is not a cumulative measurement of a student’s entire high school experience. It is rather calculated on the basis of his or her performance in the centralized tests of the twelfth grade alone. High school general exams are developed to measure what students have been taught during the twelfth grade. This prompts many teachers to develop their methodology around coaching for test-taking rather than digesting the curriculum. They devote more time to exposing their students to the previous forms of high school graduation exams rather than designing their own measurement tools. They also provide students with summaries and answers for the expected questions to be memorized. This consumes the students’ cognitive growth, and seriously challenges their ability to develop their own critical thinking and solving important real life problems.

The Ministry of Education administers the tests once at the end of the academic year. Some schools or teachers face challenges in covering the whole curriculum by the testing period. In some school districts, particularly those located in the rural side of the country, textbooks arrive weeks after schooling has started. Lack of teachers and educational resources further impedes learning advancement and contributes
to a growing achievement gap that defies any form of centralized measurement. The significant differences between schools located in rural and urban areas (e.g. lack appropriate equipment, lack of internet access and availability of technology, qualified teachers, and supervision) receive no consideration during the university admission process.

A pervasive phenomenon hindering the students’ ability to engage with their high school work and renders the GPA standard as an ineffective admission criterion is cheating. Cheating is rampant in Yemeni high schools. Due to the prevalence of corruption and the power of personal influence, many relatives help their children cheat on the exams in various ways (e.g., by bribing the proctors or superintendents or using their high positions to enable their children to cheat). While the reliance on the GPA as the only admission standard to higher education institutions persists, students are forced to undergo a very competitive cycle that prioritizes scores as the ultimate projection of their academic potential. It is becoming possible that a one-point difference in GPA may affect the likelihood of a student being admitted. The very fact that GPA also determines the likelihood of admission into a certain undergraduate major adds another layer of pressure. In this context, cheating has emerged as a “justifiable” tool to resolve the existing achievement gap in Yemeni high schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University name</th>
<th>Enrolling</th>
<th>Graduating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sana’a</td>
<td>49,803</td>
<td>21,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aden</td>
<td>19,103</td>
<td>10,755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiz</td>
<td>13,538</td>
<td>12,838</td>
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<tr>
<td>Al-Hudaydah</td>
<td>9,438</td>
<td>6,544</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ibb</td>
<td>7,624</td>
<td>3,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhamar</td>
<td>10,726</td>
<td>2,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadhramaut</td>
<td>7,828</td>
<td>2,955</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>118,060</td>
<td>60,492</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>178,552</td>
<td>22,578</td>
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The poor predictive validity of high school GPA provides a clear need for admission decision-makers to comprehensively review the appropriateness of high school tests. Equally important, the complete reliance on the GPA admission criteria significantly undercuts the chances of success at the university level, and restricts students’ intellectual growth and ability to develop their distinct learning styles. A glimpse at the graduation rate of undergraduates in the public universities...
of the governorates of Sana’a, Aden, Taiz, Al-Hudaydah, Ibb, Dhamar, Dhamar, and Hadhramaut reveals a serious problem in the university learning outcomes (see Table 1 above). For the year 2009–2010, the number of university enrollees in those governorates reached 178,552 students while the graduating rate did not go beyond 22,578 (Al-Warafi, n.d.). Although it is important to recognize other factors (e.g., socioeconomic conditions, family obligations, religious teachings, government policies, etc.) in making sense of the gap, the GPA-based admission policy remains an inaccurate ground of prediction. It continues to deny high school students the opportunity to develop their own agency even before they start their university education. Equally important, enforcing the GPA-only criteria strips away every student’s basic right to compete for the chance to pursue career in his or her area of interest.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Teaching methods, according to Glaser (1976) and Clarke (2001), constitute a way of organizing information and activities that promote the cognitive process and facilitate learning. Drawing from their fifty-year long experience in education research, Chickering and Gamson (1987) emphasized interactivity as the most appropriate approach to learning. The primary principles of this approach are predicated on building connections between students and faculty, developing reciprocity among students, encouraging active learning, providing prompt feedback, and respecting timeliness and diversity. Hake (1998), Bligh (2000), and Knight and Wood (2005) just to name a few, as cited in Eison (2010), examined the effects of traditional lecture styles and found that in all cases lecture was an unacceptable method of instruction for meaningful student learning and retention when compared to instruction in the same subjects using engaging techniques. Interactive lectures and strategies produced better attitudes, higher test scores, and overall better critical thinking skill ability. In particular, Knight and Wood (2005) found that students who worked collaboratively and had more active lectures made significant learning progress. These works echo an emerging momentum in the past few decades within all disciplines that calls to embrace interactivity as the most productive learning approach.

Yemeni University students, who manage to surpass the already restricting admission system, are set to a passive learning environment that continues to emphasize traditional lecturing as the dominant approach to learning. Educators are teaching the way they were taught decades ago. Nevertheless, the 21st century requires teaching general skills like problem solving, critical thinking, problem-based learning, and interpersonal and communication skills. It requires a focus on student-centered rather than teacher-centered approach. The Yemeni education system fails to cope with the current century changes and its rapid technology development.

Designing and planning learning activities are an essential part of education at the tertiary level (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Robley, Whittle, & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005). However, traditionally, learning activities have not been adequately connected to
outcomes and assessment (Cho & Trent, 2005) particularly in higher education where activities have not always been promoted or considered essential. Childre, Sands, and Pope (2009) recommend designing learning activities that strongly support linkage of both objectives and assessment. According to Biggs (2003), outcomes, instructional activities and materials, and assessment should not be considered individually but rather as interconnected and constructively aligned pieces of the larger curriculum design; a design that emphasizes connecting outcomes and assessment with meaningful learning activities. Program developers in Yemen need to revise the curriculum and assure that teaching strategies and assessment tools are constructively aligned with the learning outcomes.

In addition, interactive teaching methods must be employed at the tertiary level in order to empower students and secure their agency. Traditional lecturing will no longer, if it ever did, suffice to support retention and deeper understanding of the classroom materials. While all modes of instruction, including lecture, have an important role to play in higher education, a variety of instructional methods promise engaging students with different learning styles, needs, and intelligences (McKimm & Jollie, 2007; Clark, 2011). Nonetheless, interaction is the only way to ensure that the majority of students understand concepts and think critically and creatively. Every single session in every single course can and should have interactive strategies planned into their daily or weekly classroom plans. To be effective with these strategies, educators in Yemeni universities must plan in advance and identify their needs (e.g., time, subject, material) and their students’ expectations.

Designing and planning learning activities are key elements in ensuring that the taught curriculum is coherent and actually becomes the learned curriculum. Curriculum models will be on trend with the ebb and flow of education, but as Cho and Trent (2005) suggest, it matters not which design of curriculum is used as long as educators are conscious of its implications on learning. To put it into prospective, it is the responsibility of educators and curriculum designers in Yemeni universities to ensure that the design implemented in their programs and classrooms ultimately facilitates learning.

Integrating technology in teaching improves learning, and has now taken the place of a need to revolutionize education and learning for the better (Laurillard et al., 2009; Zhao, 2013; Kirkwood & Price, 2014; Hayes, 2015). One of the ways that technology has increased and supported learning in a positive way is that teachers and students can now collaborate as well as share their ideas online. They can now also share and utilize their resources online with one another and can work for a better learning environment. Teachers and students can now communicate with one another all over the world in an instant. In the same vein, social media appears to affect youth in various ways. O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) observed that “because of their limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure, youth are at some risk as they navigate and experiment with social media” (p. 1). Al-Ghamdi and Al-Hattami (2016) conducted a study to examine university students’ perceptions of the effect of social media in three domains: psychological functioning, cultural
values and thought processes, and morality and politics. The results of their study showed the university students’ perception that using social media has a negative effect on the moral and political aspect, but not on their culture/thought domain.

Teaching methodology in Yemeni universities is in a serious need of intervention. Teacher-centered classes, lack of innovation in curricular design, and dismissal of technology in learning are factors that continue to restrict the cultivation of students’ potential to initiate projects and come to terms with the vocabulary of their contemporary reality. The current system locks them in a perpetual mode of passive learning that denies them their very right to emancipation.

CAMPUS POLITICIZATION

The political life for Yemeni higher education students, particularly in the period 1990–2011, constituted a micro version of the overall partisan tension that underwrote the primary sociopolitical tension in the society at large. The major political contenders in the Yemeni political scene played a vital role in politicizing university campuses in almost every respect, as witnessed and observed by the authors of this work. The ruling party of the General People’s Congress and the opposition block spearheaded by the Yemeni Congregation for Reform were interlocked in a fierce competition to control the direction of political consciousness for the generations that were set to define the country’s prospect. The competition was manifested in the partisan nature of student and faculty unions as well as the politically-informed hiring strategies of staff and faculty. The relationship between power and knowledge was strictly defined in terms of affiliations with partisan branches in the cities hosting the respective campuses, and civic engagements in a seemingly nuanced environment.

Foucault’s (1971) critique of the west’s institutional politicization of knowledge is instrumental in reading the interconnectedness of knowledge, power, and agency in the Yemeni higher education system. This forges both a limited and a limiting space for students to develop their own independent way of learning. Although students seem to be actively entrenched in domestic, regional, and international issues of their concerns, their voice is coopted in ways that restrict their ability to grow and embrace revolutionary stances that challenge their contemporary status quo politics. Demonstrations and sit-ins, especially those informed by their political parties, became immediate venues through which students exhibited the liminality of their disruption and intervention. In an attempt to encounter the Islamist-influence of student unions, which dominated campus life during the 1990s and catered to party-affiliates, the ruling party at the time installed its own politically involved unions in the early 2000s, and provided them with all resources that were previously denied to the opposition-led unions. The newly emerging unions, though initially appeared to present a viable model for organization that transcended the restrictions of the party’s guidelines, were soon compromised to abide by their partisan affiliations. The student union disruptive experience was subsequently undercut to meet yet again partisan standards. The failure of the student union experience in
Yemeni universities in re-defining terms of activism and governance, therefore, serves as a critical variable to assess the role of campus politicization in severely damaging the students’ ability to develop a revolutionary agenda that drives a more sustainable political entity.

Another factor that contributed to the politicization of Yemeni campuses is the faculty’s role in recycling the overarching agendas of their political affiliation. In the period preceding 2011, faculty unions constantly engaged in partisan contestations that resulted in a more normative and less disruptive learning culture. Although the unions were initially structured to de-politicize the role of educators in the higher education system and safeguard their freedom, they were eventually compromised to withstand any serious demands for alternative ways to political engagement. The definition of the “intellectual” in Said’s (1994) terms as a vocal agent of change against hegemonic trends in governmentality could not be fully unfolded among many of the union-invested faculty. Enforcing the most powerful union tool (i.e., strikes), for instance, would occasionally be dictated by partisan agendas and result in hindering the learning process. Students exposed to such a fragile polity are prone to either engage or withdraw from the process; in either case, they are bound to become less interactive with the power of intellectualism in yielding fertile grounds for a more stable sense of sociopolitical change.

A third dimension that speaks of the crippling effects of campus politicization on the students’ capacity to develop their own active agency is the hiring practices of staff and faculty in the Yemeni universities. Despite the availability of hiring standards set forth through the ministry of higher education and the ministry of civil service, corruption remains by and large a very influential source in retaining a negative sociopolitical role in the country’s campuses. The appointments of provosts, vice provosts, and deans are dictated by higher authorities and subjected to favoritism based on political affiliations. Hiring of administrators and promotions within academic units are often influenced by similar calculations. The overwhelming nature of this politically charged environment creates a sense of systemic dysfunctionality that presents the least promising model for upward mobility and increases grievances among the less favored faculty. It further denies universities the right to develop educational and inspirational tools for its enrollees in order to prepare them to become the future leaders of the country.

The totality of such circumstances leads Yemeni university students to envision their campus life as microcosmic of an overall inactive sociopolitical life. Union practices and hiring policies are replete with examples of corruption that foreground influence of external agents and reduce the universities into a mere site of reproduction of future docile citizens. Realizing the importance of this site in advancing their missions, the country’s various political actors have been proactive for the past few decades in communicating their investment into the campus politicization process. The 2011 revolutionary moment, which started as an inspirational model for youth mobilization, eventually collapsed when the majority of university students failed to produce a vision independent from their affiliates (be they partisan, tribal, or
sectarian). Thus, the Yemeni higher education system has failed in harnessing the youth power by allowing campus politicization to set the terms for agency and engagement.

CONCLUSION

In the four years following the 2011 Yemeni revolution, the country moved from a peaceful transition into a bloody civil war backed by immediate regional military interventions. The process has emerged as a measuring timeline for an accelerated change among many university students from active actors in toppling a long-term dictator into passive agents in the political transition and eventually a viable force for militia street fighting. This transition necessitates a serious evaluation of the role of the higher education system in preparing the educated class to offer serious alternatives to status quo politics. A reading of this role in the pre-revolutionary era reveals major flaws in three policies, which, we conclude, have contributed to a rising generation of active yet docile citizenry incapable of intervening in the country’s mainstream sociopolitical order.

The reliance on high school GPA scores as the only criterion for admission demonstrates its inefficiency in unlocking the students’ potential for intellectual growth. These tests should be designed not to measure what students have learned in high schools but rather the necessary skills (e.g., problem solving, reasoning) needed to perform well in college. Admission committees should also consider other factors that include, but are not limited to, cumulative GPA score based on three years of high school, motivation and interest, orientation, study habits, high school class size, and socioeconomic status. This will necessarily impact the high school learning experience, bridge the achievement gap between urban and rural schools, eliminate cheating in the centralized tests, and better predict learning growth in college.

There is also a serious need to re-evaluate the current teaching methodology in Yemeni universities. Teacher-centered classes are not conducive to interactivity. They validate various scholarly concerns about productivity. Interactive learning bears the potential of enhancing the students’ self-esteem. The ministry of higher education should devote resources to introduce its educators to contemporary teaching methods that encourage the students to develop their own classroom identity. Positive use of technology opens doors to new ways of learning for both faculty and students. A comprehensive reform in university teaching methodology solidifies the college learning transition process for students while safeguarding the development of their own agency.

De-politicization of the Yemeni campus life is a necessary ground to provide the students with the power to explore their own political consciousness without necessarily re-producing the society-imported partisan divisions. De-politicization should not necessarily require universities to have an apolitical environment. It could rather materialize in the elimination of politically-driven policies that constantly feed existing anxieties around exclusion and disenfranchisement. Securing a
learning environment in which faculty and students socialize in a system that denies corruption the chance to undermine equal consideration and representation enables universities to function as a space for confidence and prowess.

Revolutionary times carry the promise of yielding serious multifaceted change in a given society. Although the Yemeni revolution has slipped into violence, the prospect of reconciliation carries the potential to produce conditions for a new Yemen in which social and political forces value the price of peace. In a post-war Yemen, reconstruction plans have to devote resources to saving a generation on the verge of loss. In addition to the restoration of the ruined infrastructure, the urgency rises for a serious educational reform in the higher education system to grant the Yemeni youth the opportunity to learn and innovate. Introducing serious reforms regarding the afore-mentioned three policies represents a critical intervention for the well-being of the country’s future. It produces learning conditions for students to emerge as a viable, contending, and stabilizing player in the country’s sociopolitical order.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Important Dates

1962  The Arab Republic of Yemen (North) founded in the aftermath of a revolution against imamate
1967  The People's Republic of Yemen (South) gained independence from the British empire
1970  Colleges of Education established in Sana'a and Aden (which later evolved into two main public universities, Sana'a University and Aden University)
1990  North and South were united into one country named Republic of Yemen
1995  Regulation no. 18 laid out the infrastructure of higher education in Yemen
2004  Republican Decree no. 137 designated the ministry of higher education as the authority to oversee university education in Yemen
2011  University students marched to streets demanding regime change
2012–14  Peaceful transition marked by a national dialogue among Yemeni power players
2015  Civil war broke out leading to a military intervention spearheaded by Saudi Arabia