

# **Schooling Mubarak's Egypt**

**Facts, Fictions, and the Right to Education in an Age of Privatization**

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Middle East Studies

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April 15, 2018

## **Abstract**

In 1981, Hosni Mubarak took office as the fourth president of Egypt. One of his most acclaimed achievements in the global community was expanding access to education. Hundreds of school buildings were built, literacy rates improved tremendously, especially for girls, enrollment rates for public schools climbed, and Egypt even seemed to be on track to make the UN Millennium Development Goal for universal access to primary education. Looking into these successes closely, however, reveals less impressive results. While state numbers reported basic literacy growth, there still existed an extremely high level of illiteracy among rural women and functional illiteracy among those whom the government deems officially literate. While enrollment in primary school was nearly 100% in many governorates, there were serious issues with student absenteeism and even more serious issues with teachers not teaching during the school day. While mass education was supposed to be a social equalizer, both the education gap and the income gap between the rich and the poor grew during the Mubarak regime. Egyptian leaders publicly recognize that the education system is flawed, yet in the past 30 years, little has changed. To the contrary, over the course of Mubarak's tenure the state saw a large transition to a private education model. Public schooling that promises education but does not educate creates a system of privatization — those with the economic means hire private tutors to supplement public education or replace it altogether. This transition to an effectively private model, however, has broader implications for overall access to quality education and resulting social and economic mobility for young Egyptians.

By examining the historical framework of public education in Egypt and state reforms over the course of Mubarak's tenure, this thesis tracks the devolution of public education over 30 years. It then moves into examining why this devolution occurred and why little was done to prevent it. I place state rhetoric, government data, and international perception side by side to the realities of the public in Egypt, showing reconciliation between the two is impossible and arguing that these realities were distorted purposefully by Mubarak for political gain. Finally, the thesis takes an ethnographic look at primary actors in education in Egypt, asking how Mubarak era policy truly looked on the ground and how it endures today.

### **Keywords:**

Education, Egypt, Mubarak, Privatization, Schooling, Literacy, Private, Public, UN

إلى أبي، الذى ضحّى بكل شىء من أجل حياه أحسن لعائلته  
إلى أهل مصر، الذين ضحّوا بكل شىء من أجل حياه أحسن لبلدهم

*(To my father, who sacrificed everything for a better life for his family.  
To the people of Egypt, who sacrificed everything for a better life for their country.)*

## Acknowledgements

This project could not have been possible without the support of countless people I cherish and love dearly. I am so grateful to everyone named here and many more.

To Sarah Tobin, thank you for encouraging me to explore my sophomore year and welcoming me to the department with open arms. Your mentorship and support made me feel as if I could produce scholarship that mattered, and for this I am so appreciative.

To Professors Emily Drumsta, Margot Jackson, Shamiran Mako, and the Middle East Studies department, thank you for advising me throughout this, at times, overwhelming project and putting up with me despite countless emails, drafts, and translation attempts. Your enormous help transformed an idea into reality.

To Hannah Abuaita, thank you for championing me even when I didn't deserve it. You are my partner in crime and I only hope to be half the person you are when I grow up.

To my mom, dad, and grandparents, thank you for raising me. I love you!

To my dear friends and chosen family, Brittani Taylor, Pieter Brower, Amani Hayes-Messinger, thank you for your enduring solace, encouragement, and love. To my entire crew, Lauren Ostrowski, Leah Hardenbergh, Lily Hertling, Grace Monk, and Sophie Kerman, thank you for turning our house into a warm and welcoming home, especially one where we could work together on our respective theses and commiserate together.

To Garrett McCloskey and Jamila Saahir, thank you for listening to and improving my ideas since high school. You teach me about enduring friendship and support that will last a lifetime.

To Ariadne Ellsworth, Lucrezia Sanes, and Alexander Lloyd George, thank you for paving the way and showing me life goes on after senior year. I look up to you.

To my wonderful cousins, Hanan Hassan Habiba and Ahmed Hassan Garamoon, thank you for welcoming me to Cairo and connecting me with countless educators and leads. In true Egyptian style, you welcomed me as family even though we were meeting for the first time. I am so happy to know you and thankful for all of your guidance.

Finally, to the Egyptian students, parents, teachers, and administrators who shared their experiences with me — *alf shoukran* for your bravery and your strength. Your commitment to the betterment of students' lives and your collective devotion to change Egypt is beyond admirable, it's inspiring. Thank you.

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## **Note on Transliteration**

Throughout this thesis, I use a simplified version of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration guide for Modern Standard Arabic. Arabic names of prominent figures or places with an accepted English spelling, such as Sonallah Ibrahim or Hosni Mubarak, are spelled in accordance with English norms rather than a transliterated one. When names and place names do not have a common English spelling, I preserve the Arabic ‘ayn and hamza through use of an apostrophe but do not add diacritical marks.

For fieldwork done in Cairo in colloquial Egyptian Arabic (Chapter 3), all names of living individuals are spelled according to their preferred English spelling.

All translations were done by the author, with the assistance of Professor Emily Drumsta.

## Prologue

Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim begins his 1992 novel *Zaat: The Tale of One Woman's Life in Egypt During the Last Fifty Years*, with the female protagonist's literal entrance into the world, describing Zaat sliding into the world "bespattered with blood." His opening use of dark satire both guides the novel's tone and sets up his subversive reflections on life in Egypt. Over the course of the novel, we follow Zaat as she ages through Egypt's vastly different and, at times, confusing eras, defined by presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar El Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak.

In the first chapter, Zaat jumps into adulthood and becomes an archivist for a local paper in the Department of News Monitoring and Assessment, which guarantees the paper only publishes reports approved by the Ministry of Information or the President's office.<sup>1</sup> Ibrahim describes Zaat's work as "transmission sessions" where Zaat becomes the trusted keeper of vast amounts of information and state rhetoric, alongside details of her much less glamorous life. Chapters alternate between narrative form and quotes and headlines from Egyptian and international news organizations. It becomes blatantly apparent that the headlines printed and transmitted *through* Zaat, are ludicrously different than what she sees with her own eyes and lives with her own life. We see why she and the book are named *Zaat*. It is not typically a woman's name, but in Arabic it is reflexive, referring to oneself or one's identity. The novel maintains to the end the dissonance between Zaat's reality and what she transmits on behalf of the state to the rest of Egypt.

Zaat never finishes her education, reflecting many times on her shortcomings, overall dissatisfaction with her life, and a larger theme of lost (or never offered) opportunity. In a fight with her husband, she says he ruined her life: "If it were not for him she would have completed her education and would now be a journalist or a television announcer."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sonallah Ibrahim, *Zaat* (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>2</sup> 77, Ibrahim.

When she hears another woman in the novel say something wise, she muses, “if she had gone to school and been educated she’d now be a doctor like other women who were no better than her in any way except that they were fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity.”<sup>3</sup>

The *real* news headlines similarly highlight failures of the education system:

A government report: “Forty percent of schools are not fit for use and there is a shortage of fifty thousand teachers.”

Teachers demand that the Education Minister protect them from the beatings and insults they suffer during examination time.

A member of the Egyptian People’s Assembly: “There are 1,116 American experts in Egypt being paid 267 million dollars a year, which is more than the entire budget of the Ministry of Education.”

A father sets his wife and children on fire because he is unable to pay their school fees.

Mass cheating in the secondary certificate exam at the Abou Tisht School. Students collect large amounts of money and distribute it to officials and proctors to organize the cheating.

The wife of a governor is accused of amassing four million pounds by extorting payments out of the parents and guardians of pupils in a language school in Cairo while she was headmistress.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 277, Ibrahim.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpts from Ibrahim. Pages 157, 157, 57, 247, 247, 251, respectively.



The headlines are invariably coupled with statements by government officials praising the country and its people, and especially highlighting how fantastic everything is right now. The difference between the novel's reality and the state rhetoric it reproduces cannot be understated.

President Mubarak: "Finally I say to the workers that every one of you is proud to be born in Egypt, and to grow up in Egypt. And be proud also that everything your country produces is made in Egypt, from the sweat and toil of Egyptian workers. We will never grow tired of talking about Egypt and Egypt's great place among nations. Egypt is stability, Egypt is security; Egypt, upholder of sacred principles; Egypt, harmonious and unified society; Egypt, steadfast despite all attacks in light or darkness; Egypt, nobility and certainty despite all pain and anguish. Egypt, you are life. There is no life except upon your land, Egypt, there is no life except for you, Egypt."<sup>5</sup>

Government leaders' descriptions of Egypt and what Zaat experiences are completely different. The facts of the Mubarak regime are fictions in Zaat's life. Placed side by side, they cannot be reconciled. For instance, the regime claims education is at the peak of success, but while Zaat is trying to enroll her children in government schools, she cannot get past the iron bars surrounding the school and watches as boys pee on the walls and smoke cigarettes during the school day. When she does get inside, she has trouble breathing because the classroom her child will join is overcrowded:

He pushed the door without knocking and it opened a few centimeters, then stopped as if something were blocking it. Out of the gap came a choking smell which forced her to move her head back, but only after she had seen more than one hundred children stuffed into a space no larger than her bedroom, containing four rows of wooden desks, each of which was designed to seat two pupils next to one another and was now occupied by four or five, while others sat on the floor between the rows on their books and coats.<sup>6</sup>

The theme of Zaat exposing the fictions of Mubarak's autocracy through her lived experiences is one of the inspirations of this thesis. By placing state narrative alongside Zaat's narrative, Ibrahim's novel brilliantly

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<sup>5</sup> 25, Ibrahim.

<sup>6</sup> 162, Ibid.

exposes countless lies from a regime with unchecked authority. I use the same structure in this project, presenting state narratives and data in the first chapter, with the subsequent two presenting realities.

Sonallah Ibrahim was only arrested once in Egypt. His expressions of subversive ideas that showed the regime as incompetent are published in only fiction. This is not coincidental. In the Arabic version of *Zaat*, there is a publishers' note about the inclusion of newspaper headlines and quotes. It reiterates that the clippings were to highlight atmosphere in Egypt, and not to endorse the veracity of the stories.

**الوقائع الواردة في بعض فصول  
هذه الرواية منقولة عن الصحف المصرية،  
الحكومية منها والمعارضة ، ولم يقصد باعادة نشرها  
تأكيد صحتها  
أو المساس بمن تناولتهم  
وإنما قصد به المؤلف أن يعكس الجو الإعلامي العام  
الذي أحاط بمصائر شخصياته وأثر فيهم .  
« الناشر »**

*The facts contained in some of this novel's chapters have been reproduced from Egyptian newspapers, both state- and opposition-operated. Their reproduction here is not intended to endorse their accuracy or confirm their validity. Rather, the author aimed only to reflect the general media atmosphere that surrounded the fates of his characters and affected their lives.<sup>7</sup>*

In this way, *Zaat*, of course, is a novel. It holds no footnotes, citations, or peer reviews. The headlines, however, are ostensibly true. And the way it highlights the difference between what is actually happening and what the

<sup>7</sup> صنع الله إبراهيم. ذات : رواية (دار الثقافة الجديدة : ٢٠١٤) 7

state says is happening is all too representative of the reality Egyptians lived each day under the Mubarak era and continue to live today. The distinction between fiction and fact was so blurred throughout Mubarak's tenure that *Zaat*, while fictitious, comes closer to the truth than state data and narratives (many of which I cite in this thesis) ever will be.

My goal in this thesis is much like Ibrahim's in *Zaat*: to contrast state-controlled narratives that were fed to Egyptians under Mubarak's regime with their lived realities during that time period — realities which continue to this day. My ethnographic work, in some ways, is inspired by and akin to his literary work.

## Introduction

Hosni Mubarak took office as the fourth President of Egypt on October 14, 1981. He inherited a heavy to-do list from the former president, Sadat, including a rather annoyed Egyptian constituency, state corruption, and heavy foreign influence and aid dependency.<sup>8</sup> While it is fair to say Mubarak assumed the presidency in turmoil, it is equally fair that Egyptians had high hopes at the prospect of real political and economic change. Throughout his tenure spanning three decades, however, Mubarak would promise much and deliver less.

One of his most curious promises was on education reform. Globally, in the 1970s and 1980s, more developed high-income countries had taken an interest in promoting universal access to education and reduction of illiteracy. UNICEF proposed in the late 1980s to hold a summit focusing on development goals and children, and six countries, including Egypt, began to plan.<sup>9</sup> On September 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> in 1990, 159 governments participated in the World Summit for Children, including 71 heads of state. The conference ultimately concluded with all countries present, Egypt included, ratifying the Convention on the Rights of a Child with ten major goals, two focusing on education, which included a commitment by the year 2000 to provide universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 percent of primary school-age children and to reduce the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to

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<sup>8</sup> Galal Amin, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak: 1981-2011*, (American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, *The UN Development Agenda: Development for All*, 2.

be determined in each country) to at least half its 1990 level with emphasis on female literacy.<sup>10</sup> These goals became known in the United Nations Development Agenda as the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and although Mubarak himself did not attend the summit, it seemed he was committed and on track to making the education goals a reality.

A 2005 World Bank report on Egypt's progress on MDGs noted that the "key focus of the government" on education has been to achieve universal coverage and that "Egypt should be lauded for its significant achievements..."<sup>11</sup> State reported numbers, if correct, would have clearly demonstrated Egypt's commitment to universal access to education: by 1996, net enrollment for primary education was 92%. By 2000, it was 97%.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, literacy rates indicate incredibly impressive results. Before Mubarak took office, in 1976 the total youth literacy rate ages 15-24 was reported as 51%. In 2005, the state reported that number had jumped to around 85%. Today, that number is usually reported somewhere between 92%-97%. Over the same time period, the total literacy rate among the population aged 15 and older went from 38.2% to 75.06%.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to exaggerate how extraordinary these numbers are. In under 40 years, Mubarak reportedly oversaw literacy improvements so impressive, he began to be hailed as a global champion of education reform by world bodies and heads of state — Egypt became an example to follow for other developing countries.

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<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, *Goals for Children and Development in the 1990s* (Web).

<sup>11</sup> Sameh El-Saharty, Gail Richardson and Susan Chase, *Egypt and the Millennium Development Goals Challenges and Opportunities* (Web), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Seth Spaulding, Klaus Bahr..., *Review and Assessment of Reform of Basic Education in Egypt*, (Web/Cairo and Paris: 1996).

In 1996, UNESCO's "Review and Assessment of Reform of Basic Education in Egypt" said, "By all standards, the initial phase of the basic education reform in Egypt (1991-1996) has been more than successful." In 2007, UNICEF's Executive Director Ann M. Veneman commended Egypt's progress towards the MDGs, writing, "Egypt is well on track to meeting the Millennium Development Goals... These include universal primary education, and reducing child and maternal mortality." She also noted the "country's current strong rate of economic growth should assist in reaching other MDG targets as well."<sup>14</sup> Inside Egypt, similar trends of upward success on education reform and economic growth were reported to the country, usually furthering official state rhetoric. Daily News Egypt wrote in 2008 about the "global" reaches of the Egyptian Education Initiative, celebrating it as a success story. "Under the umbrella of the Global Education Initiative (GEI), the EEI will cross national boundaries to act as a role model and extend its support on educational reform in other developing countries, such as Rwanda, which has shown interest in the Egyptian model."<sup>15</sup>

Skepticism of those numbers and successes is warranted. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, the government presented purposefully distorted numbers to inflate education statistics, and they rarely represented reality. Mubarak undertook these distortions to further substantiate himself as a competent, effective leader and bolster the regime, both internationally and domestically. For example, methodology for measuring literacy rates internationally is defined by the UN as ability to write one's name and both read and write a "short simple statement related to his/her everyday

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<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, *UNICEF Executive Director commends Egypt's progress towards Millennium Development Goal*, (Cairo/Geneva, New York, 20 February 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Daily News Egypt, *Education Initiative Goes Global*, (Cairo: Web, 2008).

life.”<sup>16</sup> Literacy rates in Egypt, varying by source but almost in every case, also included in their overall literacy rate those with “partial literacy”, meaning they could read *any* part of the sentence they were shown. In the most recent survey, among 6-9 year olds in Egypt, literacy was measured at 83 percent. Only 61 percent, however, could read one whole sentence, meaning there existed a substantial amount of functional illiteracy amongst those the state deems literate.<sup>17</sup> A natural question arises — what if every statistic we have measuring education rates in Egypt was misrepresented by a rate of almost 20 percent?

Looking into other educational successes reveals similarly unimpressive results. While enrollment in primary school was nearly *100 percent* in several governorates, there are serious issues with student absenteeism and even more serious with teacher absenteeism. While mass education was supposed to be a social equalizer in Egypt, both the education gap *and* the income gap between the rich and poor grew during the Mubarak era. These issues are not unique to Egypt alone, but rather they fall into a broader trend across much of the Arab world (and even more broadly, the “developing world”) rebuilding and recovering from wars, colonialism and neocolonialism, and mass poverty. What makes the case of Egypt unique, however, was that state leaders time and time again acknowledged issues in the education system and announced reform efforts to fix them. For instance, in a ten-year period from 1988 to 1998 Mubarak had announced or established *seven* different programs or reform efforts, each with their own funding sources and stated goals for the country. Among these were the “Education

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations, Adult Literacy Rate Indicator Policy, (Web).

<sup>17</sup> Fatma el-Zanaty & Stephanie Gorin, *Egypt Household Education Survey* (EHES) (Cairo: 2014), 23.

Enhancement Program”, the “Secondary Education Reform Program”, and the “National Project for Education”, etc.<sup>18</sup> None of the reforms made any substantive change.

It is difficult to reconcile these state-reported numbers and successes with the realities of education in Egypt 1981-2011. While world governing bodies, newspapers, and Mubarak’s regime celebrated successes on education, lower and middle-class Egyptians only saw social stratification increase and education quality diminish. While Mubarak was increasingly recognized as an advocate for universal access to education, government spending on public education oftentimes never materialized.

Among the most serious setbacks to quality, critical education for youth has been a marked shift to de-facto privatization of public education. While public education is a guaranteed right and compulsory for primary and secondary school (until grade eight), it is unclear whether or not education takes place. Students are enrolled, but do not attend classes. Teachers are paid, but do not teach during the school day, sometimes working other jobs to supplement their income. The most common issue, however, is instead of teaching during the day, teachers will offer private tutoring sessions after school that require a fee to enroll. These private sessions may include actual supplemental classes, standardized test answers, extra credit sessions for marks, and more, all after the school day and all not free.

If you cannot afford to pay for private lessons, you are both deprived of an education and subject to emotional, physical, and educational sanctions. The problem has become so prevalent in Egyptian society that household spending on private

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<sup>18</sup> H.K. Browne, Education Reform in Egypt: Reinforcement & Resistance (ProQuest: 2011), 136-7.



tutoring and private supplemental education has exceeded overall government spending, 12-15 billion vs 10 billion, respectively.<sup>19</sup> It is as if a black market of privatization of education is happening unofficially, having grave implications for overall access to quality education, and subsequent mobility for low-income students who are never schooled.

This study tracks the privatization of public education over the course of the Mubarak era and subsequently identifies how education reform, or the lack thereof, contributed significantly to substantiation and legitimization of the regime. It then moves into analyzing what the larger implications of this de-facto privatized system are, using primary sources in Egypt to demonstrate what manifestations of privatization look like in public schools and what the lasting effects of these policies are on the ground. More broadly, the thesis contributes to the growing body of academic work on the education system under Mubarak, Egypt's youth post-Arab Spring, and the effects of developmental policies for citizens by state and international actors.

## ***ii. Definitions and Frameworks***

In this thesis, I sometimes use the term “de-facto privatization” within the framework of neoliberal modern state. I refer to neoliberalism in this paper as the laissez-faire style of economics where the government reduces spending or fails to supply a public good. It is used commonly to denote a public system's failures (economic or otherwise) and a subsequent transition to a private model in which non-state actors either supplement the public system or replace it altogether. This theory of economic

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<sup>19</sup> Hania Sobhy, *The de-facto privatization of secondary education in Egypt: A study of private tutoring in technical and general schools* (2012), 62.

privatization is applied in this study to an education system. When students do not receive the public education the state promises them, they seek private means to replace or supplement this education. Over time, more and more students seek private means. De-facto privatization, then, refers to the overall trend that the *majority* of students seek out these private means despite the intended public system.<sup>20</sup> It denotes the dependency of access to [free/public] schooling on the ability to pay for private tutoring. The paradigm of dependency is especially useful to this research, which focuses on contextualizing this dependency throughout education under Mubarak, investigating if it was exploited for political gain, and demonstrating the realities each day for current students in Egypt.

I also write frequently on critical, quality education, or a lack thereof. What is most helpful in defining and conceiving quality education in my argument is a Freire philosophy<sup>21</sup> that links mass education in the modern state to a transformation of society and liberation for young students. In Egypt, in the context of a regime state, concepts of liberation and democratization through education take on a heightened meaning — Freire writes on the “banking method” wherein teachers deposit information to students and give no opportunity for critical thought. In authoritarian governments, these deposits are often times nationalistic rhetoric devoid of engagement. Critical education, or “democratic” education as Freire terms it, strives for the opposite. I define quality education in this research as one that builds on Freire and the official UNICEF

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<sup>20</sup> I first came across the term applied to Egyptian education in an article by Hania Sobhy named “The de-facto privatization of secondary education in Egypt” written in 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Reference to Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher who wrote on critical pedagogy, including “Pedagogy of the Oppressed.” Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed: an education for humanization* (2005).

definition, “enabling the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in a profession and break the cycle of poverty.”<sup>22</sup> It provides an opportunity to engage in critical thought and actively works to increase human capital of children in schools through praxis of empowerment. James Fraser in defining democratic education expands on Freire, writing:

When democracy is linked to education, it then demands that the central purpose of education be the nurture and development of a powerful sense of agency and voice among all students in all schools. It is not enough for democratic schools to successfully transmit a static culture to all students, or to give all students the skills needed for successful future employment... When education is placed at the service of liberation, and a continual remaking of the understanding of liberation for all peoples, then it is truly a democratic education as that term is defined....<sup>23</sup>

While it may seem odd to apply western theory of democratization to Egypt, Mubarak himself wrote and said frequently he was democratizing Egypt — both to his constituents and the world. Concurrently, he promised education that fulfilled these goals as well.

Additionally, this research fits into a larger framework of measuring social stratification as a result of improvements to education. Sociologists have long studied the effects of educational expansion and whether it increases mobility in the general population. Relevant to this research is specifically an area examining evidence on intergenerational mobility associated with enacting compulsory schooling laws. Crucially, contrary to an implied conclusion that mandatory schooling and expansion of access to education contributes to overall societal equality and betterment of children,

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<sup>22</sup> UNICEF, *Quality of Education (Web)*, 2010 as seen in 172, Browne.

<sup>23</sup> James W. Fraser, *Reading, Writing, and Justice: School Reform as if Democracy Matters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 62-63.

closer investigation reveals this notion is incorrect.<sup>24</sup> Rather initial education expansion without concurrent additional resource allocation can actually increase inequality.<sup>25</sup> This is to say that educational expansion in the form of compulsory school laws must also be coupled with investment — new school buildings, hiring of teachers, increased salaries, purchasing of books, etc. In this thesis, I argue that in the case of Egypt under Mubarak this investment did not happen. By surveying educational reform during Mubarak's tenure, I argue in the subsequent chapter that while compulsory schooling existed, this was expansion for the sake of expansion and made little change to actual student outcomes. Additionally, matching established trends aforementioned, because this expansion was not coupled with true investment, the education system and outcomes for students actually worsened over time rather than improved.

### ***iii. Literature Review***

In the field as it stands, there exists research on three separate ideas this thesis studies at their intersection: 1) failing education and subsequent privatization; 2) the state's use of faulty education to fuel the regime; 3) social movements in Egypt, political and economic mobility, and access to both. Within these guiding ideas, I depend on a variety of historical and ethnographic secondary sources, in addition to data and statistics of school enrollment rates, attendance, literacy, and more. This literature review is not exhaustive, but rather a summary of the current work that I use for framing this thesis, and subsequently a clearer path of how I came to study this topic.

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<sup>24</sup> Emily Rauscher, *Does Educational Equality Increase Mobility? Exploiting Nineteenth-Century U.S. Compulsory Schooling Laws* (American Journal of Sociology, 2016), 1697-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 1739.

Linda Herrera, an anthropologist who studies education and critical democracy, has been especially helpful to identify everyday realities of education and how a first person account of these realities in Egypt significantly add to a study of Mubarak's reforms and policies. I examine "*Scenes of Schooling: Inside a Girls' School in Cairo*" and "*Cultures of Arab Schooling: Critical Ethnographies from Egypt*", co-edited with Carlos Alberto Torres. The first book focuses on day-to-day operations and instruction, using a first-person account to establish the paradigm of a pedagogic duty to direct students morally and to raise a child properly, dependencies on over-testing students, and an alarming reliance on seeking extra private means of education. The second is a collection of essays. One I underline is "The Production and Reproduction of Culture in Egyptian Schools" by Kamal Naguib. He looks at primary actors in Egyptian schools and investigates submission, passivity, lying, and hypocrisy, eventually arguing that students, teachers, and administrators at these schools are subject to violence, coercion, and ultimately suppression. Teachers and administrators ultimately let discrimination against students of low socioeconomic backgrounds happen: fines against students for being late when they cannot afford to pay them; humiliation or physical violence for not wearing proper uniform attire that students cannot buy; and neglect to students who do not take private lessons that they cannot afford.<sup>26</sup> The sad truth in these ethnographies is that immense challenges exist for poor youth in the Egyptian education system as it stands. As one student put it in Ahmed Saad's essay in the same book — "And us? who's going to fight for us?"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Herrera and Torres, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 99.

Through the ethnographic lens, a self-perpetuating cycle of inevitable privatization becomes evident. Hania Sobhy is a political scientist who focuses on state institutions and the way citizens encounter the state. She discusses the cycle aforementioned in her article “*The de-facto privatization of secondary education in Egypt*”. In it, she details the by-products of privatization including: “profound implications of [in]equity, access to education, and content and quality of youth schooling experiences... intertwining with various forms of corruption, exam cheating, and emotional and physical harm to students.”<sup>28</sup> The crux of her argument is this: in both a public educational and social system, access to schooling and freedom from emotional harm directly depends on one’s ability to pay for private tutoring. The paradigm of dependency that translates as de-facto privatization of education is central in my research. It is important to note that the emotional harm Sobhy describes can manifest itself in different ways, but what is more compelling is that it has entered the public sphere of consciousness as a reality of schooling in Egypt. Extreme examples are teachers marking students absent enough times (even if the student was there) so that they would be automatically disqualified from sitting for the end of the year examination<sup>29</sup>, or of physical violence, as when an Egyptian boy died after a teacher punished him by, “beating him violently in the stomach.”<sup>30</sup>

Ethnographic research is also supported by data, especially when taking a closer look at lower-income Egyptians. One of the biggest data sets I rely on is the Egypt Household Education Survey (EHES). The study was the first national-level household

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<sup>28</sup> Sobhy, 50.

<sup>29</sup> M. Tadros, *State Welfare in Egypt Since Adjustment: Hegemonic Control with a Minimalist Role* (Review of African Political Economy, 2006), 224.

<sup>30</sup> BBC News, *Egypt school beating 'kills boy'* (Web: 28 October 2008).

education survey of its kind to ever be conducted in Egypt in 2005 and 2006 and gives us insight and numbers on the education system in Egypt that were not directly derived by the regime and differ from official World Bank data.<sup>31</sup> When examining these figures a critical lens may still be warranted, however, as the study was funded by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. When I first read through the results, one set of findings especially stuck out to me. When looking only at the poorest 20% of Egyptians surveyed<sup>32</sup>,

- i. 22.6% of those children never attend school
- ii. Only 8% of children in those households had access to any books
- iii. Only 22% of youth in the poorest households go immediately from secondary school to any form of higher education
- iv. And one of the statistics most relevant for this study: Just one third of students from the poorest households could attend any form of private tutoring in 2004-2005

The profound implications of non-engagement with this population are what originally inspired this study, asking how this could be possible with Mubarak's constant reforms, his commitment to education, and statistics like a youth literacy rate reported as 92%-97%.

From studies like these, an overarching question emerged in my research: Wouldn't it make sense for Egypt to want its citizens to be educated, especially in the context of current attempts to democratize Egypt? The short answer I found was no. To address this question, I looked to recent literature and came across Heather Browne's dissertation: "*Education Reform in Egypt: Reinforcement & Resistance*." Her dissertation primarily analyzes education reform as a means of sustaining status quo in a self-serving and authoritarian regime. Through a 'neo-institutionalist' approach, she

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<sup>31</sup> El-Zanaty, F. (EHES)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

uses historical case studies to argue that the Egyptian state has had immense trouble establishing legitimacy and therefore has relied on education ‘reform’ to instill “compliance, participation, and legitimacy.”<sup>33</sup> Her study is grounded in the principle that liberal education (one that relies on critical thinking and free expression)<sup>34</sup>, is essential to a democratic state. Egypt employs the antithesis of liberal education as a means of controlling masses and conferring structural and ideological power to prioritize “maintenance of state security over the democratic emphasis on civility and justice.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, we see the school in Egypt as an ideological and political space used to maintain the “status quo” that Browne refers to. This status quo maintains legitimacy for the elite and ensures the survival of the self-serving regime. She continues, saying Mubarak was “particularly weak” and was unable to motivate his citizens to comply with his government. Thus, he catered to the economic elite and increased reliance on security forces. Instead of paying attention to the needs of masses to maintain legitimacy, it was easier to create a false dialogue that there was change happening and reforms occurring, and that they would just take time. These pseudo-reforms reinforced the regime and maintained legitimacy: the false pretense of action, rather than concrete action itself.<sup>36</sup>

While Mubarak implemented countless surface reforms, a lack of true reform was used to create a reality where his regime maintained hegemonic control. The legitimacy (or lack of legitimacy) of the Egyptian government is mentioned often in texts that look at the Mubarak regime. One of these is “*State Welfare in Egypt since Adjustment:*

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<sup>33</sup> 19, Browne.

<sup>34</sup> 140, Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> 22, Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> 36, Ibid.



*Hegemonic Control with a Minimalist Role*,” by Mariz Tadros. She studied the access and use of welfare services, specifically with the poorest Egyptians in the past thirty years in a low income urban settlement in Cairo (Bulaq el Dakrour). The paper focuses on education and health and reiterates the point that, “in education, prospects for equity enhancement and upward mobility were restricted... for those who could afford to pay.”<sup>37</sup> She also argues that the government’s ‘public commitment’ to the poor is highly contestable, arguing that while rights to free education and health care were not openly rescinded, there was an erosion of these entitlements after 1970.<sup>38</sup> This journal is unique in that it brings in a new voice in the context of education and the state: the parent. Tadros discusses how when parents saw their children being mistreated, the best course of action would be to confront the teacher directly and threaten to contact the Ministry of Education. However, she also notes these confrontational strategies are avoided by parents who are in “weaker positions of power” and fear for their child’s ability to continue attending the public school they depend on. Thus, even parents were left without options to help their child. Many parents viewed private lessons and *majmuat* as “inevitable ransom” that must be paid to teachers.<sup>39</sup> Despite this ransom, throughout Tadros’ study, she met adolescents who were holders of third preparatory degrees and yet were still completely illiterate, largely illustrating the failure of the corrupt education system.

As this research further explores education reform and subsequent privatization in a framework of consistent state failures and developmental stakes, it raises questions about the welfare state and political economy. In *“The Political Economy of Reform in*

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<sup>37</sup> Tadros, M, 238.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 246.

*Egypt*”, Denis Sullivan considers the economic theory behind the educational failures. Starting with 1980 onwards, Sullivan discusses the Egyptian economy’s deterioration and how ‘less obvious’ efforts at reform are found throughout Egyptian society: “private organizations are providing services — education, job training, health care, and day care — in the face of governmental unwillingness or inability to make these services available as promised.”<sup>40</sup> Sullivan touches on how there is, “so little agreement within Egypt on the appropriate and social path the country should be following,”<sup>41</sup> and yet still underscores the failure of Mubarak to outline a course of action his country will take to mend the shattered economy.

Although Sullivan focuses almost exclusively on agriculture to prove his points, his findings are applicable to the education system as well — that Egypt is “devoid of effective leadership from the top of the political structure down through the bureaucracy.”<sup>42</sup> This void of leadership has created systems across the country of ‘privatization’ and has become the dominant word in governmental, aid, and journalistic circles. Government leaders are losing the initiative for reform to private groups throughout society, while at the same time they are being held accountable by that society. This seems to reinforce the point that Heather Browne makes earlier: that not only is the state’s legitimacy in trouble, but it has gotten to the point where they depend on a faulty education system to reinforce state security and compliance and participation within this system.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> D. Sullivan, *The Political Economy of Reform in Egypt*, (1990), 317.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 319.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 327.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 331.

Finally, I examine work denoting the gravity of leaving youth largely uneducated and unable to think critically in the context of an authoritarian regime. Here, I point again to Herrera's ethnographic work, this time from a 2010 interview: "*The future of Muslim youth: an interview with Linda Herrera.*" The interview, conducted by Michael Peters, is broad in topic, yet it touches on a key theme underscoring the developmental stakes raised by this thesis: how Egyptian youth are struggling for "meaningful ways of political inclusion."<sup>44</sup> All the while, these same youth are simultaneously subject to repression and surveillance while expected to conform to, "new market logics of deregulation, standards, and privatization."<sup>45</sup> Herrera takes the subtext of a school as an ideological and political space and applies it to a broader economic and developmental scale. According to Herrera, without an educational system that improves human capital (skills, knowledge, and experiences) for students, economic and social mobility is limited and youth are excluded from access to a successful or fulfilling life. She further defines in Egypt a clear link between lack of access to education and lack of economic and social mobility.

With this point, we also need to examine where youths fit in to an authoritarian regime and a global economy in a guise of democratization. To think critically about youth, I look at Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock's "*The positivity imperative: a critical look at the 'new' youth development movement,*" and "*The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy.*" The latter begins with a quote from Hillary Clinton when she was secretary of state: "Young people are at the heart of today's great strategic opportunities

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<sup>44</sup> Herrera, L. & Torres, C., *Cultures of Arab Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 32.

<sup>45</sup> Peters, Michael A., and Linda Herrera, "The future of Muslim youth: an interview with Linda Herrera" (*Geopolitics, History, And International Relations* 2, 2010), 250.

and challenges, from rebuilding the global economy to combating violent extremism to building sustainable democracies.”<sup>46</sup> As youth have grown more central to contemporary global political discourse, their needs have come to the forefront. But as youths’ importance in shaping society is more recognized, we must also analyze how youth are positioned as revolutionary subjects, framed as agents of change in the youth movements in Arab countries of recent popular uprisings and across other movements in the world. The book also looks at youth as a social category, and “theorize[s] the changing significance and salience of youth in the context of the shifting structures and forces of capitalist society and economy.”<sup>47</sup> One of the most important points Sukarieh and Tannock make with relevance to this study are that youth situated within a political economy perspective wield immense power, and that we need to imagine “radical solutions to youth exploitation.”<sup>48</sup> Here, we start to see the education system in Egypt as a form of youth exploitation, a lens only possible after critically examining youth as a social category.

The article by the same authors (*“The positivity imperative: a critical look at the ‘new’ youth development movement”*) touches on the same points as the longer book but warrants its own mention for one quote:

In the more positive view of youth, the agency, contributions, and capabilities of the young in society are to be recognized, celebrated and supported... Today, it is not just leftists, feminists, and anti-racists speaking out against the pathologization of the young, but individuals of every political and ideological stripe and color... youth have been widely constructed as ‘demons of culture’; but they have also been promoted as ‘angels of history,’ viewed alternatively and/or simultaneously both ‘as a vicious, threatening sign of social decay and ‘our best hope for the future.’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sukarieh, M. & Tannock, S., *Youth Rising? The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy* (2015), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>49</sup> Sukarieh, M. & Tannock, S., *The Positivity Imperative: a critical look at the ‘new’ youth development movement* (Journal of Youth Studies: 2011), 688.

I thought it best to end the literature review with this quote, because despite the Egyptian government's missteps with the education system, there is still hope for change from Egyptian youth, for Egyptian youth.

The final piece of this review, then, is briefly connecting the preceding ideas. The Arab World is in a critical time of awakenings, uprisings, and powerful questions of how to restructure society in a more equitable way, demanded and driven largely by youth. The relevance of research on Egyptian youth cannot be understated. At a critical juncture in history, Egyptian youth under the age of 24 make up 49% of the population and have proven to be a force of powerful change. So, how does a lack of critical education in schools and purposeful exploitation by Mubarak and his regime for the last 30 years change the relationship between youth and the government, between youth and their education, and between youth and their future outcomes? This thesis helps answer some of these questions and connect theory to the realities of Egyptian youth.

#### *iv. Methodology*

This research takes a primarily qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to examine Egyptian education and government reforms, and the subsequent privatization situated in an authoritarian state. Focusing on youth outcomes, it serves to distinguish state rhetoric and the reality of Egyptian youth. The study is longitudinal, applying a retrospective lens to identify how education was systematically exploited over the span of Mubarak's tenure from 1981 to 2011.

I begin with a brief description of the background of the education system, beginning with Gamal Abdel Nasser who re-established public education and founded

the system as it stands today. I then move into a historical review of changes in education over 30 years, including Mubarak's championed education reform projects and the privatization. I mainly use secondary scholarly sources of history and anthropology for this, but also descriptive statistics to further illustrate how the surface reforms contribute to an inevitable privatization model. This review sets the context for the rest of the thesis. It then moves into a political science-driven analysis, arguing through secondary sources and the *discrepancies* between the descriptive statistics and reality of education in Egypt that Mubarak not only knew about the failing structure, but he purposefully misrepresented it and used it for political gain. Finally, to add to the depth of the research on the educational realities in Egypt, the third section is fieldwork-based, using interviews and observations with primary actors of education in Egypt such as principals, teachers, and pupils over age 18. The ethnographic portion signifies the goal of this research to not solely approach this issue from a discursive, policy-based perspective, but rather from a more holistic one that sets the scene of the issue, explains how and why it happened, and then moves into why it matters.

I chose the time period 1981-2011 to study education in Egypt not because Mubarak was the only president who oversaw a poor model. Rather, he inherited an already flawed system which this thesis acknowledges. I focus on Mubarak, however, because he put education at the forefront of his policy goals to Egyptians and to the world. This time period is also greatly affected by post-colonial and neocolonial factors after the end of the British occupation in 1954 officially, and 1956 with the final withdrawal of English troops. Specifically, the dependency on foreign aid, from the United States especially, shaped policy throughout Mubarak's tenure and this is brought up several times throughout the history review. Another important factor of the time

period is how this analysis purposefully situates itself within the post-World War II environment that focused on globalization and global human rights. UNESCO was founded in 1945, 2 months after the end of the war. In December 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was introduced at the UN, which declared for “all people and all nations” a common standard of rights. Over the next decade, the world began to apply pressure on developing nations to meet the goal of educational access for all.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s a considerable momentum of expansion of school enrolments had begun in most parts of the world. Behind this momentum two forces were at work. In those countries where compulsory education was already well-established, there were pressures to lengthen its duration.... In those countries (mostly in Africa and Asia) where compulsory education was not already established, or where it largely existed in name only, as was then the case in many countries in Latin America, there were pressures both for wider access to primary schooling as such and for better opportunities to complete it.<sup>50</sup>

By the 80s, the global focus on education had only increased, especially in developing countries. This no doubt motivated Mubarak to deliver, and on paper he did. Thus, the time period becomes even more relevant to study in the context of globalization and the comparisons available to other developing countries to show how the case of Egypt was especially unique.

The research also takes ethical considerations into account, mostly focusing on fieldwork in Egypt and doing research that is critical of the former regime in a politically sensitive country where there is now a new regime. The most important deliberation was on how interviews would be structured to not threaten the security or livelihood of primary actors of education in Egypt. The fieldwork focused on seeing the realities of education in a public school in Egypt and asking educators, principals, parents, and, students aged 18+ educated under Mubarak how they thought and felt about their

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<sup>50</sup> UNESCO, *The right to education: Towards education for all throughout life*. (World Education Report: 2000), 40.

educational experiences. Had it changed over the past 30 years, 20 years, 10 years? When had they seen significant shifts or trends in their schools? How did they view Mubarak and his role in education? And finally, did students at the school usually enroll in “extra” schooling? At the time of this research, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had been accused numerous times<sup>51</sup> of consolidating power through an unprecedented level of cracking down on dissidents and specifically targeting weak groups and minorities. With this in mind, it would be necessary to craft interview questions in a way that was extremely open-ended and purposefully guised as non-political, giving a primary actor in education the opportunity to elaborate further or not. For instance, “Has the government been supportive of education reform?” would become “Has education reform been helpful at this school/in your classroom?” I avoid questions specifically asking about Mubarak, Sisi, and other government actors. In this, the interviewee would be free to avoid the topic entirely if they felt necessary. In direct engagement with educators and parents, behavior observation on willingness to answer or hesitation became as important as interview answers, and both gave insight into how people discussed education and functionally operated in educational circles.

On the ethical note of researcher’s stake, I should be transparent that I have been familiar with this topic in some capacity for most of my life. My father immigrated to the United States with his family in 1977. His mother (my grandmother) was a principal in an Egyptian primary school before taking her children to Saudi Arabia for a “better chance at education.” She continued serving as an educator there. It was common for my father to remind my sister and me as we were growing up how lucky we were to

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Abuaitha, *Sisi the Suppressor* (Brown Political Review: 2015).



attend such “decent” public schools, especially in comparison to his education and his functional illiteracy for the first ten years of his life. As I grew older and stories of educational inequality became more academically compelling, I first wrote a research prospectus on poorer Egyptians’ access to education and subsequent privatization in 2015. I’ve been educated and lived in the West all of my life, yet I’ve heard second-hand stories about what life and education in Egypt were like also for most of my life. While personal biases are an important consideration in crafting my argument, hearing the realities of Egyptians who lived through these policies and reconciling these realities with state rhetoric only strengthens the evidence in this thesis. When dealing with distorted data, storytelling and ethnography can both be importantly corrective and illuminating.

## ***Conclusions***

This thesis critically examines 30+ years of privatization, countless promises from Mubarak and his administration on the subject of education, and its effect on 20+ million youth. While there exists separate literature on privatization in Egypt, Mubarak’s attempts at establishing legitimacy, and ethnographic work on the realities of education, no one has studied how these three fields intersect. This research demonstrates that these ideas not only correlate, but also depend directly on each other to fully understand them. By tracking the privatization of public education over the course of the Mubarak era, I illustrate how education reform, or a lack thereof, contributed significantly to substantiation of the regime. The thesis then moves into examining the larger implications of this de-facto privatized system, contributing to a

growing body of work on understanding Egypt's education system, Egypt's youth, and the way state actors exploited both of the former.

## 1 | Mubarak's Fiction: A Brief History of Modern Egyptian Education

*“Any political system can commit mistakes and any state can commit mistakes. What is most important is to acknowledge these mistakes and put them right as soon as possible and put those behind them into account, bring them to account.”*

— Hosni Mubarak<sup>52</sup>

### *i. Introduction*

This chapter provides a history overview of the education system in Egypt over the thirty-year time period spanning Mubarak's tenure. To understand the foundations of government schools, I begin with Nasser, who created the system as it stands today, and continue through Sadat, who enshrined the system into the constitution. I then move into what Mubarak inherited and what he did with it—or, more precisely, what he did not do. The chapter focuses on state rhetoric and state-reported data, highlighting the many reform programs and laws the Mubarak administration enacted and tracking education indicators over the three presidencies. I use World Bank archival documents to examine these indicators and reforms alongside international aid and domestic spending earmarked for education. As noted previously and demonstrated later in this thesis, the state narratives and history provided in this chapter deserve a critical lens.

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<sup>52</sup> PBS NewsHour, *Mubarak Defies Resignation Anticipation, Protesters Pledge Big Crowds Friday* (Web, 2011).

## ***ii. Nasser and the Re-Establishment of Public Education***

Few in the history of Egypt maintain the legacy and larger-than-life memorialization that Gamal Abdel Nasser enjoys. He was born in 1918 in Alexandria and spent his adolescence amidst a cultural renaissance in Egypt. The authors, journalists, and playwrights of this period would greatly influence Nasser later in life. One of the most prominent writers during this literary emergence was Tawfiq al-Hakim. His second book was *Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, about the criminal justice system in a small town in Egypt, which exposed corruption of state actors in the town and illustrated the mistreatment of the long-neglected Egyptian lower class. Nasser would later cite al-Hakim as an inspiration during his presidency, and while Nasser never directly stated he had read this novel, his future tenure would be similarly defined by goals of anti-corruption, elevation of the lower class, and equalizing and modernizing Egyptian society.

In 1952, the Free Officers, a group of young, middle class, Egyptian nationalists, including Nasser, set the Egyptian revolution in motion. They were previously all military officers who had attended the newly revitalized military academies together and incorporated their military-style tactics into the revolution and the subsequent government. Their platform was simple — rid the country of British influence and the power consolidation of wealthy elites and restore dignity to the middle and lower classes through a parliamentary democracy. The revolution was successful, and Mohamed Naguib, an established Egyptian general who secretly helped lead the Free Officers, became the first president of Egypt in 1953. Over the next year, Nasser and Naguib would significantly disagree on how to maintain the legitimacy of their new government,

ensuing in a power struggle until Naguib resigned a year later. Shortly after, the country held a referendum on a new constitution and on Nasser taking office, officially. He became the second president of Egypt in June of 1956, after both resolutions passed by an overwhelming majority.

Nasser's mentality of restoring Egypt as a powerful country centered on principles of Pan-Arabism, anti-colonialism and imperialism, individual self-respect, and national unity. More often than not, this mentality focused on the plight of the lower class and he placed education at the top of his priorities. Coming from a modest background himself, he declared that education should not be the privilege of the few. He championed the slogan, "education should be as freely available as water and air" and set out to create a free school system that "acknowledged the rightful aspirations of the masses for a better future through education."<sup>53</sup> In 1953, Law 210 mandated 1) all young children have the right to education; 2) primary education and its curriculum would now be overseen by the government and would be standardized; 3) primary education would now be compulsory and free.<sup>54</sup>

Nasser was a nationalist who inspired the same sentiment in others and across the country. He got what he wanted through this nationalism and with subsequent national projects. In his state-making practices, education was essential. He should rightly be credited with both making public education important again to the Egyptian government and to the Egyptian population post-British occupation, operating under the belief that educated citizens are crucial to a better society. He also, however,

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<sup>53</sup> Amira Nowaira, Nostalgia for Egypt's Nasser (Web: The Guardian, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Sika, Nadine Mourad, *Educational Reform in Egyptian Primary Schools Since the 1990s: A Study of the Political Values and Behavior of Sixth Grade Students* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 38.

undoubtedly set up the framework of corruption in public education. When he nationalized education, his administration took control of all educational practices including public, private, and religious schools and curriculum in order to abolish differences between classes in favor of a unified Egyptian culture.<sup>55</sup> While his intentions may have been noble, the lack of independent oversight, or even oversight from another branch of the government, on education would have catastrophic consequences. This was not unique to education either — ironically, Nasser's democratization efforts were frequently done through authoritarian means, suppressing opposition to him, his party, and his ideas. The most prominent example of this authoritarian style is his establishment of the military state reliant on secret police and intelligence to interfere in universities and citizens' private doings.<sup>56</sup> Over the next 40 years, Egypt's government would evolve and undergo many changes, but the political institutions the Free Officers and Nasser designed would endure, even until today.<sup>57</sup>

Gamal Abdel Nasser died on September 28, 1970 from a heart attack. He had worked till the last day for his country and would be memorialized long after for this work and his al-Hakim-style Egyptian spirit.<sup>58</sup> When asked by a journalist what his greatest achievement was, Nasser answered the revolution of 1952 and the opportunities for "ordinary Egyptians" it represented:

My driver's son is able to go to university while my daughter could not get in because she had not high enough marks. So I had to send my daughter to the American University here and pay £100 a year for her, while my driver's son goes to Cairo University for free. Some think that the nationalization of the

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<sup>55</sup> Sika, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Brownlee, Jason, "Peace Before Freedom: Diplomacy and Repression in Sadat's Egypt" (Political Science Quarterly, 2012), 646.

<sup>57</sup> Cook, Steven A., *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 62-63.

<sup>58</sup> Reference to Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *Return of the Spirit* (Cairo, 1927).

Suez Canal Company or the 1961 nationalizations were the main achievements but they were only steps towards the aim of equality of opportunity.<sup>59</sup>

When Nasser died, he left the entire school system and curriculum across Egypt in the hands of the relatively new Ministry of Education. His legacy remains enshrined in textbooks and curriculum, both with students studying about Nasser himself, but also learning through the system he designed. He made sure Arabic and Islam were stressed because the prior British Occupation had weakened the subjects, and military courses were now taught in schools as standard curriculum. In terms of public education, attendance and government spending had undoubtedly improved. The British had spent little on education and social welfare<sup>60</sup> and Nasser had made education not only a right, but a cultural expectation. In 1960, four years after Nasser had become president, the World Bank reported the adult literacy rate was 20%, the primary school enrollment was 66%, and the secondary school enrollment was 16%. At the time of Nasser's death in 1971, state numbers were at 40%, 70%, and 33% respectively.<sup>61</sup>

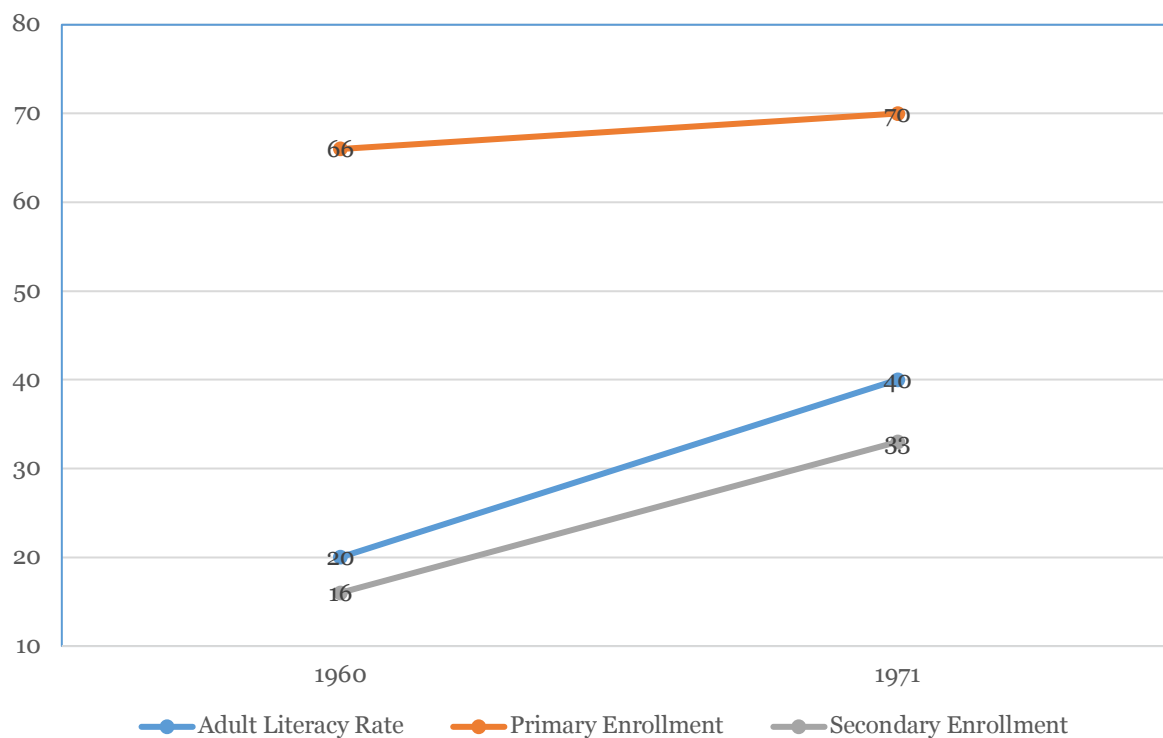
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<sup>59</sup> Stephens, Robert Henry, *Nasser: a political biography*, 559. (as cited in Alexander, 2005)

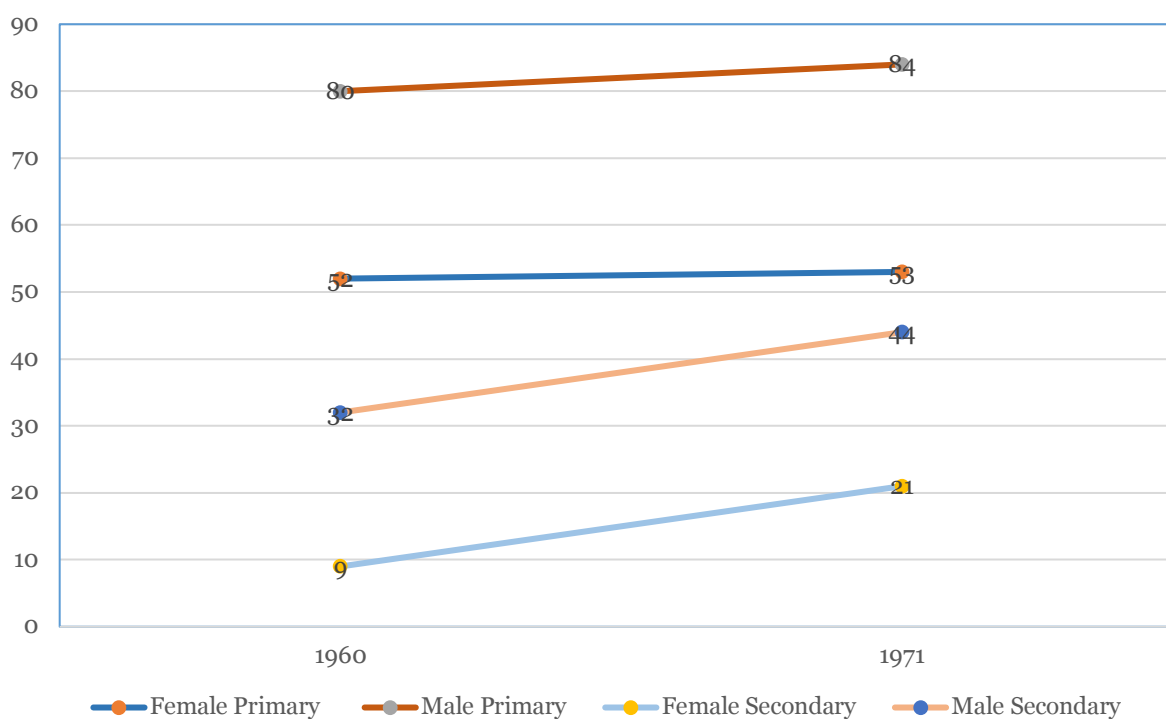
<sup>60</sup> Helen Chapin Metz (Library of Congress), ed. *Egypt: A Country Study*. See also Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot's "History of Egypt".

<sup>61</sup> World Bank, 1971 WB Document of Internal Development Association Annex I, 1.

### Education Indicators Under Nasser



### School Enrollment by Gender Under Nasser



World Bank, 1971 WB Document of Internal Development Association Annex I, 1.



### *iii. Sadat and the Public-Private Split*

Nasser was succeeded by Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat, an Egyptian politician and army general who had also served in the Free Officers, famously delivering the speech announcing to the country the beginning of the 1952 revolution:

Egypt has passed through a critical period in her recent history characterized by bribery, mischief, and the absence of governmental stability... Egypt has reached the point, there-fore, of having no army to defend it. Accordingly, we have undertaken to clean ourselves up and have appointed to command us men from within the army whom we trust in their ability, their character, and their patriotism. It is certain that all Egypt will meet this news with enthusiasm and will welcome it... I assure our foreign brothers that their interests, their personal safety, and their property are safe, and that the army considers itself responsible for them. May God grant us success.<sup>62</sup>

Sadat would not enjoy the same positive legacy as Nasser, mainly because of his work on the Camp David Accords and subsequent Egypt-Israel peace treaty, a hotly contested issue in the Arab world to this day due to concessions made to Israel over Palestinian territory. (Following a close partnership between Sadat and President Jimmy Carter who brokered the peace treaty, the Camp David Accords were both a controversial peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and a framework for Arab-Israeli peace.<sup>63</sup>) Sadat became the first Arab Nobel Laureate for this work, and was shunned by almost every other Arab state for this, including Egypt's official suspension from the Arab League for a decade. The contrast between garnering acceptance from the West and backlash from Arab states, in a way, is representative of the ways Sadat differed from Nasser — heavily partnering with the US, opening Egypt up to foreign actors (and aid) through an “Open Door” policy, and swapping Arab nationalism for Egyptian nationalism.<sup>64</sup> He was driven

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<sup>62</sup> Cook, *The Struggle*... 12.

<sup>63</sup> Brownlee, 659.

<sup>64</sup> See Brownlee, 648-652 and Sika, 40.

largely by three ideas. First, Egypt desperately needed money to rebuild infrastructure and the economy after two wars, the Six-Day War (1967) and the War of Attrition (1973), in seven years.<sup>65</sup> Second, Sadat believed free market economic policies were better for the country, deeming Egypt a democratic socialist society and re-establishing the multiparty system.<sup>66</sup> Third, he sought to reinstate the freedoms Egyptians had lost under Nasser, promising to end arbitrary arrests and lower the secret police's power, including publicly setting the Ministry of Interior's surveillance tapes on fire.<sup>67</sup> These democratizing principles extended to education as well, however in practice they never materialized.

Sadat maintained the same amount of power as Nasser. The Interior Ministry still wiretapped and kept secret files on citizens, and when he took office he moved quickly by removing Nasserists from his cabinet and those that could pose a threat to his leadership.<sup>68</sup> Sadat was especially adept at understanding the "intimate relationship" between foreign affairs and domestic, and he impressed his international counterparts including US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.<sup>69</sup> This would help him immensely as he acquired large amounts of foreign aid later.

Sadat's policies on education are hard to discern because he did not discuss them as much as Nasser. He was well read and emphasized to his daughter how much knowledge and intellectual curiosity mattered in understanding life.<sup>70</sup> In 1971, Sadat

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<sup>65</sup> Brownlee, 641-648.

<sup>66</sup> Sika, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Brownlee, 648.

<sup>68</sup> Ben Elissar, Eliahu, and Jon B. Alterman, *Sadat and his legacy: Egypt and the world, 1977-1997 : on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of President Sadat's journey to Jerusalem* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy: 1998), Xii.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, xiii.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 5.

introduced the fourth constitution since Egypt became a republic, named “The Permanent Constitution of Egypt.” (The constitution would later still be amended by future presidents, however, including by Sadat in 1980.) In it, chapter two focused on social and moral laws:

**Article 7:** *Social solidarity is the basis of society.*

**Article 8:** *The State shall guarantee equality of opportunity to all Egyptians.*

**Article 18:** *Education is a right guaranteed by the State. It is obligatory in the primary stage. The State shall work to extend obligation to other stages. The State shall supervise all branches of education and guarantee the independence of universities and scientific research centers, with a view to linking all this with the requirements of society and production.*

**Article 19:** *Religious education shall be a principal subject in the courses of general education.*

**Article 20:** *Education in the State: Educational institutions shall be free of charge in their various stages.*

**Article 21:** *Combating illiteracy shall be a national duty for which all the people’s capacity shall be mobilized.<sup>71</sup>*

The new constitution established the legal framework for education for all Egyptians that still exists today, with slight modification. As Sadat became more comfortable with his now constitutionally-established authority over all aspects of government and state institutions, he began to roll out his Open Door policies. These were a series of decisions to open the Egyptian economy to foreign actors, foreign investors, and foreign aid. These policies extended to education as well, and soon private schools began to thrive under the free market rules. Public education, however, began to struggle significantly during this period. School enrollments rose, but quality suffered. Egypt’s GDP spending on education was a mere 2.2 percent in 1980, right before Sadat’s assassination.<sup>72</sup> Sadat maintained that education was a priority, but the but it was a priority that the country

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<sup>71</sup> The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 11 Sep. 1971.

<sup>72</sup> Sika, 40.

couldn't afford.<sup>73</sup> This, coupled with Egypt's rapid population growth, was a disaster for the public school system. Private and foreign schools continued to expand beyond any previous amount, becoming the obvious choice for upper and upper-middle class Egyptians. Government schools continued to weaken, becoming overcrowded classrooms populated of poor children and poor teachers. Public school teachers and other educators began emigrating to other Arab countries to make a more livable wage. In 1985, Egypt reported that it was short 20,000 teachers.<sup>74</sup> This, of course, only hurt the struggling education system more.

The public-private dichotomy of struggling and thriving respectively extended beyond education and became worse because of Sadat's Open Door policies that disproportionately benefited the upper class. High income and poverty over the decade continued to head to the extremes. Egyptian social classes transitioned from majority middle-class to a majority in poverty, a small (and shrinking) middle class, and the extremely rich. This extended to education — in 1976, only 3.2% of males and 1.2% of females had obtained degrees from higher institutions or universities.<sup>75</sup> Nasser had previously made higher education free and, in 1964, had guaranteed public employment for all university graduates which increased demand for university studies exponentially.<sup>76</sup> The pool of high school graduates was still so small under Sadat, however, that university was still a privilege reserved for the select few. One of the frequently cited positives of the Open Door policies and Camp David Accords was the

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<sup>73</sup> Judith Cochran, *Educational roots of political crisis in Egypt* (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>76</sup> Nader Habibi and Fatma El-Hamidi, *Why Are Egyptian Youth Burning Their University Diplomas? The Overeducation Crisis in Egypt* (Middle East Brief 102, September 2016), 1.

large influx of western aid given to Egypt at a time where it was in dire financial need. It should be noted that these funds, however, made no significant educational improvements from 1974-1980, despite money specifically earmarked for textbooks and the school system.<sup>77</sup>

The year before Sadat died, the National Council on Education gave him a report.<sup>78</sup> Among its findings were:

- i. 51.2% of teachers are not certified to be in the classroom
- ii. Only 4,453 of 8,027 buildings designated for primary education are usable
- iii. 24% of primary school buildings need sanitary services and 60% are missing electricity
- iv. The drop-out rate for *primary school* is at 20%

These figures represent what existed when Mubarak took office. For lack of better words, he inherited a mess. But the system being in dire straits also undoubtedly set the stage for Mubarak's supposed *incredibly* impressive reforms over the course of his tenure. The next two sections span the education system 1980 to today, taking a comprehensive look at these reforms. At the time Sadat took office, the World Bank reported the adult literacy rate was 40%, the primary school enrollment was 70%, and the secondary school enrollment was 33%. At the time of Sadat's death, slight improvements were reported, and state numbers were at 43.5%, 72%, and 37% respectively.<sup>79</sup>

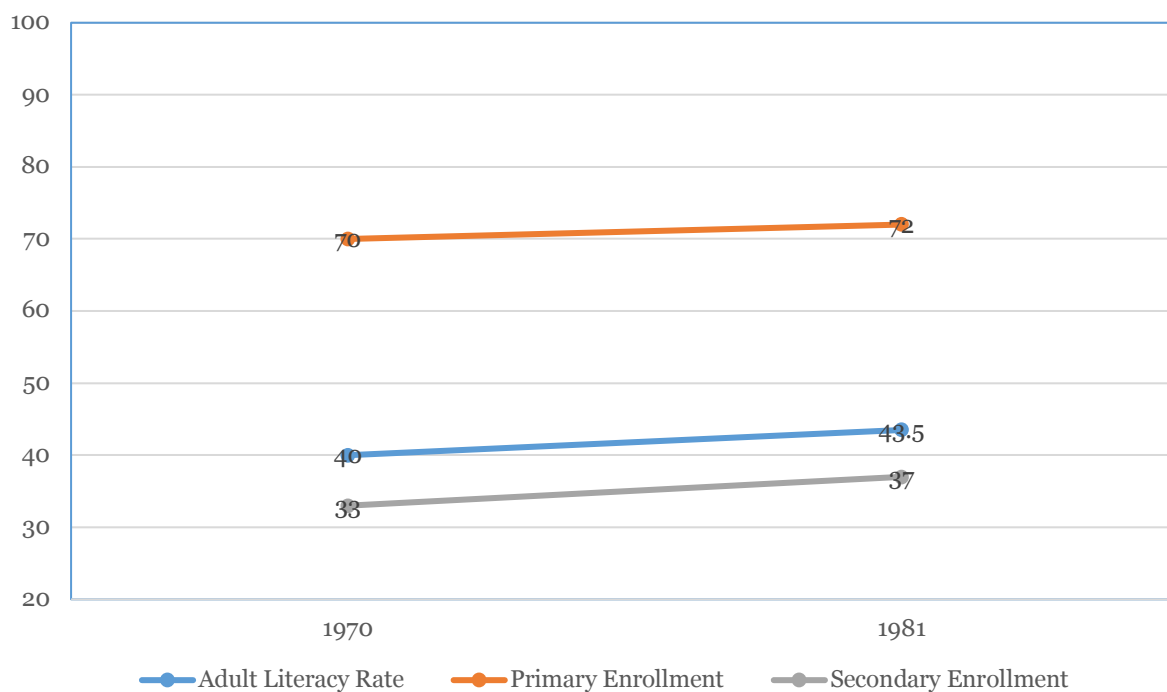
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<sup>77</sup> Cochran, 116.

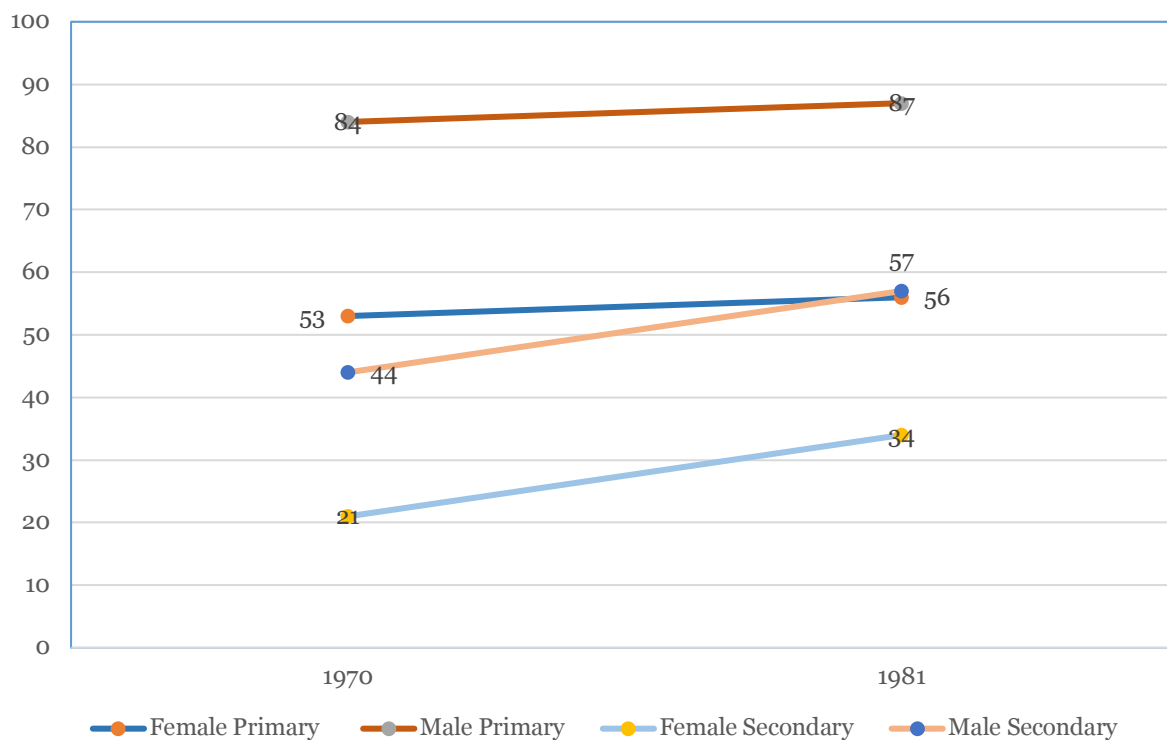
<sup>78</sup> 1980 Report to the President from the National Council. As seen in Cochran, 79.

<sup>79</sup> World Bank, 1981 WB Document of Internal Development Association, Annex I, 2.

### Education Indicators Under Sadat



### School Enrollment by Gender Under Sadat



World Bank, 1981 WB Document of Internal Development Association, Annex I, 2.

#### ***iv. Mubarak and the People's Education System (1981-2011)***

In 1981, President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by the Muslim Brotherhood, likely a consequence of hostility from the Camp David Accords and his extensive Open Door reforms not reaching the majority of the now bitter Egyptian population.<sup>80</sup> His Vice President Hosni Mubarak was also injured in the attack, but assumed the office of the Presidency eight days later. He inherited an angry constituency and a struggling education system from Sadat. Mubarak, however, had previously been involved in discussions on Egypt's schooling and he had determined to make it at the top of the country's priorities by his office as well.<sup>81</sup>

Law No. 139, passed in August 1981 one month before Mubarak took office, made nine years of education compulsory, and officially divided the education system into a six-year primary stage, a three-year preparatory stage, and 3 subsequent years of secondary education. The influx of foreign aid arranged by Sadat seemed like it would help the education system immensely, but it had no measurable effects from 1974-1980. A notable example of this aid, in 1980 the World Bank announced the beginning of the third stage of Egyptian Education projects, with an additional grant (the past two phases each had grants) of 40.1 million dollars.<sup>82</sup> By 1985, however, the money had still not been disbursed.<sup>83</sup> This began a series of curious contradictions, continuing until today, where money was funneled into education by both the government and international

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<sup>80</sup> Browne, 80.

<sup>81</sup> (Egyptian) National Center for Educational Research and Development (NCERD), *Education Development: National Report of Arab Republic of Egypt from 1990 to 2000* (Cairo, 2001), 2.

<sup>82</sup> World Bank, *Report and Recommendation of the President of the International Development Association to the Executive Directors on a Proposed Development Credit to the Arab Republic of Egypt for a Third Education Project* (World Bank, 1980). 2.

<sup>83</sup> Cochran, 134.

actors, but later the funds became untraceable or its concrete effects were hard to identify. For instance, in 2011, the Egyptian parliament publicly questioned Ministry of Education (MOE) actors for a missing 2.5 billion EGP that came from USAID. The MOE said they had spent the money on reforms in seven governorates, but they had no documentation and there were “questionable returns on educational quality.”<sup>84</sup> This was likely no coincidence.

Two years before Mubarak took office, the Ministry of Education submitted a 5-year program proposal named “Developing and Innovating Education in Egypt — Policy, Plans, and Implementation Programs.” It was approved alongside Law 139 and focused on literacy improvements. This would be the first of many five-year plans. After Law No. 139, the government began to announce the successes of the program — Mubarak’s administration insisted new funding from the World Bank and the United States was funneling down to schools and this had solved overcrowding and previously held teaching issues. At this point, 19% of government expenditures and more than 250 million dollars has gone towards education in recent years, including the construction of new school buildings, teacher training, and textbook purchases.<sup>85</sup>

There exists very little source material other than official state speeches and data on the five-year plan from 1980-1985, but certain data points indicate Mubarak was overstating the improvement of the education system during this period. First, in the early 1980s, teachers were still on temporary contracts with some paid as low as two Egyptian Pounds per day.<sup>86</sup> This is equivalent to less than 67 cents, far below the

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<sup>84</sup> Sobhy, Hania, *Education and the Production of Citizenship in the Late Mubarak Era: Privatization, Discipline and the Construction of the Nation in Egyptian Secondary Schools* (SOAS, 2012), 105.

<sup>85</sup> Cochran, 97.

<sup>86</sup> Sobhy, *The De-facto...*, 52.



poverty indicator. It would be nearly impossible to survive on that salary alone, likely meaning teachers were supplementing income via other jobs, continuing teacher shortages and absentee issues in schools. Another measure was continued infrastructure issues. International aid workers indicated reforms were not working well on the ground — one USAID worker noted that the 250-million-dollar five-year education plan had little effect because of “low absorption”, especially in rural areas. He wrote that, for instance, while schools were planned to be built, often times there were not enough skilled workers to construct school buildings.<sup>87</sup>

*Majmu’at* is a broad term in Egypt that generally means private lessons, inside or outside of the school, either with a separate tutor or the school teacher. In 1986, Law No. 149 made *majmu’at* mandatory.<sup>88</sup> They are the core of the privatization of public schools, not serving as the cause but rather the effect — a response to inadequate education in the school. The rise of popularity in *majmu’at* is arguably the biggest indicator that the Mubarak’s reforms and government schools were systematically failing their students — students were still overwhelmingly seeking alternative and supplemental means of schooling. After conducting fieldwork in secondary schools in Cairo, Sarah Hartmann writes that it became commonplace to hear the phrase — “There is no education in schools. ‘*Mafish ta’lim fil madaris.*’”<sup>89</sup> Originally, Law no. 149 was introduced to actually alleviate household financial burden on schooling, theorizing that if private tutoring was done in-school, families would not have to pay extra outside of the school. This strategy was doomed from the start, and exposed children to even further corruption and lack of access to education that existed before the law.

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<sup>87</sup> USAID Worker Report, as seen in Cochran, 123.

<sup>88</sup> Herrera (1992), 75 as seen in Sobhy, *The De-facto...*, 49 and Hartmann, 62.

<sup>89</sup> Hartmann, 65.

In 1988, Ministerial Decree No. 209 established vocational (sometimes referred to as technical) schools at the preparatory level. These schools were open to students who failed the first or second year of general secondary school, students who had finished primary school, and students who had *never* attempted or completed primary school.<sup>90</sup> This meant that students as young as 12 years old could enroll in a vocational school. 1988 also marked a new five-year plan for Egypt, the government announced.

In the beginning of the 90s, people again began to be unhappy with the government, mostly on the state of the economy, but also on education. Heather Browne writes in her dissertation that in this period, Mubarak was beginning to lose his legitimacy as an effective and competent leader. He began to be the subject of jokes, including one:

Another joke tells a story of Mubarak flying with his wife and son over the Egyptian countryside when his son suggests that he drop a 100 Egyptian Pound note out the window to make someone happy. His wife exclaimed that he should throw ten notes out of the window and make ten people happy. Then, over the speaker the pilot says he should throw himself out the window and make millions of people happy.<sup>91</sup>

Education was the area where Mubarak sought to base his legitimacy the most. He and his administration doubled down, declaring the 90s *the decade* for education reform and abolishment of illiteracy. In two separate speeches, Mubarak focused on education:

We have to be honest with ourselves, that the crisis in our educational system is reflected on the school, the teacher, the student and the curriculum. Even though it is burdening the country's resources, and the family income's capacity, the output at the end of the road is very weak.<sup>92</sup>

Education is the major pillar for our national security on a broad scale... It is our way to world competition in markets.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> UNESCO IBE 2010, *World Data on Education* (UNESCO and IBE. 2010/11), 3.

<sup>91</sup> Browne, 135.

<sup>92</sup> Sika, 45.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 41.

This is a small snippet of what became a large party line, and a much-repeated point Mubarak hit in many speeches in 1991. It seemed he was serious about concrete, structural reform of the education system. The laws backed this up as well — in the same year, he enacted Law No. 8 which considered literacy and adult education a “national duty”.

Mubarak continued giving big speeches. He also continued implementing large-scale education reforms — some piloted directly, some through the Ministry of Education, and some from international actors in partnership with the Ministry. In 1992, Mubarak began the “National Project for Education”, which focused on increasing access to education.<sup>94</sup> In 1993, the government released the next five-year plan which guaranteed education would be the state’s top priority, focusing also on access to education. In December of the same year, Egypt helped organize the international Education for All Summit (E9) for nine high-populated developing countries, announcing publicly to the globe that the 1990s is the “National Decade of the Child” in Egypt.<sup>95</sup> In 1994, the “New Schools Program” began, which targeted young girls aged 6-14.<sup>96</sup> The program reported immense success with girls’ primary school enrollments increasing from 20% to 74% in *only five years*. In 1996, “Save the Children: Access to Primary Education and Literacy” started with a budget of 2.6 million dollars.<sup>97</sup> Later that year in December 1996, the World Bank approved a loan to support Mubarak’s 835

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<sup>94</sup> Browne, 137.

<sup>95</sup> Chitra, Neik, *Education for All E9 Summit Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 23.

<sup>96</sup> Cochran, 130.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 130.

million dollar Education Enhancement Project (EEP) beginning next year.<sup>98</sup> In 1997, Decree No. 3452 was announced, focusing on the development of pre-primary education and early childhood development.<sup>99</sup> In the same year, a National Commission on Higher Education Reform started. In 1998, the Secondary Education Reform Program began.<sup>100</sup>

As is demonstrated by the sheer number of reform programs and the billions of dollars spent, education in Egypt should have been transformed. And on paper, it largely was. By 1996, Mubarak's state census and the 1997 World Bank World Development Reports reported incredible results. In the 15 years Mubarak had been president, gross primary enrollment was at 100%, gross secondary enrollment had gone from 37% to 74%, and illiteracy amongst those 10 years and older had decreased from 60% to 39%. These numbers cannot be emphasized enough.<sup>101</sup> By comparison, primary enrollment increased 2% under Sadat in 11 years. In 15 years, Mubarak reportedly oversaw increases over ten times what Sadat had accomplished.

Egypt entered the 2000s with education flourishing, again only according to the state. Universal enrollment in education for boys and girls was reported at 97.5%.<sup>102</sup> The Ministry of Education had adopted a new slogan seemingly fit for the new millennium, "Education for Democracy." They never defined democracy concretely, however, and reform again seemed to be a guise – a "facade of the regimes' measures of liberalization, rather than a true democratization."<sup>103</sup> Alongside new slogans and new democratization efforts came legislation: a 2004 MOE report listed 14 new important legislation changes,

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<sup>98</sup> Egyptian Ministry of Education, *National Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education Reform in Egypt* (Cairo), 71. (NSP)

<sup>99</sup> World Data on Education (IBE 2010), 3.

<sup>100</sup> Browne, 137.

<sup>101</sup> World Bank, *Egypt Country Assistance Evaluation (Report No. 20513)*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Sika, 57.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 59.

consisting of Presidential Decrees, Ministerial Decrees, Laws, and assorted symposium guarantees. The report also maintains that universal gross education enrollment is at 100% but admits net enrollment is at 78.8% in 2001/2002 and 77% in 2003/2004.

Now that the education system had, on the surface, been reformed, the government did not publicly discuss it as much compared to the 1990s. Mubarak did, however, incorporate it into his larger reform and five-year-plan. In 2005, Mubarak announced that he would allow opponents in the Egyptian presidential election happening in the fall. Previously, he had never faced an opponent and over his rule held four referendums that allowed citizens to vote “Yes” or “No” on him remaining in office. The contested results always favored Mubarak with more than a 90% majority.<sup>104</sup> According to the Ministry of Education, as part of his electoral program reforms, he presented a new “vision for reforming socio-economic, cultural, and political life in Egypt. Education reform was at the heart of that vision.”<sup>105</sup> This, once again, was a call for reforms that would raise teachers’ salaries, build more schools, and ensure “equal access to quality education.”<sup>106</sup> It seemed that the cycle of endless, and largely deceptive, reforms had begun again.

In 2006, Law No. 82 established the National Authority of Educational Quality Assurance and Accreditation, which reported to the Prime Minister. There were now nine different reform programs happening in the same year, each with different funding sources and different supervision.<sup>107</sup> In 2007, Law No. 155 amended previous education Law No. 139 establishing the Professional Academy of Teachers. The Ministry of

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<sup>104</sup> Neil Macfarquhar, *Mubarak Pushes Egypt to Allow Freer Elections* (Cairo: 2005).

<sup>105</sup> NSP, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 71.

Education then announced that the shortage of teachers was now only measured at 13,596.<sup>108</sup> In the same year, however, two important, and at times contradictory, documents were published. The first was the 2007 Ministry of Education National Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education Reform, an over 500-page document that lays out the current state of the school system and plans to, once again, begin new reforms. Mubarak himself gave a speech announcing the document in coordination with Law No. 155:

Continued reform of our educational system is indeed a major and timely prerequisite for Egypt's development. All our policies and endeavors have to envision the Egyptian citizen being the engine and ultimate goal of our national development.<sup>109</sup>

The document glosses over catastrophes of the education system, failing to recognize the root issues of education failures like overcrowding, censorship, and lack of properly trained or properly paid teachers. It briefly mentions points of contention, such as an estimated 80% of general secondary students now receive private tutoring<sup>110</sup>, but its analysis largely ignores the issues and instead reports falsehoods such as the gender gap in education has been closed almost entirely, a notion that is plainly incorrect.<sup>111</sup>

The second document published was the Educational Household Survey, the first national-level household education survey of its kind to ever be conducted in Egypt. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and its overall statistics match up with the state reported data. It, however, goes much deeper than the surface and disaggregates this data. This disaggregation further proves that state data under Mubarak was manipulated and inflated. For instance, amongst respondents of the

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<sup>108</sup> Sobhy, *The De-facto...*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> NSP, Introduction.

<sup>110</sup> NSP, 46.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

survey aged 18-24 who would have been educated previously during the 90s and a period of supposedly great education reform, 29.7% of them reported they had no schooling whatsoever and a combined 38.3% had never finished primary school.<sup>112</sup> This seems far-fetched if by 1996 gross enrollment in primary school had hit 100% as the state reported.

At the time Mubarak left office (involuntarily), he had ruled for 30 years and supposedly overseen incredulous education reform. In 2011, Mubarak would be forced out of office for the failures of his regime and the countless lies he told, but some of these repeatedly reported falsehoods — namely data — were already enshrined into history. In 1981 when Mubarak took office, the World Bank reported the adult literacy rate was 43.5%, the primary school enrollment was 72%, and the secondary school enrollment was 37%.<sup>113</sup>

At the time of Mubarak's ousting state numbers were at **73%, 102%, and 82%** respectively.<sup>114</sup>

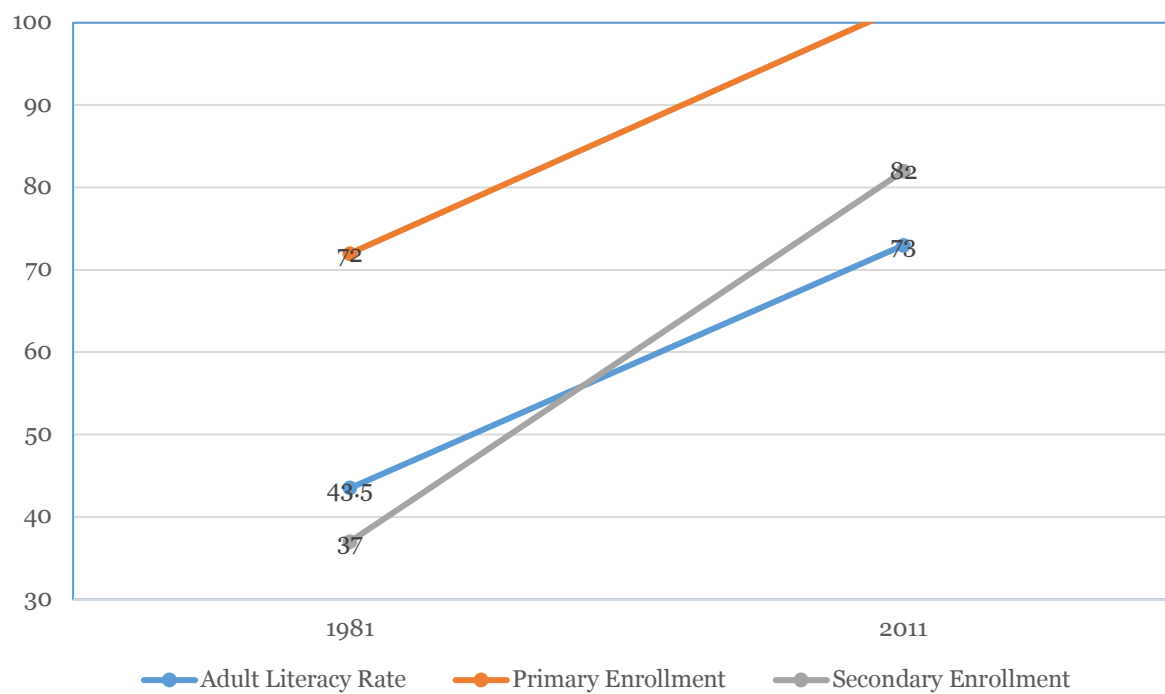
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<sup>112</sup> 10, EHES.

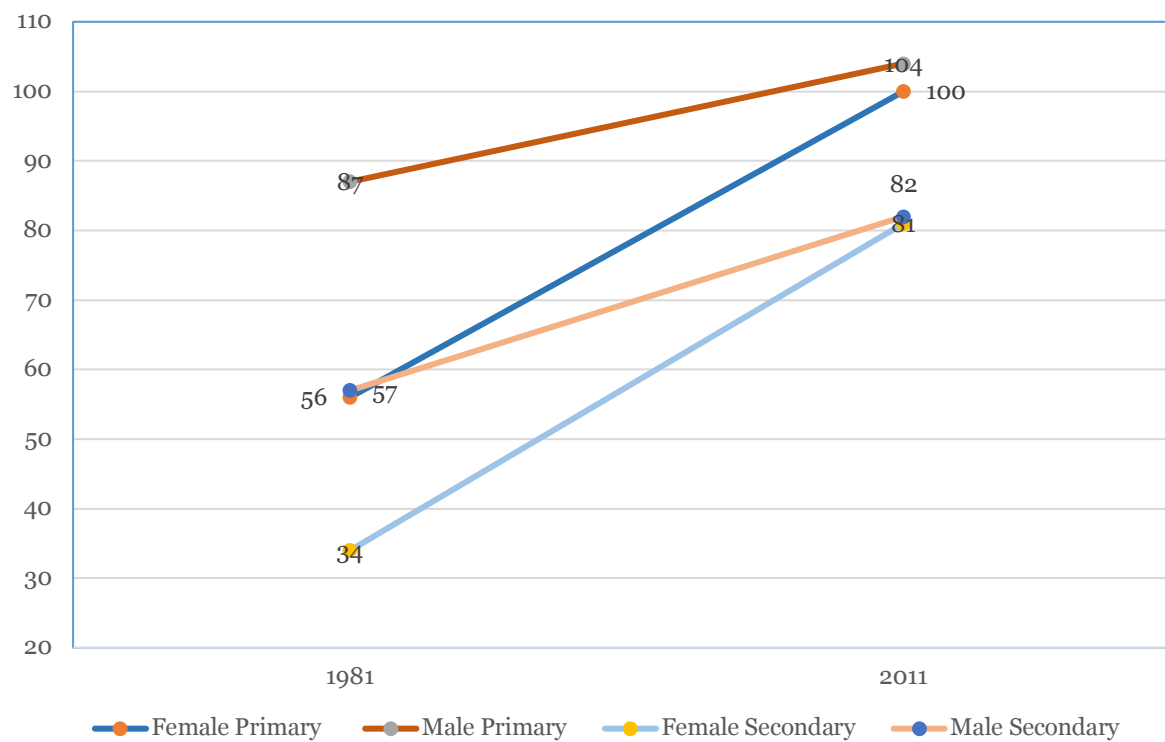
<sup>113</sup> World Bank, 1981 WB Document of Internal Development Association, Annex I, 2.

<sup>114</sup> World Bank. World Development Indicators, (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2012).

Education Indicators Under Mubarak

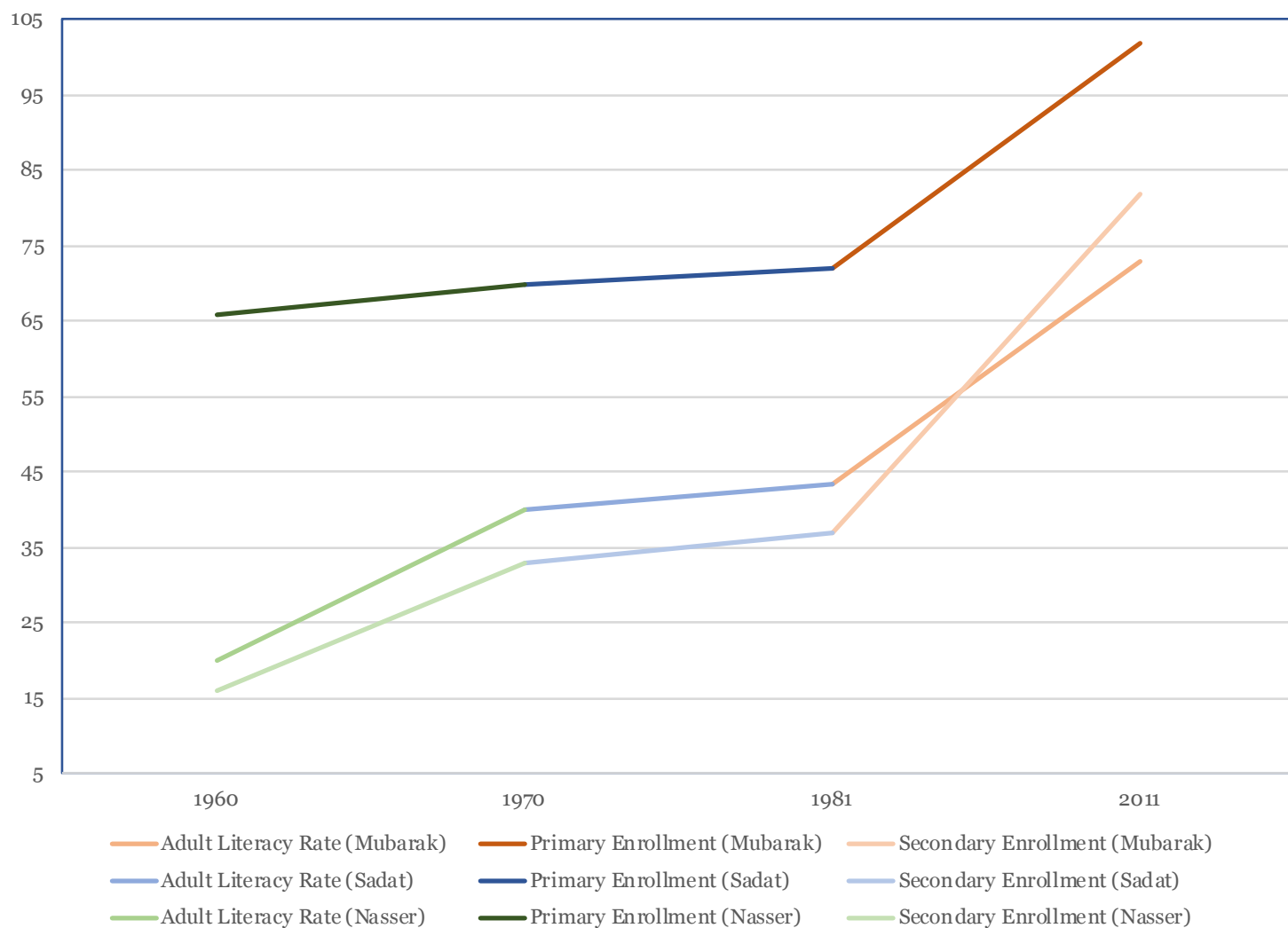


School Enrollment by Gender Under Mubarak





## Egyptian Education Indicators 1960-2011



Data from World Bank: 1971 and 1981 Document of Internal Development Association in Annex I and 2011 World Development Indicators

*iv. Conclusions*

This chapter offered a brief history of modern education in Egypt, focusing on how it was established and the changes it underwent during the twentieth century. This historical overview lays the foundation for the next chapter, where I investigate the state narrative further and argue against its veracity. Mubarak systematically manipulated and distorted the status of the education system. He not only overstated the progress of reform, but he also implemented many that did nothing at all and existed in name only. I eventually argue that unfortunately for Egyptian students, the reported great strides of progress in the education system discussed in this chapter are only a false pretense to prolong the legitimacy of Mubarak's regime.

## 2 | The People's Reality: Abuse, Distortion, & Substantiation

*“Elementary education is one of the pillars of national security.”*  
 — Husayn Kamal Baha' al-Din, Egyptian Minister of Education<sup>115</sup>

### *i. Introduction*

This chapter builds on the preceding historical survey of Mubarak's education reforms and is split into two sections. The first further analyzes the education reforms described in the previous chapter, demonstrating how the reports and data generated from the state were categorically false. It identifies the real status of the education system in Egypt under Mubarak, showing that despite countless reform efforts and boastful statistics, the education system did not improve — in fact, it undoubtedly became much worse. The second part of the chapter explores why this happened and why Mubarak repeated countless falsehoods. It shows how the regime manipulated public education, both in terms of rhetoric and purposeful underspending, to serve primarily as a platform of legitimization and pseudo-democratization, ensuring survival of the autocracy, both domestically and internationally.

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<sup>115</sup> Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformations in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

## ii. *The State of Education in Egypt: Post-Reform*

During and after the Arab uprisings of January 2011 in Egypt, when Mubarak would be forced to resign, scholars looked for the impetus of the revolution. The overwhelming answer was young adults 18-30, who were concerned with social mobility, hunger, and abuses of power by the government.<sup>116</sup> These youth, who watched income inequality and corruption grow to extremes and poor Egyptians left behind by the government, were all ostensibly educated during the peak of the education system in Egypt. Mubarak and his government had spent billions of dollars on transforming the system, enacting countless reforms. Education indicators were the best they had been in the history of the state, with primary enrollment hitting over 100%. Additionally, international aid in Egypt was at an all-time high, with the country consistently receiving three to five billion dollars from the United States each year.<sup>117</sup>

The truth, however, was that the system was in more dire straits than ever before. In reality, every single one of the reforms failed at expanding access to education, despite billions of dollars spent, countless promises from Mubarak, and many reported successes by the government. While these massive reform projects were supposedly implemented, government schools continued to systematically fail their students in four major areas:

- I. **Overcrowding:** Overcrowding in public school buildings continued to be a major problem across Egypt, in the face of reports to the contrary. This included claims

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<sup>116</sup> Shenker, Jack, *The Egyptians* (London : Penguin Books, 2017), 110.

<sup>117</sup> USAID, *USAID Foreign Aid Explorer*.

from Mubarak that overcrowding was not a serious issue now. A Ministry of Education strategic plan wrote that between 1992 and 2005, the education budget increased 240% and a total of 13, 709 schools were built.<sup>118</sup> But according to the World Bank's 2000 Country Evaluation, GDP spending had actually decreased significantly on education over that period, reduced from 6.3% in 1980-85 to 4.8% in 1992-1997. In addition, education ethnographers in Egypt during this time also noted overcrowding continued to be a serious impediment to learning, with shortened classes for two school shifts a day (8am-1pm and 1pm-6pm, for instance) and more than 50 kids in a small classroom. Even the NCERD National Report 1990-2000 admitted that the density of classrooms in some "poor haphazard areas" had reached 60-70 pupils per classroom. It also, however, reported that only 20% of schools operated on more than one shift a day<sup>119</sup>, which is incredibly far-fetched. In 1994, the New York Times reported that even before the 1992 earthquake that made many buildings unusable in Cairo, most schools "operated in two or three shifts a day with usually 40 to 70 students in a class," and at points, 100 students per classroom.<sup>120</sup> At the end of 2000, the Ministry of Education wrote that it was short no less than 100,000 teachers in its system.<sup>121</sup>

- II. **Inadequate education & private tutoring:** One of the largest indicators these reform programs were pseudo-reforms or surface level reforms at best was the continued privatization of education as a response to inadequate schooling. By 2000,

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<sup>118</sup> 29, NSP.

<sup>119</sup> In Egypt beginning in the 70s, schools began to operate with having several shifts of "school days" in one day, to prevent classrooms having more pupils than it could hold.

<sup>120</sup> Chris Hedges, *Parents, Often in Vain, Await Their Children* (Web: NYT, 1992).

<sup>121</sup> 22, NCERD.

spending on supplemental private tutoring had reached such high levels, that poor families spent one-fifth of their annual income on “supposedly free schooling.”<sup>122</sup> Middle class households, UNESCO estimated, spent one-third *just on tutoring*<sup>123</sup>, and it was warned that by the 2000s private spending within the supposedly public education system would surpass government spending. (It did, in 2003.<sup>124</sup>) If these reform programs were so successful that primary enrollment was 100% and illiteracy was close to eradication in the public education system, why did families continue to have to use up to a third of their income to try to obtain an education for their child?

Mubarak placed immense importance on public education in rhetoric alone, and reforms he publicly touted never materialized. Consequently, over the course of his tenure the state underwent a transition to what was, in effect, a private education model entirely. By the 2000s, this was widely accepted as standard in society. 80% of secondary students in government schools received some supplemental form of private lessons, usually for the entire year. Even more alarming was that even in primary school (ages 6-11), 50% of students already received private tutoring. As I present in chapter 3, during fieldwork many parents expressed to me exasperation and powerlessness: public schooling that does not educate properly leaves parents and students little choice but to look elsewhere. It was no longer an option — either you attended private tutoring and paid for what was supposed to be a free education, or you did not receive one.

These state failures are a larger part of the overall neoliberalization of Egypt, started by Sadat with his Open Door policies, but enshrined into daily life by

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<sup>122</sup> 50, *The De-facto...*, Sobhy.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Mubarak. By purposefully and repeatedly making no concrete change to an obviously failing system, Mubarak ensured havoc for educators and students. One of the most surprising parts of Egypt's brand of neoliberalism was that private actors who supplemented or replaced the public education system were often public actors themselves. Teachers and administrators who were paid too little were the ones who organized and ingrained private lessons into curriculum, testing, and practically every aspect of school life in Egypt. This is paradoxical on two levels. The first is that neoliberalism is when the state makes way for private actors by cutting spending or, in this case, pretending to spend and reform but not sufficiently providing a service. These private (outside) actors, however, did not work outside of the organization at all, and were arguably at the foundations of the public education system. It is through this paradigm of normally-public actors becoming private actors themselves that we see how private tutoring became a normalized part of Egyptian society.

The second paradox underlying this new system is that 40% of parents sent their child to group or private tutoring because they felt the teacher did not educate properly in the classroom.<sup>125</sup> However, they still sent their child in most cases to private tutoring with that same teacher. Why is it that in private tutoring teachers would educate sufficiently but during the school day they would not? This is the system Mubarak and his administration incorporated. Sobhy explains,

Private tutoring in Egypt emerges as a phenomenon that is not easily explained as a remedy to poor education, as a strategy to subsidize low teacher pay or as driven by high-stakes examinations, but rather as a complex relationship between these variables and the related educational and institutional policies and practices. The school level dynamics described here only amplified the impact of the policies and practices supporting this type of marketization across the system. The growth of tutoring has been effectively backed by government policy intent

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<sup>125</sup> EHES, 115.

on privatizing the financing of education and embedded in a complex web of corruption extending from high up in the structure of the MOE to the community and school levels.<sup>126</sup>

In the overall marketization she references, we see how education fits into a larger framework of corruption and neoliberalism. Previously public services privatize because of a combination of a lack of public spending or spending that mysteriously disappeared or made no concrete change. This became the policy Mubarak would be known for amongst his unhappy constituents. Across the globe, though, Mubarak was not necessarily known as a dishonorable ruler who oversaw privatization as means of living. In fact, he was frequently hailed as a model example for developing countries to follow — a president who cared about education and implemented reforms when necessary, an image he worked tirelessly to curate.

- III. **Censorship and abuse for students:** For students who did attend classes with a teacher present, the situation was even worse. Running concurrently to education reforms supposedly bettering and democratizing the school system were a series of censorship sweeps<sup>127</sup>, likely a response to Mubarak's wavering public approval. Through tactics of coercion and fear, district leaders kept students from engaging with texts that were "potentially politically subversive materials."<sup>128</sup> When the Minister of Education Baha' al Din was asked how he could be democratizing government schools but also censoring immense amounts of material, he replied:

Psychologically speaking, a child is a person who does not have a formed character... He cannot fight... so it is the State's responsibility to take care of the child and not leave him to face unhealthy situations... I don't approve of censorship, but I have the duty to protect the child, physically, psychologically, and mentally. Until he is formed he has to be under the protection of the family and the State.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> 62, *The De-facto...*, Sobhy.

<sup>127</sup> 31, Herrera, L & Torres, C.

<sup>128</sup> 32, Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



This admission by the Education Minister was one of the first times we see the government admit the state uses education as a tool — instilling state rhetoric in students and banning any opposition to the regime in schools. This suppression and dependence on the banking method in the classroom highlights how education was anything but quality, critical, or democratic. Additionally, what is inaccurate about the Minister's statements is the assertion that the reforms somehow protected youth from physical or mental harm. Contrarily, in addition to educational misgivings like over-testing and censored pedagogy, students were also frequently exposed in this period to violence in classrooms. For instance, if students were late they were charged late fines, and if they could not pay, public humiliation and physical violence were encouraged. In addition, students who could not pay for the private tutoring mentioned in the section prior were also subject to abuse. Teachers sometimes marked students absent enough that they would be disqualified for sitting of end of year examinations and would automatically fail the year.<sup>130</sup> Sometimes, violence became so serious that students died, including an eleven-year-old boy from Alexandria named Islam 'Amr Badr. He was killed accidentally by his teacher through violent smacks in the stomach with a ruler. The student's crime? "Not having finished his homework."<sup>131</sup> While Mubarak continued his glorious education speech tour through the 90s being hailed for his reform efforts and working towards a better education system, the students supposedly helped by these efforts were not afforded this improved education. If anything, the situation was worsening.

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<sup>130</sup> Tadros, 224.

<sup>131</sup> BBC News, 2008.

IV. **Censorship and abuse for Teachers/Administrators:** Teachers, too, were subject to the same coercion, fear tactics, and, at times, violence that students faced. Perhaps the most notable failure of Mubarak's reform efforts during the 90s for teachers was the choice by the regime not to pay them a living wage. For all the money that the government said it was spending on education, teachers' salaries were still usually below the poverty line. In my personal interviews with primary actors in education, which I highlight in the next chapter, teachers and administrators frequently expressed how little choice they have in the faulty education model and how a subsequent transition to private lessons became the main source of schooling. They are not paid enough to only teach during the day, so they either find another job (leading to serious problems with teacher absenteeism), or the more likely option, they hold private lessons for a fee after school, and also lessen or stop teaching completely during the school day.<sup>132</sup> Administrators were trapped within the bureaucratic nightmare of the Ministry of Education and Mubarak's surface reforms. They were frequently told not to complain and to toe the party line. They knew if they did not, there would be dire consequences. One remarks, "Directors learn to suppress their aggression towards the despotic power [of the senior education administration] and to avoid any confrontation with it. This leads to acquiescence, submission, passivity, lying, and hypocrisy."<sup>133</sup>

It is impossible to reconcile the proclaimed successes of state reform in education and the realities of students and educators who live and work within the system.

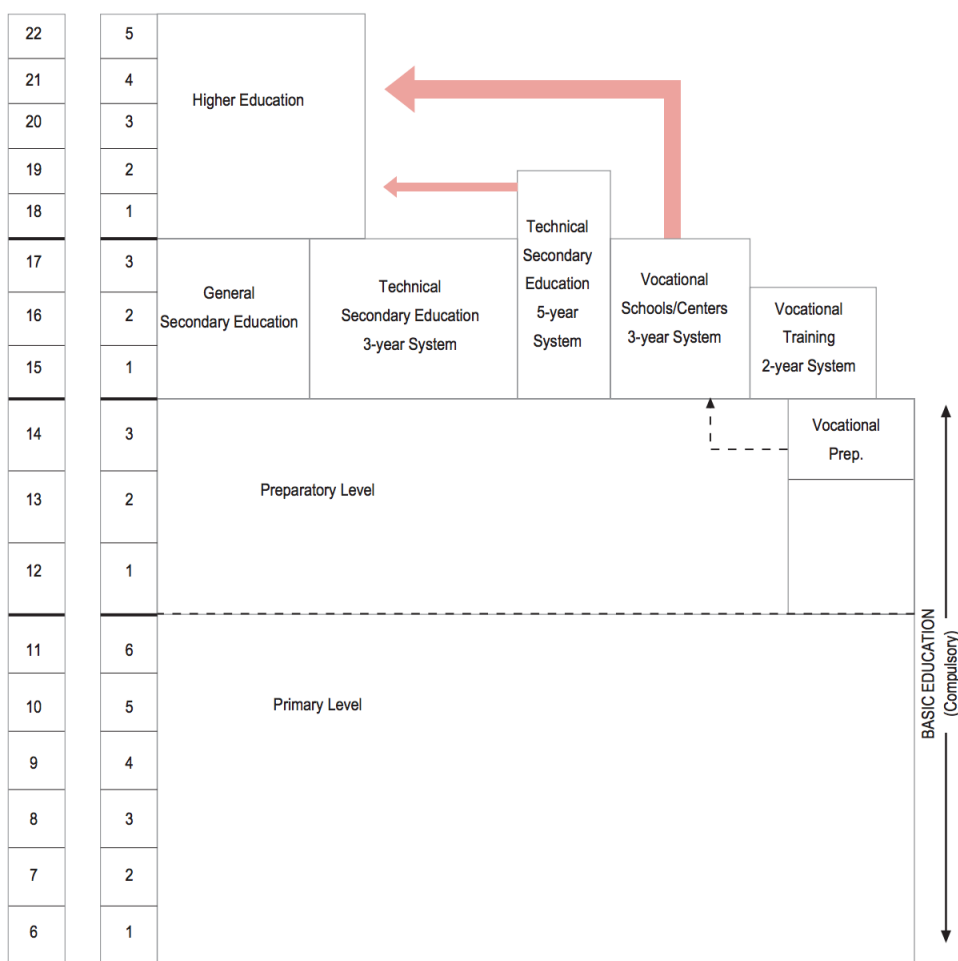
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<sup>132</sup> Herrera, L & Torres, C, 59-60.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 70.

Mubarak throughout the 1990s promised that it was the decade of the child, the decade of education, and the decade of reform. But at the end of the ten years, little had improved and much had become worse. In the 2000s, the trend of pseudo-reforms, privatization, and abuse in public schools would only continue.

In addition to failures inside the government school, education indicators (published across the state and the globe) tracking the percentage of youth even engaging in the schooling warrant a further look. For instance, the gross enrollment rate under Mubarak spiked by the early 2000s to above 100%. UNICEF defines gross primary and secondary enrollment ratio as the number of children enrolled regardless of age, divided by the population of the age group. The annex in the MOE 2004 Development report says that there are 15,438,790 students enrolled across public *and* private schools and the figure is representative of every student in Egypt (primary, preparatory, and secondary). The total population of Egypt according to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (who perform the census) in 2006 was 72,798,000 people. The age group distribution according to the census the same year was 10.5% 5-9, 10.6% 10-14, and 11.8% 15-19. If you only account for ages 5-14, that population is 15,360,378 which gives a gross enrollment of 100%. However, the total number of students provided in the statistic included those in secondary school. And if you take 6 years to do primary school, 3 years to do preparatory school, and 3 years for secondary education and start at the usual age of 6, you are now 18-19. So, if you include 15-19 year olds, who are typically still in school in Egypt according to the Ministry of Education, a self-calculated gross enrollment rate drops to an incredible 64%. This is, of course, a rough estimate, but there is only one way to calculate a gross enrollment rate, and a 36% discrepancy should at least give cause to doubt the veracity of the reported 100%.

**Figure (1): The Egyptian Education System, 2007**

Source: MOE, PSPU

*Ministry of Education chart explaining routes through the Egyptian education system*

The same report hints that they know their data simply doesn't add up. While the Ministry of Education maintained the fact that universal gross education enrollment was at 100%, it admitted net enrollment was at 78.8% in 2001/2002 and 77% in 2003/2004. The author of the report writes, "How can the disparity between the gross enrollment rate of 95.2 percent and the net enrollment rate of 77 percent be accounted

for in the year 2003/04? A study would be needed to answer this question.”<sup>134</sup> Suffice to say, I could not find a study answering questions about discrepancies in state numbers completed in any publication by the Ministry of Education.

Additionally, towards the end of Mubarak’s rule, some schools simply did not operate. In 2008, Linda Herrera, an education researcher, went to a school during the day to observe classes. The building was completely empty. (It was not a holiday.)<sup>135</sup> Despite countless reform programs implemented, even in 2008, this was still an entirely common phenomenon: that a government school would be completely empty during the school day when school was supposed to be in session. Egyptian citizens had been catching on to Mubarak’s schemes for years, but the level of discontent bubbling up, culminating in a people’s revolution, would still be a surprise. In 2010, Amira Nowaira wrote an op-ed in the Guardian on what she called “Nasser Nostalgia” — a longing for a return to Egyptian history where leaders kept their promises and truly invested in the futures of young Egyptians. She writes,

Subsequent governments continued to pay lip service to the principle of free education, they left it like an ailing invalid without a proper supply of oxygen, perhaps hoping it might eventually collapse and die a natural death. It is hardly surprising then that free education has now almost come to mean non-education, the unenviable privilege of the poorer classes.<sup>136</sup>

In terms of spending, this was undoubtedly true. While the government repeated claims that they had poured billions of dollars into the education system on reforms, government spending actually decreased since 2000, and private spending only continued to rise. As state reported enrollment rates steadily climbed in public

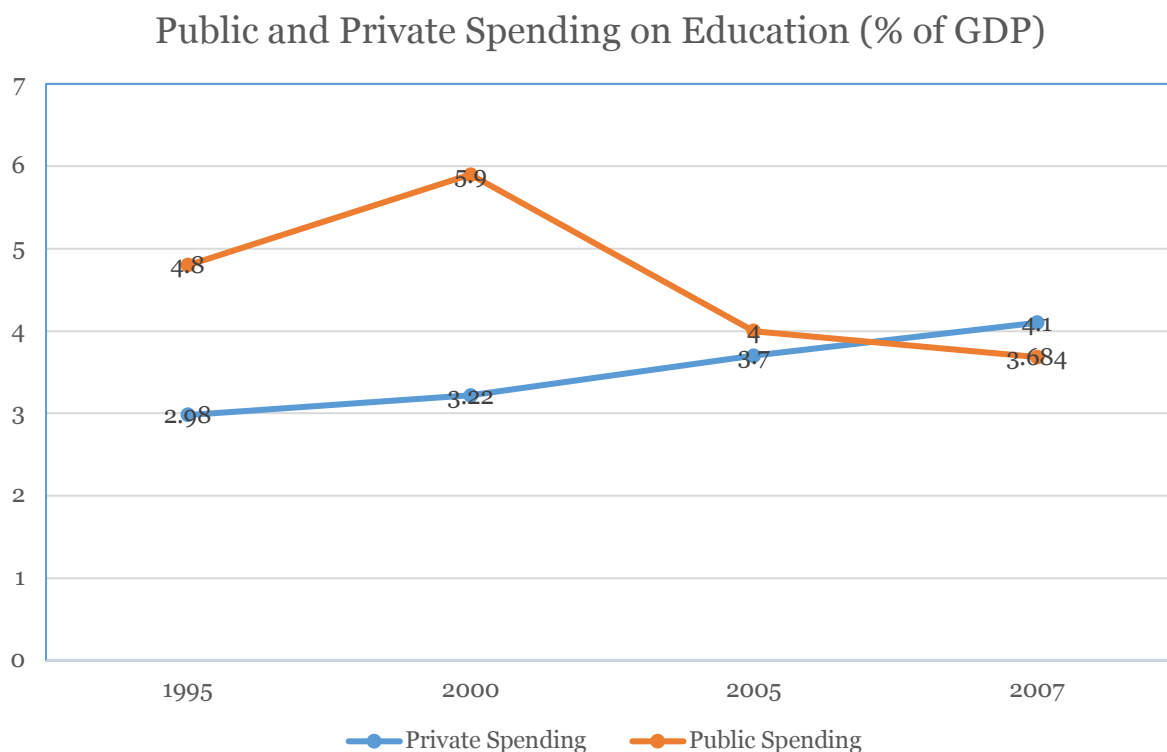
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<sup>134</sup> Ministry of Education, *A Development of Education in Egypt 2004-2008, A National Report* (Cairo: 2008), 14.

<sup>135</sup> Sobhy, *The De-facto...*, 50.

<sup>136</sup> Amira Nowaira, *Nasser Nostalgia* (Web: The Guardian, 2010).

education, private spending on education also steadily climbed, increasing from 2.98% of Egypt's GDP in 1995 to 3.70% in 2005.<sup>137</sup>



Data taken from Sobhy, 50, Online World Bank Data Indicator, & Egypt Country Assistance... (2000).

As the above graph shows, state data showed private spending on education surpassed public spending in 2006-2008, but UNESCO in 2003 estimated private household spending had far surpassed public likely several years before. Recent estimates are private spending is 12-15 billion EGP every year, compared to a 10 billion EGP Ministry of Education budget.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Data taken from Sobhy, 50, Online World Bank Data Indicator, & Egypt Country Assistance... (2000).

<sup>138</sup> Sobhy, 50.

As 2011 neared, when Mubarak would be ousted by his angry constituents for the lies he told and the promises he never kept, the education system was stagnant in its unreformed and unproductive state. In a survey conducted in 2011, in spite of decades of supposed efforts to the contrary, 6.9% of young people (ages 10-29) still had never attended school, and for those that did attend at some point, 47.1% of young men and 43.4% of young women had dropped out and not finished.<sup>139</sup> This was merely a glimpse at the ways Egyptian public education failed its students.

A natural question arises from the dissonance between state reported successes and lived realities — if the system was clearly failing, why did Mubarak repeatedly claim the opposite? Why did he hallmark education as a top priority and one of his greatest accomplishments?

In this section, by documenting the ways these reforms failed students, I showed how “free” schooling became expensive while privatization ran rampant, impressive education state data was inflated while realities for students became worse, and corruption amongst primary actors in education on all levels from teachers to the Ministry of Education bureaucrats became commonplace. In the next section, I turn to answering why these phenomena occurred. By inquiring how Mubarak ruled, I analyze how he used the faulty education system as a tool for political gain and exploited students of Egypt for both his own agenda and his legacy.

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<sup>139</sup> Population Council West Asia and North Africa Office, *Survey of Young People in Egypt* (The Population Council, January 2011), 50-55.

### ***iii. Education as a Tool: The Struggle for Longevity in Mubarak's Autocracy***

When President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1981, Vice President at the time Hosni Mubarak was also injured in the attack. Sadat's close partnership with the United States, the Camp David peace accords and rising unemployment would all contribute to his death, but this event's predecessor was that across the country he already had begun losing legitimacy. People of Egypt began to feel incredibly negative and distrustful towards their government, losing hope that they could improve living conditions or ease the divisions that were rapidly appearing in their society.<sup>140</sup> When Mubarak took office, he employed many of the same tactics as Sadat but even more so. He strengthened partnerships with Western allies and depended even more on the foreign aid that came with them. He took Sadat's free market aspirations and extended them a step further, transitioning entirely into a decentralized and privatized system. Islamic extremist groups accordingly deemed Mubarak's regime as mutually "illegitimate and ungodly", subsequently engaging in killing tourists and an attempted murder of Mubarak himself.<sup>141</sup>

The attacks themselves never gained mass support for the Islamists but the insurgence of violence did pose a threat to Mubarak's unstable new government. It also undoubtedly gave the perfect excuse to consolidate absolute power under himself. He swiftly and publicly committed himself to all things security and stability, justifying human rights abuses and a lack of political reform as a means to an end to protect the state from terrorism.<sup>142</sup> Over the course of his presidency, Mubarak would double down

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<sup>140</sup> Browne, 69.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 82.



on these measures. He enacted the Emergency Law in Egypt in October 1981, a temporary measure for one year, which granted seemingly unlimited power to himself in the name of combating terrorism and violence. Ironically, however, Emergency Law seemed to only sanction at will state violence and imprisonment. This law, which was designed for the interim after the assassination of Sadat, was extended time and time again for over 30 years, persisting until it expired in 2012 after the end of Mubarak's rule.<sup>143</sup>

Alongside Mubarak's rise in unchecked power came election fraud and the institutionalization of corruption. This translated to education, but also all other ministries across his government. Despite the continued guise of democratization, cabinet positions were seemingly handed out based solely on loyalty to Mubarak and not any actual skills. Analysts of the regime point out that the first prime minister of the Mubarak era was the last to have any knowledge of political history, "or to have even possessed a real interest in politics."<sup>144</sup> This was no secret. It was widely talked about that the Minister of Manpower and Migration Aisha Abdelhady had failed to finish even basic education, including not graduating from preparatory school.<sup>145</sup> This blatant despotism and unqualified appointments had many consequences for the people of Egypt, however, who depended on faultily run social and public services. For instance, towards the end of Mubarak's rule, he appointed Ahmed Zaki Badr to lead the Ministry of Education. While he had no background in primary or secondary education administration, he was formerly the President of Ain Shams University, where he was

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<sup>143</sup> Fidh Worldwide Movement For Human Rights, *The Emergency Law In Egypt* (Web).

<sup>144</sup> Amin, 41.

<sup>145</sup> Alaa al-Aswany, *On the State of Egypt* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 11.

infamous for limiting free speech and, a first for Egyptian universities, hired groups of “thugs armed with knives and petrol bombs” to attack his own protesting students.<sup>146</sup> Accordingly, while he was Minister, he frequently advocated for the right of teachers in government schools to beat schoolchildren.<sup>147</sup>

Mubarak’s policies consistently failed his constituents, notably poor Egyptians. Throughout his tenure, the rich became much richer and both the poorest 10% became much poorer and almost half of the population fell below the poverty line. Workers in Egypt used to have combined annual salaries of about half of the nation’s GDP, but by 2007 it fell to less than one-fifth. It was the “starkest inequality witnessed since colonial times” where the top one-percent controlled virtually all wealth in the country.<sup>148</sup>

All of this is to say that Egyptians were not happy with their government, and because of all these problems, Mubarak consistently struggled to maintain his legitimacy as an effective leader. With corruption and poverty rampant, quite simply, he looked bad. He responded by lying. As the first section of this chapter lays out, Mubarak fabricated so many successes that it became hard to keep track of what was real. In this now truly authoritarian system, the search for truth in the regime became a struggle, and it was especially difficult to distinguish state rhetoric from the people’s realities. Drawing out these differences is precisely what this thesis does. By not acknowledging consistent failures of his government, Mubarak made it on paper as if they just did not exist. Instead, he only boasted false accomplishments and progress. In this way, we begin to see how Mubarak used the education system for his own political gain. While he enacted famous education reforms and discussed all of their successes, his lies sought to

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<sup>146</sup> Aswany, 25.; The Telegraph, *New Education And Transport Ministers, Five New Governors* (Web).

<sup>147</sup> Hazem Zohny, *Beating children in the name of discipline?* (Web).

<sup>148</sup> Shenker, 69.

bolster the validity of his government domestically and internationally. All the while, however, the quality in life for Egyptians only got worse. Alaa al-Aswany, a famous Egyptian novelist, writes in a newspaper column after the National Democratic Party (Mubarak's political party) conference, "Like all Egyptians I watched the latest conference of the National Democratic Party and was surprised at the extraordinary ability of the senior officials to fabricate and lie. They speak about achievements that exist only in their reports and their imaginations while millions of Egyptians live in complete misery."<sup>149</sup> Mubarak did not have to lie alone, armed with his entire government to reproduce fabrications at his will.

This struggle for truth amongst lies becomes essential in the analysis of the education system's devolution over the course of Mubarak's tenure. Education was frequently named as the top priority of the state, but in spending, it was never actually prioritized. The state spent more on policing than on health and education *combined*.<sup>150</sup> (For comparison, the UK spends around 5 billion pounds on policing and 56 billion on education. The US spends around 42 billion on protection/policing and 110 billion dollars on education.<sup>151</sup>) Rather than actually invest in education or other public goods, Mubarak continued to leave the poor to suffer and instead invest in security to repress any complaints or opposition. It is worth noting that thirty million Egyptians were children in the 1990s. These youths were repeatedly oppressed, assured by the state that their dreams were pointless.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Aswany, 3.

<sup>150</sup> Shenker, 8.

<sup>151</sup> US Government Current Spending History, *What Is the Total US Government Spending?* (Web).

<sup>152</sup> Shenker, 110.

The education system was used as an effective tool in this suppression tactic. Rather than ever teach critical thinking skills, classrooms depended on rote memorization and focused on repeating information on a test and then forgetting it.<sup>153</sup> The classroom became an ideological battleground, only there was never any critical debate — what was presented was one-sided government rhetoric, assuring them of Egypt's greatness and, notably, Hosni Mubarak's successes. Imagine being in five classrooms a day of 60 people each in a school building not renovated since Gamal Abdel Nasser was President being told how great your life was. Curriculum and textbooks reinforced the state's agenda and all politically subversive material was removed.<sup>154</sup> Patriotic activities were encouraged and civic education was tied directly to nationalism and social control.<sup>155</sup> Teachers were threatened to comply or face termination, with Minister of Education Baha Eddin stating he was prepared to fire ten thousand teachers if necessary, or dismiss them to "other government positions sometimes hundreds of kilometers away where they would not have contact with children."<sup>156</sup>

Students, too, directly face consequences for nonconformity including failing their end of year exams for expressing opinions. An extreme case was when one government school child wrote for a free response on their final an impassioned argument on Egypt's faulty alliance with the American government. The child was imprisoned.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, Mubarak was able to use faulty education to his advantage

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<sup>153</sup> Shenker, 111.

<sup>154</sup> Browne, 22.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Herrera, L & Torres, C. 32.

<sup>157</sup> Browne, 148.

in another convenient way: many students in government schools were going to become government employees, with public sector workers making up one-third of the entire labor market.<sup>158</sup> Thus, it went hand in hand to use the public school as a mechanism to further government rhetoric — students were being trained in falsehoods and would eventually work in and further these falsehoods themselves.

As 2011 approached, world bodies began to finally (or publicly) catch on to Mubarak's lack of any real progress in education. The author of a 2010 UNICEF report writes, "Indeed, access to education of poor quality is tantamount to no education at all."<sup>159</sup> Students who attended government schools under Mubarak and actually went (accounting for chronic absenteeism) could have not gone at all. Either way, students failed to learn skills crucial life skills to survive in Egypt.<sup>160</sup> Mubarak boasted of incredible education overhaul in his country and continually lied. He hallmarked education as a top priority and one of his greatest accomplishments, but these accomplishments existed in his word alone. He used faulty education and a lack of critical thought amongst his citizens as a means to save his autocracy another day of survival, all while Egyptians suffered at his hands.

In a conversation with Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's son who was groomed to be his successor, Alaa al-Aswany says to him, "Things in Egypt are very bad. We've hit rock bottom."<sup>161</sup> While Gamal Mubarak responds with niceties and more lies, Aswany was right. For decades under Hosni Mubarak, the poor had been assaulted with neoliberal policies that extended far beyond just education. Mubarak not only let public

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> UNICEF, *Quality of Education (Web)*, 2010 as seen in Browne, 172.

<sup>160</sup> Browne, 172.

<sup>161</sup> Aswany, 52.

goods such as education suffer from a lack of funding, he also actively sold public assets to the private sector for ridiculously low prices. Experts estimated the amount sold to private third parties was worth 104 billion dollars. Mubarak took 9.4 billion dollars for it, less than 10% of what was owed.<sup>162</sup> It is hard to overstate the deeply sinister nature of Mubarak's abuses of the Egyptian people for his own personal gain, allowing public entities like education to collapse entirely in one breath, while taking credit for its great successes to validate his own leadership in another.

#### *iv. Conclusions*

In this chapter, I extended my historical analysis and examined how reported great successes in education reform were categorically false and did not represent any semblance of actual day to day realities of the system. I then moved into examining why and how Mubarak exploited students and the education system for his own legitimacy and his regime's survival. I demonstrated while Mubarak presented fantasies domestically and to the world, the realities for students and young Egyptians were much more bleak. In the next chapter, I contextualize the regime's failures with actual lived experiences in the education system in Egypt. By interviewing teachers, students, and parents who engage in the system, I illustrate the specifics of Mubarak's insidious education system and appraise the core problems that should be addressed today now that he has left office.

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<sup>162</sup> Shenker, 67.

### 3 | Education in Name Alone: Egyptian Schooling through an Ethnographic Lens

*“When I was doing my thesis, I did research in a public primary school in a most underprivileged area. I spent a year there. I could see the problems... How can you learn or think or know if there are no books?”*

— Suzanne Mubarak, Wife of Hosni Mubarak<sup>163</sup>

#### ***i. Introduction***

This chapter follows fieldwork conducted with primary actors in education in Cairo in January 2018. Through interviews with students educated under Mubarak, parents, and teachers, I paint a more complete picture of the lasting effects of Mubarak-era policy in education. I further demonstrate the disconnect between lived experiences in Egyptian schools and the government’s narrative.

#### ***ii. Hanan***

Here in Egypt we have the governmental schools that are totally free. These are the ones in which classroom capacity might be up to 60 or 70 students. There are 2 other [private] systems — the national and the international. The national costs money also, but it’s affordable for the moderate people [middle class]. The international one costs much more. So the national, maybe the classes reach 35, and the international even less, maybe 15, maybe 16 students....

[The biggest difference] is the capacity of the class, the number of students is much higher in public schools. They just open the book and study the information as it is written. There’s no application, there’re no hands-on activities. Because can you imagine 60-70 students in a class, how many questions and how many..., how can the teacher focus? I think [the students] suffer. They suffer more.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Charlotte Curtis, *Books and Suzanne Mubarak* (Web: The New York Times, 1985).

<sup>164</sup> Habiba, Hanan. Personal Interview.

Money defines education in Egypt. This is an idea repeated to me in various forms in every interview I conduct. If you want a high school degree from a “free” government (public) school, you pay a fee for private lessons. If you want a high school degree that “means something”, you pay more for a national private school. If you want an *education*, you pay even more for an international school. As I visit schools in New Cairo, an affluent neighborhood outside of Cairo, parents show off the facilities of their private schools — it has become a symbol of grandeur. The ability to pay for an education for their children is as much a symbol of being upper class as a brand-new luxury car, and the costs are similar. The American International School in Egypt, regarded as one of the top ten schools in Cairo, was estimated in 2016 to cost a staggering 168,900 dollars from kindergarten through twelfth grade.<sup>165</sup> The average annual salary in Egypt is usually estimated at 5000 dollars.<sup>166</sup>

Hanan is an elementary school teacher at one of the impressive academies, Andalus International School. We discuss in her home the tenets of the education system as it exists today and how it has changed over time. She loves her job, but she is also acutely aware of the difficulties of affording school in Cairo: she and her husband Ahmed have two children, Taleen age 6 and Jowayreya age 4. As of this year, both attend international schools.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, education was originally described to the public as a social equalizer, a chance at a better future. That system, designed by Nasser, undermined by Sadat, and destroyed by Mubarak, is unrecognizable in its current state. As our conversation continues, Hanan describes to me the vast differences

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<sup>165</sup> Hassan Abdeltawab, *19 Most Expensive Schools In Egypt: 2016-2017 Edition*. (Web: Cairo Scene)

<sup>166</sup> PayScale, *Average Salary in Cairo, Egypt*. (Web: Payscale, 2018)



between the types of schools. From the structural soundness of the buildings to the attendance rates, they are polar opposites. For instance, on average, she says no students in her classroom miss more than one day of school each week. She even seems surprised I would ask her about attendance: absenteeism is a phenomenon found in only government schools.

Hanan has personally seen the devolution of the system. She was educated in the 90s, during the “National Decade of the Child”<sup>167</sup>. When I ask her about this, she laughs. I describe in further detail the progress the government said it made during this period: thousands of schools were built, more teachers were hired across the country, countless reforms were enacted and new laws to protect the right to education were passed. She looks unconvinced. When I ask if she thinks education has gotten better since the 80s and 90s under Mubarak, she points to the increase in private tutoring as a sign it has gotten worse. Students won’t receive an education, unless they seek means elsewhere. She says:

No, it’s worse. It’s increasing the phenomenon itself. In the 90s, we used to take private tutoring in one or two subjects at the high school. Nowadays, they already take private tutoring at the elementary stage. In high school, they take private tutoring in all the subjects, not just one or two. It’s increasing and becoming worse...

Actually, I think the government tries its best to say this to the people. But in fact, this phenomenon is becoming worse. Not only in Cairo but also in other governorates. They are not doing anything. Nothing is improving. This is because also our population is increasing, and they are not building schools and quality is not improving. There is a lack of resources.<sup>168</sup>

She is right about the population working against Egypt. When Mubarak took office, the population was estimated at 44 million. Today, that number is approaching 100 million.<sup>169</sup> When Nasser established the public school system, he guaranteed the right to

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<sup>167</sup> Chitra (UNESCO), 23.

<sup>168</sup> Habiba, Hanan. Personal Interview.

<sup>169</sup> World Bank Indicator Data. Population, total. (Web)

education to each child. As Egypt's population rapidly grew, many scholars were quick to point to this growth as the cause of Egypt's educational failures: the infrastructure simply could not keep up with enrollment.<sup>170</sup> Mubarak himself frequently blamed the high birth rate for many of the country's issues. In 1989, he remarked on having to import half of the country's food, "if people did not have 8, 9 or 12 children, there would not be a food problem."<sup>171</sup>

The rise in Egypt's birth rate is likely a factor in the education system's struggles, but this explanation does not account for the curious circumstances surrounding the course of action during the Mubarak era. For one, enrollment percentages *continued* to grow according to the state, and never plateaued (even surpassing 100% to 102% in gross enrollment rates). This seems to support the theory that infrastructure could not handle increasing enrollment, but this only holds true if students actually attended school. As Hanan points out, by secondary school, students simply would not attend school after the first day or two of classes to enroll for the year. This was confirmed to me in interviews with former students of government schools, who told me, on average, they attended one or two days each week, if at all. They would rely solely on private tutoring, often with the teacher, after school. Are we to assume the physical infrastructure could not keep up with the *effective* enrollment of zero students?

Additionally, throughout the course of this research, not one person mentioned a problem of accessibility to private tutoring, or of enrolling in government schools. If there are enough government school teachers to educate privately, it follows that they

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<sup>170</sup> Kimberly Faust..., *Mass Education, Islamic Revival, and the Population Problem in Egypt* (Journal of Comparative Family Studies 22: 1991), 329.

<sup>171</sup> Alan Cowell, *Egyptian Population Growth Strains Resources and Society* (Web: The New York Times, 1989.)

could do the same during the school day in the government schools. In this, however, we get to the crux of the issue — teachers in government schools have such low salaries that they cannot afford to only teach during the day. To live they must seek employment elsewhere: usually depending on their government school students to supplement their salaries.

This cycle of dependence is rooted in government failures. The state claimed to increase spending on education over the course of the Mubarak era, and repeatedly said they raised teachers' salaries. In fact, in every single report I could find on development in education from the Ministry of Education cited raising teachers' salaries as either a goal or as an already effected change. This was demonstrably false. Some government school teachers I spoke to told me the opposite — salaries had actually decreased — today government school teachers make around 2000 EGP each month (~110 dollars),<sup>172</sup> 74% below the average salary in Egypt.<sup>173</sup> These facts and figures lead me to the second reason scholars should not blame population increases alone for the changes to education: Mubarak took, and supposedly spent, billions of dollars of international aid and domestic spending to increase teachers' salaries and build new school buildings, supporting the very infrastructure that today is crumbling. Where did that money go? One government school teacher told me that in the 30 years she has been teaching, she has never received a raise. Thus, while it is a convenient theory to blame population growth, the truth seems to be much more insidious. Time and time again, Mubarak championed education reform, but upon closer examination it seems the education

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<sup>172</sup> Sayed, Manal Mahmoud. Personal Interview.

<sup>173</sup> PayScale, *Average Salary in Cairo, Egypt*. (Web)

system he was hailed for existed in name alone. One parent, Ali, interrupted me when I began to explain my research to him. “There is no education here,” he said.<sup>174</sup>

As noted in Chapter 1, spending on education by citizens surpassed spending by the government in 2003. Estimates put it at 12-15 billion spent privately, and 10 billion spent by the government.<sup>175</sup> I relay these statistics to Hanan to ask her if she’s surprised that private spending has surpassed public. She looks confused. I explain that government expenditures indicate they spend 10 billion each year, and she suddenly cuts in. For the first time, she looks shocked. “Where?! Each year? Where is this money? You need to go to a public school to see the buildings. To see a school.”<sup>176</sup> She is surprised not because private spending outpaces public, but rather that the government spends those funds at all. To her, and to many Egyptians, the schooling in Egypt had become both privatized and a punch line. This was a matter of fact.

Egyptians realize education deteriorated under Mubarak, and education would later be incorporated into the list of grievances at the time of his ousting.<sup>177</sup> When looking at how Mubarak shaped the system, a common sentiment among actors in education is that he, at one time, was genuine in his caring for education. At the beginning, he did want to improve infrastructure and build new schools. But he was president for 30 years, and when you stay in power that long, you lose your convictions. At some point, corruption takes over. Hanan says that it was not until the early 2000s that private lessons became the norm and the right to quality education had lapsed. This theme, however, does not account for how the system got to that state in the early

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<sup>174</sup> Ali, Ali. Personal Interview.

<sup>175</sup> Sobhy, 50.

<sup>176</sup> Habiba, Hanan. Personal Interview.

<sup>177</sup> See Part 1 of *The Egyptians*, Jack Shenker.

2000s. Mubarak's demeanor had indeed changed over the course of his presidency, but it happened long before the new millennium. At the beginning of his presidency, Mubarak had openly discussed limited presidential terms and democratizing the country, incorporating advisors and experts from across the political spectrum.<sup>178</sup> A decade later, however, Mubarak had surrounded himself exclusively with military allies and rejected any idea of democratic elections. By the end of his rule, corruption was at an unprecedented level and 40 million people, almost half of Egypt, were living below the poverty line.<sup>179</sup> A 1993 New York Times article details Mubarak holding the referendum for his third presidential term, which he hoped would bolster his legitimacy. It details how his approach to the presidency had fundamentally changed:

The increasingly imperial tone of Mr. Mubarak, a 66-year-old former air force officer, has stunned many who knew him as a self-effacing and unpretentious general and vice president...

"The President has fallen into a form of political narcissism," said Tahseen Basheer, a diplomat who was President Sadat's spokesman. "He looks around him and he sees people who support him 110 percent. He no longer acknowledges the problems in Egypt, and if he does acknowledge them, he blames them on conspiracies launched by his enemies."<sup>180</sup>

Ironically, the same article also reports on Mubarak's growing opposition, where one of those interviewed is 16 years old. During the interview, he tells the reporter he abandoned his original goal of getting an education "because he could not afford to pay for private tutoring that students need for exams."<sup>181</sup> This was not an exceptional case. Research indicates that out of students who never drop out of school, 71.69% of them would have received tutoring or another form of private assistance.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Chris Hedges, *As Egypt Votes on Mubarak, He Faces Rising Peril* (Web: The New York Times, 1993)

<sup>179</sup> Aswany, Vii.

<sup>180</sup> Hedges, *As Egypt Votes on Mubarak...*

<sup>181</sup> Ibid

<sup>182</sup> Faust, 335.

The 90s were the “National Decade of the Child”, but by the 2000s, Egyptian children who could not afford schooling were worse off than ever, with little prospect for social elevation. Moreover, for those that could afford partial schooling through supplementary private lessons or a national school (a private school geared toward the middle class), their families are expected to spend a third of their income on education for their children.<sup>183</sup> Even Hanan and Ahmad, who pay to send their children to an international school, at times struggle with the enormous costs. They have little choice, however. Teachers in the system know all too well that you either pay incredible amounts for quality education, or you may not receive an education at all.

### *iii. Manal*

It becomes apparent throughout the course of my research that government school teachers and others who teach these private lessons undoubtedly exacerbate the problem of absenteeism and a lack of education in schools. But these teachers are not evil actors purposefully depriving children of education. Rather, they say they are left with no other choice but to teach private lessons in order to make enough money to survive. When confronted with the fact that this privatized model leaves behind students who cannot afford “free schooling”, teachers acknowledged this as a consequence of reality, that not everyone gets to be educated. The Nasser-era “education for all” sentiment seemed to have lost its hold: a consequence of years of government abuse and a lack of actual investment in education.

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<sup>183</sup> EHES, See Chapter 7: “Household Expenditures On Schooling”, 61-69.

Manal has seen and felt the lack of investment over time. An elementary public school teacher in Cairo, she has been at her current school 'Amr Ibn al-Khutub in a neighborhood right outside of downtown Cairo for the past 7 years. As of this year, she's been teaching in the system for 30 years. This semester she teaches Arabic and Religion classes to 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. She has 6 classes a day, 45 minutes or 90 minutes long. Each class has 60 students in it. And she offers private lessons.

Throughout our conversation, she expresses a few times that she actually does teach in her classroom during the day. She even employs new pedagogical methods to keep the attention of her many students. One technique that has become popular in Egypt is teaching almost exclusively in song, helping younger students memorize complex grammar structures. She tells me she maintains a good relationship with her students this way, and that so many of her students ask for private lessons that some are turned away and must take them with another teacher.

Private lessons (*majmu'at* or الدروس الخصوصية) are a form of supplementary education that in the past bore resemblance to tutoring: students who needed help in a subject or extra aid before an important test would seek a tutor or teacher through some private means. Over the course of the Mubarak era, students who attended government schools suffered through schooling that continued to worsen in quality. This, combined with teachers' shockingly low salaries, was a perfect recipe for private lessons to replace public education altogether. Students could avoid school entirely and could still pass (with high marks) as long as they took private lessons with the teacher, usually in *every* subject. Students would still advance to the next grade with the test scores they needed without stepping foot in the school, sometimes for the entire year. And teachers would

be able to use the money from these private tutoring sessions to supplement their own income, not worrying if they can afford to live on their government paycheck. Because of this phenomenon, public school classrooms across Egypt can be found completely deserted.

Manal holds her private tutoring sessions in her house, usually hosting a group of ten students at a time for an hour and a half or two hours. In them, the curriculum is typically the same taught during the day — this week they've been working on case endings in Arabic. When I ask her why kids would come to group private lessons to just repeat the same curriculum as during the day, she shrugs at the question. "The parents want more attention for their kids, that's why they ask for private lessons. I can't always repeat myself in class because the time is limited, but in private lessons I can give specialized attention. It is the parents that ask me for them." As a teacher offering a service, she thinks this is normal. Over the course of 30 years, private lessons became standard practice as the means to receive education if you could not afford a non-government school. Even most of Manal's *first-graders* engage in private tutoring. "It starts at kindergarten now. Everyone takes them."

She maintains that she never approaches students to take private lessons. She always waits for parents to ask for them. Students in other classes are not as lucky. Many teachers *require* those in their class to take private lessons (for a fee) with them. If students refuse, they often are subjected to physical and emotional abuse.

A wide range of tactics were cited by parents and pupils for enrolment in majmu'at and private tuition classes. Students were subject to threats to force them to enroll in the additional course. They were also subjected to corporal punishment if they did not enroll in private lessons. Physical violence has always been part of the educational system in Egypt, and the increased privatisation of education has heightened pressure on pupils to attend private lessons. Pupils also cited threats from the teachers to fail them in examinations or throw them out of school. These threats are not pro forma: they are carried out. One informant, Amal Abdel Sayid, a widow who



has six children and works as a cleaner in the local council, was particularly distressed that her daughter was forced to sit outside school after her mathematics teacher threw her out of class and told her not to return until she had paid the LE40 [~6 dollars] for the majmu'at. She feared for her 11-year-old daughter's safety when she was obliged to sit outside the school.<sup>184</sup>

Another way teachers force students into private lessons is by simply barring them from leaving school until after they have attended them, “so that the issue is presented to their parents as a fait accompli.”<sup>185</sup> As it was described to me, even “worse”<sup>186</sup> than physical or emotional abuse was that teachers also have the ability to fail schoolchildren on their year-end final exams (‘amal al-sana). These exams determine their marks for the entire year, whether they can advance to the next grade, and future schooling or work plans.<sup>187</sup> For instance, teachers could mark students absent enough such that they were automatically disqualified for sitting for the end of year exams<sup>188</sup> — a notion entirely ridiculous since most students were *never there* in the first place. As one student described it to Hartmann, “in normal schools, students don’t go to school at all.”<sup>189</sup>

Private tutoring has been illegal since 1998, when the government realized teachers were educating students only outside of school, and only for a fee. Over time assorted Ministers of Education have admitted the phenomenon exists, but nonetheless the law is rarely enforced, with teachers and principals laughing at the suggestion that what they are doing is illegal. It seems the law, too, exists in name alone. Some entire schools get in on the deal. At Manal’s school, this year the school has started

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<sup>184</sup> Tadros, 243.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>186</sup> Samir and Naguib

<sup>187</sup> Hartmann, 62.

<sup>188</sup> Tadros, 244.

<sup>189</sup> Hartmann, 69.

coordinating the private lessons with teachers after school, held in the classrooms. For organizing the lessons, the school takes a modest cut. She tells me she doesn't mind however, as it is easier for her to hold private lessons at the school. Primarily, a classroom can hold more students than her living room and so she can take 20 pupils instead of 10. "It's more money for me," she explains.<sup>190</sup>

For kids that do not attend private lessons in the home with their teacher, by choice or otherwise, they visit centers dedicated solely for this supplemental education. Like the phenomenon in general, tutoring centers existed previously, but gained notoriety in the 90s, and now have popped up all over Cairo. The educational centers are very similar to a school, they contain desks and a whiteboard, and a teacher will take an hour or two after school and either explain a concept to them, or simply give them test answers — usually for a costly fee. The centers have nicer facilities than government school buildings, with more space and better ventilation.<sup>191</sup> The rise in popularity of private tutoring has made it an accepted socio-cultural phenomenon — parents regularly discuss which is the best or highest rated center, and which has the most famous instructors. They also gossip about which centers or instructors are "famous" — meaning they have connections to the Ministry of Education, which means they can (suspiciously) accurately predict end-of-year exam questions.<sup>192</sup> These famous instructors will have their center spots fill up quickly, and reservations have to be made months in advance. The rise of these centers further demonstrates how private tutoring and other government school failures were not solely caused by inability to meet

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<sup>190</sup> Sayed, Manal Mahmoud. Personal Interview.

<sup>191</sup> Habiba, Hanan. Personal Interview.

<sup>192</sup> Hartmann, 67-68.

population growth and demand. Famous instructors like Omar Hamed just continue to expand. His sessions are held in huge ballrooms with no desks, and he will sing lessons or share test insights to hundreds and hundreds at once.<sup>193</sup>

Teachers feel mixed about the private lessons and they expressed guilt and dismay to me at the system they have been forced into. Perihan, an instructor at Al-Andalus International School lamented, “The more you “teach”, the less they learn!” On one hand, these sessions literally help them survive and without the supplemental income, they could not afford rent and groceries. But on the other, they realize they are failing their students and children all across Egypt. Those who cannot afford the private lessons are forced out of school altogether and have little hope at education or social elevation. Even for those who can afford the private lessons, instructors of the tutoring say they still are not acquiring knowledge or skills. Perihan told me she stopped giving private lessons for this reason. “I hate private lessons. Because I don’t think it’s learning. It’s fake. (Y3ani) Like, it should only be for kids who need special help, but not a trend... it’s not the essence of teaching. It’s not like having a classroom with many students. It’s sitting next to a child spoon feeding them [the information].” The information (or the exact test answers) memorized by the student often will be forgotten the day after the exam. Some educators expressed remorse at going into teaching, saying in the past, they had dreams of teaching, ready to employ a critical pedagogy focusing on children’s betterment. “[It’s] my imaginary role,” Perihan says, implying actual teaching exists only in a fantasy. “My expectations and my reality are different.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Stringers Video News Agency LLC. مدرس مصري يعتمد على الموسيقى والغناء في التدريس. (Web :YouTube).

<sup>194</sup> Perihan Magdi. Personal Interview.

Until the Egyptian government finally fulfills promises of raising teacher's salaries, the phenomenon of imagined public education will only continue to get worse. I ask Manal what she thinks the biggest problem with the system is today, and she names salaries as not only the biggest problem, but she thinks the sole problem. If the teacher had a higher salary, she says there would be no need for private lessons. When I ask if she had ever noticed public spending had increased or if she had ever received a raise over the 30 years she was in the classroom, she laughs.

I want you to guess my salary.

Guess what my salary is after 30 years?

2000 EGP (113 dollars). I used to get 2500 EGP (142 dollars), but the government actually cancelled one of the [income] programs and decreased it to 2000 EGP [per month]. Can you imagine?

After 30 years, can you imagine?<sup>195</sup>

Manal has never received a raise in all of the time she has been teaching. Additionally, she questioned the government's investments in education at all. She tells me a story, verified by neighbors, that just happened last year in their district. The MOE announced that they were hiring new teachers and spending three million dollars on building a new school. But only one million ever appeared to actually buy materials and pay laborers. The neighborhood suspected the engineering firm and MOE officials pocketed the other 2 million for themselves, saying group corruption was commonplace. The facilities at the new school weren't in great condition, but the community was just happy to have another school. Exactly one year after the school was built, it began to literally crumble to the ground. Students and teachers were evacuated and the building was deemed unstable and unfit for occupancy. All students and teachers were transferred back to

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<sup>195</sup> Sayed, Manal Mahmoud. Personal Interview.

Manal's school, Ibn el Khuttub. I asked, astounded, did anyone say to the Ministry, "what happened?!" She replies, "Actually yes. There was an investigation, but nothing happened... [when they] act like nothing happened, it is as if it didn't! It is as if nothing happened!"

More than anything, Manal wants me to know that she loves her work. She taught her own children until high school, and brags that she even used to teach a famous soccer player. But Manal, like public school teachers across Egypt, is stuck in an impossible situation. With years of neglect under Hosni Mubarak, the system is struggling to continue on, now with even less government support. Manal tells me she used to teach at a school called Hosni Mubarak school, but after the revolution they changed the name. "They cancelled the name of Hosni Mubarak." Egypt and its leadership however, as this thesis has argued, only makes changes in name. Teachers still must give private lessons to survive, and students still must take them in order to get some semblance of an education, or at the very least a diploma. Like the school in Manal's neighborhood, the system was left to crumble. Today, the children who cannot afford to pay for free public schools are left behind, stuck under the rubble.

#### *iv. Samir and Naguib*

The final perspective missing from this analysis is the student. What does it feel like to be one of 60 children in a classroom in a school building not renovated since Nasser was in office? Or missing school for weeks at a time and only showing up for exams? For students educated under the Mubarak regime, this was the norm. While education was repeatedly described as one of the government's most important issues (and later, achievements), in reality, for young lower-income kids schooling was not a

requirement. Despite the law making preparatory school compulsory, one went only if their legal guardian wanted them to. Former students of government schools I spoke to described their schooling as not an opportunity for education, but rather simply a means to get a diploma as a prerequisite for an already determined future. Social mobility, or learning, was not even on their radar. Furthermore, students who went to secondary school in the early 2000s were accustomed to the abuse and distortion they faced in their education. When I described my research to them or asked them questions about teachers hitting and humiliating them, mandatory and costly private lessons (at “free” public schools), or chronic absenteeism their responses invariably began with the Arabic word “’Adiyy”, meaning “It’s normal” or “It’s fine” or “That’s just the way it is.”

Samir and Naguib are twins who live in Giza. They are alumni of the government school a block away in their neighborhood. They are 29 years old, meaning they were educated at the height of the Mubarak era “Decade of the Child” in the late 90s and early 2000s. Like their dad, they are both drivers in the tourism industry — rather than take public transportation or taxis, many tourists in Egypt pay a driver to take them around the country, at incredibly affordable rates because of Egypt’s low cost of living. As part of their work in the tourism sector they routinely read and write in Arabic, indicating they needed a high school diploma to be employable. They told me it was a simple and obvious path: in order to become drivers, they had to get a diploma. In order to get a diploma, they had to pass their exams in government schools. In order to pass their exams, they paid their teachers for private lessons.

While it is generally accepted in Egypt that one skips secondary school during the day and depends entirely on tutoring, Samir and Naguib tell me they were absent for most of elementary (*ibtida’i*/primary) school too. They began when they were 6 years

old, when their father decided it was time. I ask them to tell me what they remember about their school and they start laughing. “We never went to school, so we don’t remember!”<sup>196</sup>

From the very beginning of Samir and Naguib’s time in school, they missed the majority of classes. They would attend maybe 2 or 3 days each week. After 10 or 15 absences for the year, the principal would ask children to bring in their father or other male guardian to the school to discuss truancy. These meetings were merely a formality and rarely changed actual attendance patterns. Samir and Naguib discussed a lack of any real consequences for their actions — if they missed more school after the meeting, no negative action was taken against them as long as the teacher was happy. Attendance rarely affects final marks in Egypt, maybe counting for a small percentage for the entire year, but the grades are left entirely up to the teacher. Samir and Naguib’s teachers, for instance, didn’t mind the absences granted they participated in their private tutoring.

They had 6 or 7 subjects per day with a different teacher for each class. Each was 45 minutes long, with 30 to 50 students. The teacher encouraged all students in the class to attend private lessons, because at the end of the year “she was the one who could make them pass.” I ask if private tutoring was always taught by the same teacher and Samir and Naguib reply: “Yes, the same teacher just after school. Of course, what’s the point of having a private lesson unless you know you will pass?”<sup>197</sup> It was quid pro quo at its finest, with each lesson costing around 50 EGP for one hour for one subject (~3 dollars now, \$12.50 dollars at the time in 2002). At 6 subjects a week, Samir and Naguib paid around \$150 total every week for an hour of private lessons with each teacher. The

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<sup>196</sup> Ashab, Samir and Naguib Ayad Naguib. Personal Interview.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

school year in Egypt runs 9 months out of the year, assuming time for exams at the end and no lessons the first two weeks, 8 months x \$150 = \$1200 for the year. That is 24% of the average annual salary of the Egyptian, just on tutoring sessions for their children attending free public schools.

While these numbers shock me, Samir and Naguib convey nothing but resignation or normalcy toward their educational backgrounds and the system they were brought up through. Everyone in their class took private lessons, unless they were unusually bright or they simply couldn't afford it. This was accepted. "Government schools are supposed to be free, but really they are not free... [private lessons] were normal... Otherwise we wouldn't have passed." When I asked them how they felt about the idea that free schooling wasn't really free or if they felt it was odd private lessons were mandatory, they seem confused. The idea that education is bought isn't just normal; it's expected. Conversely, the idea that paid afterschool time with the teacher should not be mandatory is abnormal. I probe further and ask how they felt about going to school in general: "did you feel like you were going to get an education...?" Ali, who is interpreting, listens to the question and turns to me before translating. "Alex, kids, I mean it's not like in America where they have feelings or whatever. The kind of education they must receive is what it is. It was planned all along that they were going to be drivers and be in tourism. They just wanted their high school diploma."

The majority of students in government schools are lower class, with working parents who will sooner or later depend on their children to contribute income to the household. In mine and other scholars' research, poorer parents and students were much less likely to speak up against injustices faced in the classroom — the stakes were much too high. In these cases, the neighborhood public school and the teachers there



were the only option, deciding the fates for children who could not afford to turn anywhere else for schooling. Deciding to protest these abuses by teachers and a lack of accountability by the government only leads to more suffering for the child, and the potential to fail at the end of the year unjustly. In one instance told to researcher Mariz Tadros, when teachers failed a boy on his end of the year exams, his mother put all the money she had together to bribe the teachers to change his grade. They did.

The moral of the story, as many participants put it, is that it is more economical to pay the teachers in 'instalments' than to pay a huge bulk sum at the end of the year when they fail and have to undergo a mulhaq (re-examination). In many cases parents saw private lessons and majmu'at as no more than an inevitable ransom to be paid to teachers.<sup>198</sup>

Samir and Naguib viewed it as inevitable as well. They were constantly afraid of their teachers, fearing intense physical punishment as young children. This only contributed to their avoidance of classroom time. The space of the government school seemed to be a lawless one — when a child occupied that space, they were powerless and lost fundamental rights. In this, we see how the classroom becomes a direct extension of the authoritarian government — those that publicly disagree with policies of the regime face violence, coercion, or imprisonment. Furthermore, following the chain of command up led not to accountability, but to further corruption. Teachers employ illegal tactics of mandatory tutoring or accept bribes to pass children that haven't attended school all year. Administrators at the school turn a blind eye, likely taking a cut of the profits. Government officials such as superintendents or district leaders from the Ministry of Education, who routinely did highly publicized inspections of public schools, would give the school notice of an inspection so they could prepare. For these inspections, called “taftish”, school administrators and teachers would clean the building and tell students

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<sup>198</sup> Tadros, 246.

that they had to be in school on inspection day. Samir and Naguib told me this happened every year, but that in all of their years of schooling, the inspectors from the government never entered any of their actual classes — they only showed up and sat in the principal's office, probably sharing a cigarette and then leaving.

Overwhelmingly, there is a sentiment of helplessness in Samir and Naguib's stories. Challenging the system by students or by parents is impossible. One parent describes it to me as just the cards they were dealt, saying he considers himself lucky his kids were "educated" at the beginning of Mubarak's tenure. His son *only* had to switch school four times because of "mismanagement and school closings"<sup>199</sup> which are now commonplace. Maybe unsurprisingly, Samir and Naguib agree. They feel lucky they have made it through the system. Many do not. They both previously had dreams of attending university, but could not afford it. As soon as they obtained their diploma, they joined the military, ironically serving the government that had failed them, to support their family financially.

As we finish our interview and I turn off the audio recorder on my phone, I ask them if they have any questions for me or anything else they want to say. Samir begins to speak in an urgent tone, as if pleading for understanding from an audience:

In Egypt? If you're doing your education in Egypt [government schools], you don't understand anything. You have to study elsewhere. The education in schools is not good... if you just go to school for education, you will not understand anything... it just doesn't make any sense. If you have a lot of money you can get an education. But government schools? Ah, there's no education... if you pay... but, in the school? It's finished. Bye, bye. Everything, only if you have the money.<sup>200</sup>

He makes me promise I will include his words in my research, conveying a deep need for people to know that things are not as they seem. They have not been for a long time. His

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<sup>199</sup> Ali Ali. Personal Interview.

<sup>200</sup> Ashab, Samir and Naguib Ayad Naguib. Personal Interview.

words build on a nationalistic bent that is familiar, reminiscent of the Egyptian spirit present in the revolution of 2011. The theme, arguably tracing back to Nasser, is common in many of my interviews: that despite the disconnect between politicians and government policies and people, Egypt can mend and return to a former glory. It is a powerful type of hope, that, together, the people can still fix decades of social and economic damage done by Mubarak and, now, his successors.

## ***v. Conclusions***

Today, Egypt's public education system remains unreformed and continuously fails the children it claims to educate and make productive members of society. It exists solely in name, with any actual education happening outside of regular school hours and outside of government regulation. Students, parents, and teachers have few rights and their only chance to change this is to disengage from the system entirely — a non-option for so many low-income families. In the authoritarian system Mubarak perfected over 3 decades, the top-down approach leaves no room for citizen's opinion and would eventually lead to the revolution of 2011. Unfortunately, post-revolution changes to the government and education also do not seem promising. Hanan and Ahmad tell me each new Minister of Education comes in with grand new plans of changing the entire system, but little action is ever taken. Ahmad laughs and says each one wants to “re-invent the wheel.” Tarek Shawki, the new Minister of Education elected in 2017<sup>201</sup>, has publicly stated that he wants to reorganize the entire Ministry and overcome the

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<sup>201</sup> Sarah El-Sheikh, *Parliament approves new cabinet reshuffle of nine ministries* (Web: Daily News Egypt, 2017)

phenomenon of private tutoring. Hanan tells me he has a vision to fix the system. I begin to ask, “So maybe...” Before I can finish, Hanan heaves a sigh. “Yes. Maybe.”

## 4 | Conclusions: Complicated Legacies and Seeking Truth

Hosni Mubarak left office as the fourth President of Egypt on February 11, 2011. Following mass protests driven by hundreds of thousands of youths, in Tahrir Square in Cairo and around the country, Mubarak had no choice but to resign. It was an end to his 30-year rule, now infamous for corruption and neoliberal policies that had hurt poor and middle class Egyptians immensely. In the weeks following his removal from power, Mubarak's legacy would be fiercely contested. It is still complicated today.<sup>202</sup> Disregarding the possible merits in Mubarak's presidency, what is unchallenged is that he was a liar. He repeatedly and systematically repeated falsehood after falsehood. He also had anyone in his regime relay the same deceptions. If problems were admitted in his version of Egypt, they were miniscule compared to all of the accomplishments he and his administration had made. Education was only one example of the way Mubarak fabricated an entire Egypt that simply did not exist in the real world.

And yet, education is also a special case as I've argued in this thesis. Unlike other socioeconomic trends in Egypt, such as income inequality, that have been scrutinized since the beginning of Mubarak's term, education was regarded in Egypt as a model for other similarly developing countries. Fueled by the rhetoric and data the Mubarak regime provided, the World Bank, the United Nations, UNESCO, the United States, etc.

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<sup>202</sup> Michael Young, *In Defense of Hosni Mubarak* (Web: Al Arabiya News).

all praised Egypt's and specifically Mubarak's "significant achievements" in education reform.<sup>203</sup>

Previously, work had been done in the 2000s by scholars that studied three, largely separate ideas: privatization of education, Mubarak's struggles for legitimacy, and political and economic mobility in Egypt. In my work, I've sought to connect these ideas and demonstrate how they depend on one another. Looking past the regime's falsities, I argue a more clear narrative appears: Mubarak took power in an unsteady period of transition and rising unhappiness amongst Egyptians. Rather than investing in public goods and effective reform, he simply told his constituents that it was happening to maintain his legitimacy and never effected real change. Simultaneously, he expanded emergency law and bankrolled incredible security forces to suppress opposition for those who pointed out the hypocritical, corrupt, and insidious nature of the regime. By tracking state narratives and data over the course of Mubarak's presidency and putting it side by side with the lived experiences of Egyptians, I attempted to reveal fact from fiction: that education reform happened solely in name while Egyptian students that depended on promised government schooling suffered without any real prospect of an education. Finally, I presented ethnographic work with primary actors in education including students, teachers, and parents to emphasize the lasting effects of Mubarak's policies and how they drastically shaped experiences of so many across Egypt.

Mubarak likely did not see himself as a reprehensible ruler. Alaa al-Aswany once wrote that Mubarak was a longtime sufferer of "dictator's solitude."<sup>204</sup> The term refers to how authoritarian rulers live in isolation from their constituents for so long that they

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<sup>203</sup> Sameh El-Saharty, Gail Richardson and Susan Chase, 20.; UNICEF, *UNICEF Executive Director commends...*

<sup>204</sup> Aswany, 36.

lose any contact with real life. Essentially, they lose awareness of the poor or anyone outside their elite circle — they may not have any idea what it is really like to live in their country under their rule. This is a convenient theory for Mubarak's legacy because it paints him as blissfully unaware of the ways he wronged his compatriots. Either way, Mubarak's inaction in his failing education system was beyond irresponsible. He tragically altered outcomes for so many students who attended his faulty government schools. Even without an education, they would be the ones to overthrow him in the end.

Today with Mubarak out of office, it is hard to discern if the course of education in Egypt will be any different. Early signs look bleak — from fieldwork done this year (2018) it seems schools remain unreformed and students remain dependent on private means to access any semblance of an education. They still rely on rote memorization, and textbooks are altered to suit whoever is in power: the year after the revolution, chapters were added to textbooks across primary and secondary schools to highlight the new Muslim Brotherhood government, including Islamist views and images recast to include veiled women.<sup>205</sup> By 2016 and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's takeover, these had been removed and pro-government military chapters were added back.<sup>206</sup> One notable change has remained in both versions, however. Mubarak's name has been scrubbed from books, school buildings, parks, and hospitals. His presidency, based on the history textbooks' state rhetoric in Egyptian government schools, seems to have happened in name alone.

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<sup>205</sup> Sonia Farid, *Chapters praising Mubarak regime removed from Egyptian textbooks* (Web: Al Arabiya News).

<sup>206</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, *In new Egyptian textbooks, 'it's like the revolution didn't happen'* (Web: The Washington Post).

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