

Policy Brief

A Generation in the Making: The Formation of Young Muslim Volunteers in Cairo (DFC File no. 09-010KU)

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Executive summary

The PhD thesis describes and analyzes the practices and experiences of a group of young middle-class Egyptians in a youth-based Muslim charity organization before, throughout and immediately after the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The overall argument is that religious commitment in the form of providing for the poor can in fact strengthen ideals and practices of civic responsibility and political engagement among young middle-class Egyptians. Recommendations are made concerning potentials and challenges in terms of possible partnerships with such faith-based youth organizations in Egypt.

Introduction

Sara Lei Sparre's PhD research investigates the practices and experiences of a group of young volunteers in a recently established youth-based Muslim charity organization. Due to the timing of the project, focus has been on the same group of people before, throughout and in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. For this reason it has been possible to investigate the influence of an important historical event, the 2011 Egyptian uprising, on the practices, values and self-understanding of the young, but at the same time, see significant connections and continuities over time resulting from longer-term social, cultural and political processes. Overall, the thesis argues that new forms of activism among young and educated middle-class Egyptians have provided a space for fostering a new kind of civic consciousness and responsibility towards Egyptian society, which somehow prepared these young people for the uprising and the changes that followed.

Background

In recent decades there has been a growing need for research that takes account of the needs, conditions and practices of the large youth populations in many developing countries, not least in a populous and regional important country like Egypt. With the right qualifications, better job opportunities and easier access to decision making processes, young men and women in Egypt represent a huge potential for development and democratization. Yet in many recent studies of youth in Egypt, negatively loaded characteristics have tended to dominate, describing young Egyptians as alienated and marginalized from decision-making processes, lacking educational qualifications, destined for unemployment and late marriage, and vulnerable to violent and extremist ideologies.

By focusing on how young Egyptians engaged in society regard their situation and which values, efforts and concrete activities they see as essential to solving both their own and larger societal problems, the present study takes a different approach, taking seriously the requests and initiatives of the young people themselves. Furthermore, the project moves beyond a static analysis of the organizations and their participants to situate the social activism among today's Egyptian youth in the context of larger political, cultural and socio-economic developments. Finally, it contributes to an improved knowledge base on the role of religion in youth strategies in Egypt and possibly other Muslim-majority countries.

The PhD thesis is based on findings from more than nine months of ethnographic fieldwork, including 82 interviews, participant observation and collection of written material, carried out in Egypt, primarily Cairo, in the period 2009 to 2012. The main focus is on young Muslim volunteers and their parents in *Resala Association for Charity*, the largest and oldest among a group of recently established youth-initiated charity organizations in Egypt. Resala began as a student initiative at the Faculty of Engineering in Cairo University in 1999, and its overall mission was to assist poor and needy in the country by engaging young Egyptian volunteers. Since then, it has grown into the largest youth organization in the Arab world with 70 branches and more than 500,000 registered volunteers across the country. Resala is now a formal, registered NGO providing a wide range of services, such as aid provision, orphanages, medical assistance and educational activities. The vast majority of volunteers in Resala are middle-class students and recent graduates of approximately 18 to 27 years of age.

Results

The thesis demonstrates how religious commitment in the form of engagement in a Muslim charity organization such as Resala can in fact strengthen values and practices of civic responsibility and political engagement. In the organizational discourse as well as among the volunteers, participation in Resala's activities was predominantly framed as a matter of 'doing good,' i.e. helping those in need as is required of a good Muslim. But with the Egyptian uprising and the success of the protesters in forcing Mubarak to step down, their practices and vocabulary changed, now emphasizing political agency and generational self-consciousness. In this process, it turned out that their engagement with Resala had in fact prepared these young people for activities aimed at larger-scale political change. Like many other Egyptians, Resala volunteers participated in the mass demonstrations singing and chanting protest songs. However, they also engaged in activities strikingly similar to the ones carried out in Resala prior to the uprising such as coordinating blood donation campaigns and collecting and distributing food and medicine among protesters. In this perspective, I argue that for the young Resala volunteers, the 2011 uprising, in particular the 18 days in Tahrir Square, can be seen as a catalyst for the unfolding and manifestation of a new and more political dimension of a social engagement and civic consciousness that had been in the making for a while.

As a result of their experiences and knowledge in Resala together with a gradual change of values, aims and ideals compared to their parents' generation, the young volunteers had gained

ideas and practical knowledge of what it meant to be and act as a citizen. What the Tahrir moment changed was their consciousness about themselves as a generation and their political rights and responsibilities as citizens. The formative processes underlying these individual and collective courses point towards the emergence of a particular version of the ‘Muslim citizen,’ understood as a subject whose religious commitment and observance primarily takes shape in adherence to ideals of social responsibility and civic engagement within the framework of the Egyptian nation. Hence what looked primarily or even solely as a religious commitment turned out to be just as much a civic commitment. For the young volunteers, serving God did not contradict with their role as Egyptian citizens; in fact, it was considered as the means to it. Thus, underlying these formation processes was a novel foregrounding of citizenship and the civic interpreted within the framework of the Islamic tradition and the structures of a civil society activism.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study shows that young Egyptians’ involvement in a faith-based charity organization like Resala has not led to a weakening of more civic values and ideals. Quite the contrary. The thesis demonstrates that religious commitment and observance in the form of providing for the needy can in fact strengthen values and practices of civic responsibility and political engagement within the national community. These formative processes and their potentials for the shaping of politically engaged citizens became clear and were further strengthened by the 2011 Egyptian uprising.

Implications and recommendations

On the basis of the central findings it is recommended to attend to other actors than the explicitly political ones when considering issues of reform and development in Egypt and the Middle East. Furthermore, Muslim and other faith-based organizations should be taken into consideration. Muslim charity organizations like Resala are clearly different from the sorts of organizations that are usually involved in partnerships with Western NGOs and donor agencies, who usually search for partners among secular advocacy organizations within the fields such as human rights, democratization and women’s empowerment. However, as the present PhD project has shown that Muslim charity and youth organizations can represent new and potential agents for change and development in Egypt insofar as volunteers, directly or indirectly, are introduced to and trained according to values of civic responsibility and engagement. More specifically, the following steps and considerations are suggested:

1. When identifying potential partners in Egyptian civil society, we should not immediately reject the religious discourse and vocabulary of certain organizations but instead critically attend to their effort (or lack of) to installing civic skills and values among especially the younger generations. Acting in an authoritarian and depoliticized environment, these organizations can be highly political in nature. Apart from providing services to the poor, they mobilize young people to participate in society and strengthen skills that can be

characterized as essential to political engagement – skills such as techniques of argumentation, team work and critical thinking. But instead of using our vocabulary of democracy, reform and political rights, they talk about participation, social justice and voluntarism, and they do so within a framework of Islam and social welfare.

2. Many of the Muslim charity and youth organizations have reservations about cooperating with European and North American actors especially. The reason for such reservations is first of all the strict Egyptian NGO law, which allows state authorities to punish all organizations and individuals working for social reform. Among other rules, organizations are not allowed to receive foreign funding or engage in any collaboration with domestic or foreign organizations without prior authorization. Furthermore, many organizations fear reactions to such collaborations from their own constituency and Egyptian donors. Would partnerships with a Western-based NGO or donor agencies weaken the organization's legitimacy and ability to attract funding locally? The leadership of Resala, however, has at several occasions voiced interest in learning about the Danish experience of youth volunteering and civic engagement. If the political climate in Egypt would allow for such a kind of exchange of experience between Resala and a Danish NGO, perhaps the Danish Youth Council (DUF) would be the most obvious choice.
3. The largest obstacle to any civil society actor in Egypt, religious or not, is the extensive and strict set of rules and regulations formulated in the Egyptian NGO law. If an organization violates any of the rules or is seen to in other ways threaten national unity or violate public order and morals, authorities can immediately dissolve it and fine or even imprison individuals. For this reason, it is further recommended that effort is put into pressuring the Egyptian government to amending this law, possibly through cooperation with Egyptian advocacy organizations.