

AUC's Student Union: A Success or an Epic Failure?

LEAD-IN: In The American University in Cairo, many student organizations have been created over the years. Some made it up to this moment, others changed their activities, and many closed their operations completely. Only one organization has made it from its very beginning till now, but, is it really successful? A-U-C's Nadine Farrag reports.

Music: "The Case of Am Ahmed" by Omar Khairat (Fade-Out) (:14)

For over 70 years, the Student Union, has survived in The American University in Cairo, A-U-C. The SU was originally formed with a mission to unite and serve students. It started with a group of students filing petitions until it became the largest student-run organization on-campus serving students in different aspects such as entertainment, activities, and petitions.

Although many people would assume that this is a sign of success, AUC Professor Mahmoud Ellozy from the Theatre department sees otherwise. Ellozy was a theatre major at the university during his undergraduate years, and he was very active in that field. He wrote many scripts and directed as many plays. However, he never participated in AUC's Student Union. Ellozy recalls some of the problems with the S-U.

Music: (Fade-In) Soundtrack from AUC Talent Show 2012 Teaser (Fade-Out) (1:10)

ELLOZY: "I think it started in the late 70s when it became sort of obvious that there was money involved in it and it became very sort of prestigious to be in the Student Union and you had clouts. I went away in 80 and came back in 85 and when I came back it became very very ugly. When I looked at the Student Union just at the elections and how they were held and the bribes and the money that was spent on the elections. Students were spending so much money on their campaign. Why would people spend thousands of pounds to get elected President of the Student Union? What is it? Were they training to be members of the NDP or something like that? What? Check the Caravan about the money that disappeared, someone swindled someone, embezzlement, things like that. They reminded me of the NDP and probably most of them were sons of NDP people."

(0:59)

Ellozy isn't the only person who looks down to the union. Professor Firas Al-Atraqchi, from the Journalism and Mass Comm department, and managing editor and faculty advisor of AUC's student newspaper, *The Caravan*, never participated in the Student Union as well during his undergraduate years in the early 90s.

AL-ATRAQCHI: "I was turned off. It felt to me like there was this little club, network, mafia thing of best friends that looked out after each other's interests and appeared to be working towards the betterment of student life whereas within a few months they would all have these scandals and accusations against each other etc etc etc. So no. Why would I throw myself into that horrendous pit of anarchy and backstabbing? No way. You know I knew a lot of people who worked in the Student Union and it sucks the life out of you."

Just two weeks ago, no three weeks ago, some student interviewed a student senator who after he saw his interview in print realized that he had misspoken and then threatened the student journalist with, I don't know, a variation of threats and this is the way the student government here operates. If they don't like what they see, they threaten you with something. It sounds very NDP. I wonder are these kids the NDP or what."(1:17)

It is true that many AUC students are sons and daughters of parliament members from the Mubarak regime, and specifically from the dissolved National Democratic Party. AUC Professor Hanan Shahin from the Rhetoric Department says that some AUCians have gone on to participate in Egyptian politics themselves.

SHAHIN: "Another SU Head was Ahmed Said. Ahmed Said now is a member of parliament and he's an active member. I think he's the leader of El Masreyeen El Ahrar (Free Egyptians). He started as SU President back in the 80s. So apparently he had leadership qualities that's why he's nominated and is now member of the parliament, the Egyptian parliament." (:26)

Students do fight fiercely over positions in the Student Union, but, could it be out of proactivity? Can it be because of leadership qualities as Professor Shahin mentioned?

Music: (Fade-In) "The Case of Am Ahmed" by Omar Khairat (Fade-Out) (:30)

The Student Union's mission entails helping advocate students' viewpoints against the administration. According to Professor Shahin, the SU did an exceptional job fighting the administration when she was an undergraduate student in the 80s.

SHAHIN: "Back then we were in Tahrir and we didn't have a variety of restaurants to choose from like you do here. So we just had the cafeteria food. And even outside the walls of AUC, we didn't have anything, we didn't have Mcdonald's, anything! And we didn't get the quality that we deserved. The Student Union then organized a campaign whereby it wanted to compete with the AUC Cafeteria and so it sold kind of the same products but better quality and cheaper prices. It was very successful because it got the AUC Cafeteria to improve its services"(:36)

Shahin isn't the only one who recalls good experiences. Although it would seem that Ellozy is very biased against the Student Union, he also recalls a good experience with them during his undergraduate years in AUC.

Music: (Fade-In) "Ahlef Besamaha Wbetorabha" (I Swear by its Sky and Earth) by Abd El Haleem Hafez (Fade-Out) (:09)

ELLOZY: "In 73 during the war I think Bimbo Makram was president of the student union - he's now member of parliament. He took a very strong stance. Fourth day of the war, there was a leaflet that was being distributed that we were going to have a special assembly and apparently the Dean of Students at the time, his name was Frank, he said that this assembly was illegal, it was not during assembly time and he hadn't authorized

it. But, the custodians opened Ewart Hall for us and Bimbo was there with the rest of the members of the Student Union. And I think it was the first time I saw the Ewart Hall completely packed full. I mean packed full. And we had a discussion and we decided that, you know, we couldn't go on with classes while the war was going on and that we wanted to organize ourselves in order to participate in the war efforts. We got the civil defense people to come, the firemen, and they trained us. There was also nursing. We learnt how to evacuate people from buildings that's on fire and many of the students went and volunteered in hospitals. It's a student union organized. It wasn't a money making thing at the time. And I think that was my first memory I have of the Student Union playing an active role, other than that it's not really sort of interesting." (1:16)

Music: (Fade-In) "Ahlef Besamaha Wbetorabha" (I Swear by its Sky and Earth) by Abd El Haleem Hafez (Fade-Out) (:10)

The Student Union's activism didn't only show during the war crisis.

In 2006, and although the SU was not directly affected by the incident, they gathered donations to help the families of those who died in the tragic incident when an Egyptian ferry sank in the Red Sea.

The SU helped raise awareness about other countries miseries as well. It organized Quds Week in the 90s to shed light on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Their protest for Quds back then, is known to be the largest in the history of AUC. They also played movies, showed pictures of Israel's inhumane actions, and sold food, scarves and t-shirts to send their income to support the

Palestinian cause. Along with the money they collected, they also carried out a blood donation campaign.

The SU turned AUC into a huge fundraiser to send caravans of supplies to all those in need, whether in Egypt or off-borders.

Music: "AUC Strike Song" by Ahmed Safi and Marwan Imam (Fade-Out) (:35)

Student activism at AUC isn't just a past memory. After the move from the downtown campus to the new campus in 2008, Ahmed Fayed, current SU President, recalls when students went on strike because of the high food costs and the poor quality of the services they received. Just like in the 80s, the students succeeded again.

FAYED: "08 strike it was by the Student Union. For 2008 we had mainly two strikes. One at the beginning of the semester; it was concerned mainly with the services offered on campus and we concentrated in specific on the food. It was a very difficult shift from the old campus to the new campus. In the old campus, we had all food outlets available, but here in the new campus we only had Jared's bagels, as I can remember, and the food court didn't open yet. As a result, the union proposed a solution which is opening the SU Market. That was the first time for the SU Market to open. But in terms of a strike itself, it was really inspiring for students to call for their rights even after the shift, even after we're kind of separated from the Egyptian community. We're very isolated. That shows that any AUCian is always concerned with what he/she is getting and the services offered."(1:03)

Nat. Sound from AUC's New Campus Strike in 2011 (:29)

The Student Union, and many student activists, called for another strike afterwards. In 2011, AUC witnessed a turning point. It was the first time to see students, workers, and security staff hand in hand striking against the administration.

FAYED: "For Fall 2011 strike, of course you knew, it started because of the increase of the tuition fees. But, after that, we figured so many other things that would add to the strike. For example, academic quality. Also, we had so many concerns for the security personnel, the DDC workers, and the custodians. But after that we decided to join forces in order to be a more effective body calling for their rights. And we agreed that none of the bodies will resume its work, unless all bodies receive their demands and that happened and we reached a good conclusion. It was more of a compromise. We wanted so many things, but, eventually the feasible things were met. That was mainly it with the 2011 strike. It was one of the very strongest strikes in the history of AUC as it was the first time in the history of AUC, not only students but students and security and DDC and custodians would unite together. Another thing was that in the peak we reached approximately 3,000 students participating in the strike. As we can remember, the strikes against the invasion of Iraq and Gaza bombs. These things happened in the old campus and these were major strikes in the history of AUC in which most of the AUC community participated in. But for the recent history of AUC, the 2011 strike was one of the biggest in terms of scales, in terms of demands, in terms of what we reached with the administration."(Fade-Out) (1:45)

As much as the SU had achieved, Al-Atraqchi disagrees with resorting to strikes as a first solution, especially that it wouldn't work every single time. He also believes that the Student Union, AUC's largest student organization, has never evolved for over 20 years now.

AL-ATRAQCHI: "I always felt when I was a student here that there was a little mafia that intimidates people into taking one choice or another and I fear that it is still the same way. When I was a student here, there was always the same kind of story. The same keywords always come up. Corruption. Accusations of theft. Accusations of misappropriation of funds. Now, that I'm a professor here and I'm in charge of the Caravan, I see the same kind of things happening in the SU today as they did 20 years ago. And for me that's funny and at the same time it's very sad that the Student Union as an entity hasn't evolved. Till this day I still don't know what they've done to AUC students. Maybe take down the American flag? Last year, I was walking down the Plaza, or whatever it's called, and some very enthusiastic campaigner for one of the candidates mistook me for a student and tried to get me to vote. It took me back 20 years, it really did. He was very intimidating, extremely aggressive, very pushy. Exactly the same way that students were pushed into voing 20 years ago rather than try and convince the students that it is in their best interest to vote. Same tactics, 20 years later, and the country itself is changed. Now we're thinking, why isn't the Student Union evolved as well. Some students complained to me that they were told that if they vote for so and so candidates they would win a packet of Marlboro or something. That's bribery and just sounds so silly but again, the fact that we have all these mini-scandals going on has to have somebody take a closer look at how the entire setup

Nadine Farrag
JRMCM 460

of student governance has been established. There's something wrong somewhere and somebody needs to fix it."(2:35)

Whether we agree or disagree, the Student Union will remain at AUC...and people will continue to question the authenticity of their actions and activities. Nadine Farrag, AUC News.

Music: "The Case of Am Ahmed" by Omar Khairat (Fade-Out) (:53)

I would like to thank those who have contributed to the making of the audio documentary.

AUC Professors:

Professor Mahmoud Ellozy from the Theatre department

Professor Hanan Shahin from the Rhetoric Department

Professor Firas Al-Atraqchi from the Journalism Department and Managing Editor and Faculty Advisor of AUC's Caravan Newspaper

Undergraduate student and current SU President Ahmed Fayed

I would also like to give credit to Youtube for the following:

Nat. Sound from the AUC 2011 Strike

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AUC Strike song by Ahmed Safi and Marwan Imam

The Case of Am Ahmed music by the musician Omar Khairat

Ahlef Besamaha Wbetorabha song by the late artist Abd El Haleem Hafez