In Cairo's shadow? Student activists in Egypt's second capital and its governorates

*À l'ombre du Caire ? Militants étudiants dans la deuxième capitale d'Égypte et
ses gouvernorats*

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IN CAIRO'S SHADOW?
STUDENT ACTIVISTS IN EGYPT'S SECOND
CAPITAL AND ITS GOVERNORATES

ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on contentious student activism in post-2011 Egypt, this paper contrasts the manifestations of the “feeling” of marginality with reference to Cairo’s centrality between Alexandrian student activists and their other non-Cairene counterparts. Approaching marginality as a perceived problem, this study nuances the image of the governorates as equally disadvantaged and similarly excluded from the mainstream of power as Cairo supposedly is. Moreover, by looking at the activists’ strategies for dealing with the “problem” of Cairo’s centrality, this paper demonstrates that while Alexandrians employ strategies that assert their autonomy and portray them as a competing site of power, other non-Cairene activists feel the need to resort to various tactics to ensure the visibility and validation of their collective action. These tactics (and the lack thereof among Alexandrians) reveal that dependency and local identity are not markers of a condition of marginality as much as strategies that actors come up with to deal with their “problem” of marginality versus a perceived center.

INTRODUCTION

“Despite its 9 million inhabitants, Alexandria today suffers from a feeling of regional existence in Cairo’s shadow, the highly centralized capital city. The people of Alexandria, especially those whose families have lived in the city for generations, mostly carry an explicit local identity and pride mixed with an inferiority complex towards the capital city. The question of identity and the

city's location is indeed part of a nationwide political conflict to determine what constitutes Egypt". (Schieler 2017: 15).

This quotation from the Alexandrian magazine *tará al-bahr* (Sea View)¹ paints an image of Alexandria as a city living in the "shadow" of Cairo. The terms "centralized", "regional existence", "suffering" and "inferiority complex" seem to portray the relationship between Cairo and Alexandria in terms of the latter's marginality *vis-à-vis* an all-powerful capital. Conceptions of marginality, various as they may be, point to a "distance or exclusion from the mainstream as a site of power (...) being on the opposite side of hegemony" (Bayat 2012:20). Marginality connotes a "condition of disadvantage", although recently scholars have demonstrated that this condition could have its advantages, in that the sites of the marginalized could "provide greater impetus for change" (Saad 2012:98) and "foster survival, growth and alternative ways of living" (Bayat 2012:21).

This paper aims to put the image of Alexandrian marginality into perspective by comparing how different governorates relate to the capital city. The goal is not only to reconsider Alexandria's disadvantage when compared with Cairo, but also to reflect on marginality as a perceived problem that emerges during interactions and that weighs on actors' strategies. I approach both margins and center as "practical categorizations that produce social effects" in order to examine how "agents invest their (...) representations into things or acts and strategies of symbolic manipulation aiming to determine the mental representations that others make of their properties and their carriers" (Bourdieu 1980: 65).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on contentious student activism in post-2011 Egypt², this study examines the various manifestations of the "feeling" of marginality with reference to Cairo's centrality in the activists' narratives and practices. I suggest that the contrast between the narratives of Alexandrian student activists and other non-Cairene counterparts nuances the image of the governorates as equally disadvantaged and similarly excluded from the mainstream of power as Cairo supposedly is.

Moreover, by looking at the activists' strategies for dealing with the "problem" of Cairo's centrality, this paper highlights the governorates' "differential capacities for mixing and exchanging with the mainstream" (Bayat 2012: 23). I thus argue that while Alexandrians employ strategies that assert their autonomy and portray them as a competing site of power, other non-Cairene

1 <https://www.taralbahr.com/about>, consulté le 10/01/2018.

2 Throughout the paper, the word 'contentious' in contentious politics/ activists/ actors/movements and milieu refers to "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claim and their objects when at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims or a party to claims and the claims would if realized affect the interests of at least one of the claimants". (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2011: 5).

activists feel the need to resort to various tactics to ensure the visibility and validation of their collective action. These tactics include working with the capital city, invoking its responsibility towards them, and *"performing a local identity"* (Evans and Norcliffe 2016: 218) on occasions when activists from different cities are involved. Here, I consider that city-based identity is produced through performance: it *"comes into existence as people act"* (McDermott 2006: 198). In other words, I will demonstrate how non-Cairene student activists *"through 'doing' in order to be, become, and belong (....) give performances when interacting with others in social settings"* (Huot and Laliberte Rudman 2010: 72) ³. By reflecting on these tactics (and the lack thereof among Alexandrians) this paper's final suggestion is that dependency and local identity are not markers of a condition of marginality as much as strategies that actors come up with to deal with their "problem" of marginality versus a perceived center.

In order to develop these concepts, I begin with a methodological section that presents the conditions of the field study and its relevance to the reflection on the relationships between Cairo, Alexandria and the governorates. In the following section, I highlight the various manifestations of marginality and centrality as an issue among student activists, and in the third section, I proceed to identify the strategies that reflect the differences in the activists' perceptions of the problem of their marginality and the ways of handling it.

LOCATING MARGINALITY

This paper employs empirical materials, namely careers⁴ and observed interactions, that have been collected as part of a study on Egyptian student activism. Although the relationship among governorates was not *per se* a major issue in this research, the conditions of the study and the analytical categories

3 The authors of the paper were borrowing from E. Goffman's conception of identity as performance.

4 The term 'career' is an analytical tool that is currently in wide use in the study of social movements. Adapted from Howard Becker's study of 'divergence', a term he in turn had borrowed from E. Hughes, 'career' refers to the sequence of movements of an individual from one position to another and the factors on which mobility from one position to the other depends. These could be objective facts as social structures or subjective changes in the perspectives, motivations, and desires of the individual (Becker 1963: 24). When adapted to social movements, the notion of a 'career' approaches activism as a process, thus restoring activist choices to the various phases of a person's life cycle. Seeing activism as a process supposes that during one's life, the attitudes and behaviors of the present are determined by those of the past, and in turn limit the possibilities for the future (Filleule 2001: 201).

that emerged from the field data advocate for its relevance to a reflection on the center-margins dynamic.

First, the scope of the study included various types of student organization, such as student unions (henceforth SU), contentious movements (Revolutionary Socialists, April 6th), *ad-hoc* collectives, and most importantly organizations affiliated with political parties (whether explicitly, like *Usrat al-midān*⁵ whose association with *al-Dustūr* party is official, or implicitly, as is the case with *Misr al-Qawiyya*⁶). Some are large organizations with branches in many cities, while others are limited to a certain university or even to a specific faculty. Furthermore, being aware of a long-running scholarly Cairo-centrism (El-Chazli 2015: 6-10), I had decided early on to explore what was happening beyond the capital, and made sure to conduct interviews with student activists from various governorates such as Alexandria (7 interviews, 1 focus group), Tanta (4 interviews, 1 observation), Zagazig (2 interviews), Banha (1 interview), Port-Said (1 interview) and Faiyum (2 interviews). Having said that, the study was based in Cairo for the most part, with one field trip to Tanta and two to Alexandria. With the exception of Alexandrians, the interviews with non-Cairene activists took place in Cairo when they were there to attend an event related to their organization (such as meetings or conferences,) or to run personal errands.

The nationwide student organizations also hold numerous events for their members from the governorates, such as summer camps and coordination meetings. Additionally, I was able to observe the coordination among student union members from different cities, although the meetings mainly took place in Cairo.

The conditions and range of the study therefore made it possible to examine how activists from various governorates relate to one another, whether through their direct or indirect references to centrality and marginality or at the various events at which activists from different cities gather.

Secondly, because the study followed a grounded theory approach, most of its analytical categories emerged in interaction with the empirical data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). I therefore came to approach the cluster of student

5 Literally translated, *Usrat al-midān* means the family of the square [referring to Tahrir Square]. The student organization was created in September 2012 as the student branch of *al-Dustūr* [the Constitution] Party. Both the party and the student organization are part of the network of supporters of Mohammed El-Baradei, both as a candidate in the 2011 presidential elections and even earlier, since his introduction to the political sphere in 2010.

6 *Misr al-Qawiyya* [Strong Egypt] is a student organization created in September 2012 out of Abdel Moneim Abou El-Fotouh's presidential campaign. Although it shares its name and origins with a political party, members of *Misr al-Qawiyya* insist on being seen as an autonomous contentious movement [for further details, see note 17].

organizations, groups, and activists in post-2011 Egypt as a contentious *milieu*. Although the term 'milieu' is theoretically loose and subject to considerable debate, the activists I interviewed used it often to refer to the fluid ensemble of organizations and groups to which they belonged.⁷ Taking the multiple levels of interactions among student activists as a milieu paves the way for detecting and reflecting on the emergence of various processes and constructions within these interactions. Consequently, the analytical category 'milieu of contentious student activism' provides a lens for observing the emergence of marginality as a problem and its effects on actors and their interactions.

That being said, it is important to note that student activism (Alexandrian or other), is not the object of this study in and of itself so much as it provides a location within which to reflect on center/margins dynamics. This is why questions such as the historicity of student activism, and the agenda and poles of the contentious student milieu at a time of political change or the challenges activists face in times of repression will not be tackled in detail, but only as elements for contextualizing the situations in which a feeling of marginality was referred to or strategies for dealing with a marginal position presented themselves.

In addition, while acknowledging the historicity of Egyptian student activism and the fact that it is deeply rooted in the dynamics of contention prior to 2011, the timing of the observation (2013-2015), along with the temporal scope of the activists' narratives (2011-2015) offers insights into two particularly interesting moments. The first follows the constitution of the milieu in the aftermath of 2011, which was a time when the possibilities for collective

7 Using this rhetorical category analytically seemed to be a practical approach towards grasping the fluid ensemble of networks, collectives, organizations, and individuals to which they referred in order to be able to understand their interactions and detect the processes that occur amongst them. Conceptually, however, the term is rather tricky to define, as it is vague and is used differently by different authors. S. Malthaner, for example, uses the term 'radical milieu' to approach the immediate social environment from which terrorist groups emerge (Malthaner 2014, 979). S. Schielke, on the other hand, uses the term 'literary milieu' to refer to a wider social space [than circles, scenes, or cliques] that includes the generational experience and class socialization of people participating in that space. My understanding of milieu builds on the theoretical concept of arenas as elaborated by J. Duyvnedak and O. Filleule. If an arena is the "*space both concrete [...] and symbolic [...] which brings together all the players, individual or complex, participating in the emergence, definition and resolution of a problem*" (Filleule Duyvendak 2015:306), milieu would refer to the relationships between individuals and groups developing as a part of arenas for contentious mobilizations. The links they form survive beyond the issue for which they were mobilized and are further crystallized around other common issues, along with common styles, vocabulary, and knowledge.

action were seen as being unprecedented. The second moment coincides with the beginning of the fieldwork in October 2013, when universities came under direct pressure from the newly-established regime.⁸ Interactions among student organizations were particularly intense in both periods, which makes the temporal framework of the study pertinent for following the construction of a “problem” and evaluating its relative “weight”. The geographical scope of the milieu is also an important issue to be raised in the course of this study. From what I observed, it is possible to argue that the milieu is spread nationwide in cities with universities. Although interactions are more intense in some cities than in others, it is safe to say that since 2011 there has been more than one student organization in every university, and that these organizations are all connected with each other in one way or another. This statement would definitely require some nuancing; however, the focus in this paper is not on the objective geography of the student milieu but on geography as a component of the construction of a “problem”.

CAIRO, ALEXANDRIA, AND MUHĀFAZĀT: THE UNEQUAL BURDEN OF MARGINALITY

Despite the current administrative and geographical division of Egypt into provinces and governorates, for most student activists Egypt consists of Cairo, Alexandria, which are viewed as large cities with prominent universities on one hand, and the *muhāfazāt* (governorates) on the other hand. Within the *muhāfazāt*, Upper Egypt is sometimes singled out as a particularly marginalized and poor region. Samir⁹, a leader in *Misr al-Qawiyya* articulates this clearly in a passing observation,

We want to shift our attention to Upper Egypt. As you know, the universities there are in a dire state, not at all like in Cairo or Alexandria. When we were campaigning for the bureau's elections last summer¹⁰, we travelled to universities and

8 Starting in October 2013, universities across Egypt witnessed an unprecedented wave of violence. It was primarily due to government repression of contentious actors, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi sympathizers, who mobilized under the name “*Tullāb did al-inkilāb*” (Students against the Coup d’État). Confrontations between *Tullāb did al-inkilāb* and the police included violent exchanges and massive arrests that reached not only the MB and their sympathizers but also targeted actors from other movements. There was also an evident rise in the various forms of restrictions on political expression and freedoms.

9 All names have been changed.

10 He is talking about the elections for the central bureau of *Misr al-Qawiyya*, which took place in July and August 2014.

met with students there. Next trimester we will hold our very first camp dedicated only to students from Upper Egypt.¹¹

If marginality is indeed conceptualized as an issue within the milieu, Alexandria seems to be seen as exempt from the burdens associated with it. Furthermore, Cairo's centrality recurs as an issue that affects individual careers as much as activist choices. Activists from governorates such as Banhā and Zagazig make explicit separate references to the difference between Cairo and their home towns. Menna, a leader of SU at Ain Shams University, explains how she chose to come to Cairo [Ain Shams is part of Greater Cairo] although she is originally from a village near Zagazig,

I was accepted in the faculty of my specialty in Zagazig, but I decided to go to Ain Shams instead. Despite being far from home, I wanted to be at the heart of the capital city. I wanted to be able to follow events, to attend conferences, movies, and exhibitions.¹²

Mamdouh, a key figure in *Misr al-Qawiyya*, also finds his city too calm, despite many attempts by activists to revive it, "*Banhā is dead 13, there wasn't much going on. We tried to do something, to locate other activists and start a movement in Banhā*"¹⁴. When I asked him what he meant by "not much was going on", he explained that the demonstrations in the various phases that followed 2011 were small and limited. In addition, the political organizations inside and outside the university were, according to him, not sufficiently active, which is why he was trying to locate other individuals who were interested in politics and to integrate networks of activists through friends and family. This type of reference was rare in narratives from Alexandrian activists.

It is also interesting to point out, as I mentioned earlier, that all my interviews with activists from the governorates took place in Cairo, as they were there for other meetings related to their organizations, or else when I had to go to Alexandria to meet Alexandrian activists¹⁵. This is probably more related to the conditions of the study than it is to the geographical distribution of student activism. Nonetheless, these conditions at least reveal the need for some activists to spend the money and time to be in Cairo frequently, where "things

11 Interview, September 2014, [former] Headquarters of Tullab *Misr al-Qawiyya*, Garden City, Cairo.

12 Interview, June 2015, Manyal, Cairo.

13 The Arabic expression *Banhā Mayyeta*, which is literally translated as 'dead', connotes that it is quiet and rather dull, and that action is scarce.

14 Interview. April 2015, Garden City, Cairo.

15 Apart from the focus group, the student activists I interviewed mentioned that they came from different parts of the Alexandrian governorate and its surroundings.

happen”, while living and studying in their home towns, whereas this does not necessarily seem to be the case for Alexandrians.

More importantly, centrality was explicitly articulated by leading activists from northern governorates as an obstacle. Hany, a leader of the Tanta University SU, discusses in the plainest of terms,

People are working in Tanta, there are things going on in different universities. In Aswan they just removed the Dean, and no one knows anything about it. We really must solve this centrality issue. It really is a problem.¹⁶

Actually, when Hany made these remarks he was not only a leading figure in his SU but also a member of the central office of a student organization. In addition, he was setting up an initiative to create a coordination network for student activists. If someone in a dual leading position and with enough influence to take on this initiative complains of a lack of visibility, it clearly shows the extent to which the burden of marginality is felt by activists from the governorates.

By contrast, this did not seem to be an issue for Alexandrians. First, while they were very vocal about other issues, such as a lack of interest in politics, the rising cost of engaging in contentious politics, and increasing administrative restrictions, Cairo’s centrality did not come up especially often. Secondly, when centrality was mentioned, it gave way to a rather comparative, competitive attitude that conflicts with that of the other non-Cairene activists. This is clear from the way Ayman [a member of *Misr al-Qawiyya*] compares one particular episode of contention in both cities, “*The April 28 protests were very big here. Even though they were launched by Cairo, they were much bigger here*”. Sami, another member of *Misr al-Qawiyya* also recounts how the movement was created in a large conference held by Abū al-Futūh¹⁷ and members from his former electoral campaign, at which they announced the creation of a nationwide student organization in May 2012. Sami insists that “*the conference took place here, people came here in buses from everywhere, from Beheira, Tanta, and Cairo*”. Both remarks could, in fact, reveal a need to make a comparison with the capital deriving from an “inferiority

16 Group discussion around the challenges of contentious student activism, May 2015, downtown Cairo.

17 Formerly a member of the Muslim brotherhood, and one of the founders of *Al-jamā’a al-islāmiyya* (the Islamic group) in the 1970s, Abū al-Futūh resigned from the Brotherhood to run in the 2012 presidential election. Along with Hamdīn Sabahī and Mohammed al-barādī (who withdrew from the race six months before the election), Abū al-Futūh was seen as a “revolutionary” candidate. After he lost the election, networks of participants in Abū al-Futūh’s electoral campaign gave way to the creation of a political party (*Misr al-Qawiyya*) and a student movement of the same name. The conference in question (*al-kilma kilmitnā*) saw the launch of the student movement.

complex", as S. Schielke puts it in the citation above (Schielke 2017: 15). Even if this were to be the case, however, it translated into a very different attitude from that of those who believe that marginality is a burden. Indeed, the feeling that Alexandria is not the same as other governorates was explicit in the Alexandrian narratives, as a couple of members from *Usrat al-midān* point out:

Abdalla: Alexandria is not in the capital, and we do not see mobilizations at the university like the ones you have [in Cairo]. We have some at the Faculty of Medicine, but the faculties are separated [unlike the unified campus at Cairo University].

Bassem: Despite that, we do organize activities at a university level, and it works even better than in Cairo.

Abdalla: The focus on our activity is much less. **I mean if it is like that for us in Alexandria, look at the other governorates and Upper Egypt – no one talks about them. Our colleagues there are doing a lot of work that no one will ever hear about.** There is indeed centrality. The smallest event held at Cairo University would create momentum equivalent to a medium-sized event here.¹⁸

Perceiving oneself as part of a margin and not of a competing center weighs on the actors' strategies in different ways, as the following section will demonstrate.

DIFFERENT CAPACITIES FOR EXCHANGES WITH THE MAINSTREAM: DEPENDENCY, COMPETITION, AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

One of the major concrete incarnations of the burden of marginality, though it is felt unequally, is the question of the visibility of collective action. As Abdalla mentioned in his previous comment, collective actions that take place outside Cairo are neither as influential nor as recognizable as whatever may be happening in the capital. Hany, from Tanta, puts it quite clearly when he says, "*If we have a sit-in in Tanta with hundreds of students it will not be as loud as a demonstration with ten people at Cairo University*".¹⁹ I have translated the expression he used as "loud" for want of a better term, although the verb was actually *tesamma'* which does not connote volume alone, but also resonance and influence. I therefore argue that when perceiving themselves as marginal, actors resort to strategies to ensure the visibility of their collective action.

18 Interview and discussion, May 2014, downtown Alexandria.

19 Informal discussion with a group of activists from Tanta, Tanta, November 2014.

For activists from the governorates, working with the capital city while accepting an unequal relationship is one option. Again, Hany explains the backstage interactions at a press conference I had attended earlier in March 2015, where Presidents of student unions were demanding that the Ministry of Higher Education hold elections on their due date.²⁰

Do you remember the press conference we had for the SUs the other day? I had prepared a statement in coordination with other SU leaders nationwide. However, the guy from Cairo University SU came with his own statement and gave it to us. And that was the statement we announced. We did not have a choice; after all, he represented Cairo University, and we had to work with him. (...) People from Cairo and Ain Shams need to be aware of their responsibility towards other student activists, they must work with us.²¹

Another strategy to which the governorates resort in order to acquire visibility is participation at events at which activists from different cities gather. As I mentioned earlier, many student organizations, such as *Ussrat al-midān* and *Misr al-Qawiyya*, have branches in different universities all over Egypt. Both organizations often hold events that target all their members, such as summer camps that last for three or four days where members can meet to socialize, discuss, and train. I attended *Misr al-Qawiyya*'s summer camp in September 2014, which took place in 6th of October City in Greater Cairo, and two observations struck me the most²²: first, only three Alexandrian members were present among 50 participants, one of whom was a member of the central office, as opposed to large groups from Zagazig University (at least 15), Faiyum (at least 10), and Cairo (at least 10). Secondly, city-based cliques were very noticeable during the various camp activities, especially among members from Zagazig and Faiyum. Groups of men from both universities would move, sit, and eat together, and sometimes drop camp activities to do their own thing. On many occasions, they would refer to themselves as the group

20 At the end of 2014 and in early 2015, it seemed to student activists that the Ministry of Higher Education [MOHE] was stalling holding the elections for new student unions at the scheduled time [supposedly April 2014]. In the opinion of many SU members, the MOHE was buying time in to make sure it could manage to control the electoral process and block the regime's political opponents [Muslim Brotherhood students or other contentious groups]. The activists thus made it their target to mobilize to demand SU elections as soon as possible through press conferences, sit-ins, and exhibitions. Field notes, press conference, SU members demand that MOHE hold the elections at the due time, Garden City, Cairo, March 2015.

21 Interview, April 2015, Garden City, Cairo.

22 Field notes, student at fourth *Misr al-Qawiyya* camp, Agyad Farm, October the 6th City, 12-15 September 2014.

from Zagazig or Faiyum. If an identity is the construction of a boundary to separate “us” from “them” (Tilly 2003: 608), the physical presence of many “others” in one place makes these gatherings a suitable social setting for identity performance. Consequently, it would make sense to view the formation of city-based cliques not just as a result of familiarity among colleagues from the same university, but as a way to “do” a local identity, which would be one way for non-Cairene student activists to assert their presence in the milieu, to acquire visibility, and to say “we are here”. Here, the contrast with the Cairene activists at these gatherings supports this suggestion: there were numerous participants from Cairo University at the camp, many of whom were colleagues from the same faculty, but there were no similar displays of local identity. This is not specific to the *Misr al-Qawiyya* camp; on the other occasions I was able to observe at which activists from different cities were present, the limited, or at least quiet, Alexandrian presence compared with the very loud presence from the governorates was equally remarkable.²³ Indeed, the Alexandrians’ attitude towards those gatherings is most interesting. Their lack of interest on participating in numbers or strongly manifesting their presence could be an expression of their attitude of independence. By not insisting on forming a local identity at gatherings or even ensuring proportional representation, Alexandrian activists seem to convey the message that they have their own thing going on and do not need to resort to further tactics to make sure they are recognized.

My observations also suggest that the Alexandrians’ need to gain recognition for their collective action is not as pressing as that of their other non-Cairene counterparts. For the most part, collective action in Alexandria or taken by Alexandrians over the course of the period under review (2011-2015) were immediately visible and given credit in the milieu without any specific claim being made. One example of this is how credit is given to Alexandrian activists within the milieu for their initiatives. In September and October 2014, a nine-person committee from the Egyptian Student Union, which negotiated with the Ministry of Higher Education, presented a new

23 The Insider Conference, for example. Insider is a student newspaper that started in GUC and spread to various public and private universities. At its annual conference, which brings together members from its 22 universities, the governorates asserted their presence by frequent cheering and chanting (field notes, May 7th 2015, AUC main campus).

project for student bylaws²⁴. The original draft of this law had been prepared by a student movement from Alexandria University, however. Even though the new bylaws were not passed in the end, it seemed to be further common knowledge among activists from the milieu that this proposal originated in Alexandria. In a passing observation, Mamdouh says:

I was present during the negotiations for the new bylaws. Everyone knows that it was originally a project developed by a group of students from the Faculty of Engineering in Alexandria, then the ESU took over.²⁵

I also detected underlying aspirations among Alexandrian activists to play a supporting role on behalf of less visible governorates. Although not explicit, I was able to note a tendency to initiate regional alliances. For example, at a closing ceremony organized by a student union in Tanta to celebrate their activities throughout the year, I found that the President of an Alexandria SU was present. In his final speech, Tanta's SU president welcomed him, and thanked him for his support.²⁶ In an earlier interview, that same person had said that their SU often coordinated with activists from governorates in regions such as Beheira or Tanta to organize all sorts of events.

To sum up, the problem of marginality as described by activists from the governorates paved the way for their dependence on the capital on one hand, and for the use of multiple occasions to perform local identity in gatherings

24 Until January 2011, the legal framework regulating all things related to student organizations was a presidential decree issued by Anwar El-Sadat in 1979 and amended in 2007, which was known as "*al-la'eha al-tullābeya*" (the student bylaws). The bylaws had been subject to various criticisms from student activists and human rights advocates as, among other things they guaranteed faculty and university administrations' control of the student union elections, placing the unions directly under administrative tutelage (Ezzat 2011: 11-25). Since 2011, student movements and organizations had been pressing for the establishment of new bylaws drafted by student representatives. Thus, in January 2013, new bylaws were issued by a decree from the prime Minister Hisham Qandil. Although subject to a great deal of criticism mostly because of the perceived dominance of Muslim Brotherhood students on the drafting of the proposal, the 2013 bylaws were still considered by many to be a step forward compared to the old ones (Abdel-Salam, Nagy: 2013). In the aftermath of 30 June 2013 and Morsi's removal from the presidency, the Ministry of Higher Education decided to change the bylaws once again, at which point the Alexandrian project emerged to amend critical points in the 2013 bylaws and was presented by members from the ESU. The Ministry ended up imposing its own changes, however, without taking the students' input into account.

25 Interview, September 2014, Garden City, Cairo.

26 Field notes, November 2014, University of Tanta, SU closing ceremony.

on the other. In contrast, the absence of this issue from the Alexandrians' discourse translates into more autonomous strategies that may even lead to leadership aspirations. These contrasts show that both dependency and identity performances, which are often a marker of a marginal condition, are, in fact, the result of strategies deriving from the construction of this marginality as a problem.

Contentious student activism in a city unlike the others

The aim of this paper was not at all to dwell on the reasons for the specificity of Alexandrian student activism; rather, it was to approach the relationship between governorates through the lens of the activists' interactions, perceptions, and attitudes within a contentious milieu. Its main goal was also to nuance the approach to center and margins by examining them as categories that emerge during interactions, and not as objective conditions. That being said, there is no doubt that the difference between the Alexandrians' attitudes and strategies towards the declared center and those of the other non-Cairenes are rooted in Alexandria's long-established contentious dynamics on the one hand, and on its position as Egypt's second capital on the other.

The Alexandrian activists' independence from the capital city and their aspirations to become its competitors not only reveal that they have their own agenda, but also that they are part of a larger ecosystem of contentious actors, civil society, and political organizations within which they achieve recognition, experience, and mutual influence. This is not the case with other non-Cairene activists, however: in governorates such as Banha or Tanta, student activism is presented as the heart of the city's contentious dynamics, and so the activists need to *be at* and *work with* the center of the student milieu nationwide.

One might also say that while activists from the governorates "do" their local identities as a way of declaring their existence and asserting themselves vis-à-vis the center, Alexandrians, who are aware that they are neither "from" nor "in" Cairo, do have a feeling of "*regional existence*", but this feeling manifests itself in an awareness that they are not like the other governorates. Their local identity is thus carried with pride, combined with a sense of responsibility towards others. This attitude is a fitting one for activists who belong to Egypt's second capital, and who are perhaps seeking to become an alternative center for the marginalized.

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