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The Education and Social Reform of Al-Azhar University: A Short Historical Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the university is perhaps one of the oldest social institutions in the world and plays an intricate and pivotal role in societies in various cultures. Every university has a unique story in its history, growth, controversies, and its on-going survival. The role of each respective university's faculty and academic leadership has a certain level of professional interaction in terms of their role and contract with society. This paper examines the historical evolution, challenges, reforms, and proposed prediction of the renowned Al-Azhar University of Cairo, Egypt.

Founded in the late 10th century A.D. by the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt, Al-Azhar University is considered the world's most prominent cultural and academic center for Sunni Islamic theology, philosophy, and Arabic literature. It is considered the second oldest operating degree-granting university after the University of al-Karaouine of Fez, Morocco (c. 859 A.D) (Dodge, 1961; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Although, originally intended to be a congregational mosque and place for worship, it gradually evolved into a center of learning and academic institution.

In its infant years, its governance and student curricula revolved around the studies of religious jurisprudence, interpretations, and theological hermeneutics. Al-Azhar University is regarded as the only existing academic institution in the world that is organized based on its original Islamic model while other universities have adopted and continue to adopt the Western model of academic organization (Dodge, 1961; Teferra & Altbach, 2004).

During the onset of European colonialism, Al-Azhar University witnessed what Kezar (2001) would probably describe as a dialectical change.

Under the French occupation in the late 18th century, Al-Azhar began proactively propagating resistance against European influence, which led to Napoleon's army bombarding the university. Gradually, Al-Azhar saw a dramatic shift from its traditionally centered autonomy to an expansion of educational reform and intellectual change. Until educational reform began taking root in Egypt, Al-Azhar had no formal degrees or entrance requirements. It was not until the 1930s that Al-Azhar was granted university status and began academic and governance reformation (Meri, 2006).

The creation of new fields and disciplines of studies, international student enrollment, and the establishment of a women's college brought about a teleological change towards reform and transported Al-Azhar to a new limelight of academic leadership, in line with the general system of education. The faculties of engineering, medicine, and business administration were added to the existing programs of Islamic law studies and Arabic literature (Qubain, 1966).

With the July revolution of 1952 and the rise of Arab socialism, Al-Azhar was gradually brought under the sphere of influence of the national government. Secular studies and Western positive law were introduced and the selection of the headmaster was striped from the clerics and given to the president. Al-Azhar moved slowly from a religious entity to a political post dependant on funding from the Egyptian state and its administration selected by the government according to state policies and interests (Crecelius, 1966; Gearon, 2012; Cardinal, 2005).

Interestingly for some Egyptians, Al-Azhar University has been a source of cultural tension representing more religious repression than intellectual progressivism. Once seen as a moderate

academic institution, Egyptian intellectuals accused Al-Azhar University for pushing its objectives of protecting Islam and using censorship campaigns as a political tool to win over Egyptian traditionalists. Is this what Kezar (2001) meant when describing the political change theory and the affects of external social movements? This attempt to control the academic direction and governance of a university known for its rich intellectual history and Socratic-style education since medieval times has raised concern among contemporary Egyptian scholars and academicians (Del Castillo, 2001).

No doubt that the Arab Spring that began in 2010 will bring a level of uncertainty for the future of Al-Azhar's academic governance and its role in both Egyptian and Islamic society. Despite its educational reach on the international scale and its historical omnipresence, the challenge that lies ahead for Al-Azhar University is how to balance the inevitability of progressive organizational change and social reform with its role as the leading religious institution in the Islamic world. These challenges between academic secularists and traditionalists will continue to be felt especially among faith-based higher education institutions.

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