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Situation Assessment | 14 October 2020

# Poverty Uprising in Egypt: Causes and Consequences

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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## Unit for Political Studies

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On 20 September 2020, popular protests swept across the villages of Egypt, beginning in Giza and then spreading to the governorates of the south.<sup>(1)</sup> Despite the near-total suppression of political life under Abdel Fattah El Sisi, demonstrators were able to come out in force and demand the President's removal. Events reached a peak on 25 September, the "Friday of Rage", with simultaneous protests taking place in multiple different governorates.

## Causes

The recent uprising can largely be attributed to deterioration in social and economic conditions as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. According to government statistics from August, within the last six months some 2.5 million people have lost their jobs and unemployment has risen from 7.7% to 9.6%. These figures are likely to be understated.<sup>(2)</sup> The same agency reports that 26% of the Egyptian workforce have lost their jobs permanently as a result of coronavirus, most of them in manufacturing (food, fabrics, agricultural products, building materials) and the transport and storage sectors.<sup>(3)</sup> The pandemic has also hit tourism, which accounts for 12% of Egypt's GDP<sup>(4)</sup> and brought some 13 billion USD into the country in 2019.<sup>(5)</sup> An official study predicts that the tourism sector will lose 70% of its income as a result of coronavirus.<sup>(6)</sup> These losses have been passed on to the two million people working in tourism and aviation in the country. With such a bleak economic outlook, it is no surprise that many of Giza's villagers came out to protest.

Government action, in particular the decision to allow price rises, also played a role in encouraging protests. The final straw came when it was announced that buildings that do not comply with construction codes will be subject to demolition or fines, with serious repercussions for those on limited incomes. According to official reports, as many as 2 million of the residences built between 2000 and 2017 are non-compliant.<sup>(7)</sup>

Of course, some of Egypt's most impoverished regions have not so far witnessed demonstrations. But those that have show a clear relationship between poverty and protests in the country.

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1 "WATCH: Egyptian Protesters overturn Police Truck on 'Palacegate' Anniversary," *The New Arab*, 20/9/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3nmZlqO>

2 Yasmin Saleem, "Mu'addal al-Bitala fi Misr Yaqfuz ila 9.6% Khilal ar-Rub' ath-Thani bi-Sabab Korona", *Misrawi*, 17/08/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/33CSXFJ>

3 Yasmin Saleem, "al-Ihsa': 26% min al-Mushtaghilin fi Misr Faqadu 'Amalahum Niha'iyyan bi-Sabab Korona", *Misrawi*, 20/9/2020, accessed on 07/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3ljaeJS>

4 Travel, Tourism Contribute to Egypt's GDP by 11.9%, *Egypt Today*, 19/3/2019, accessed on 7/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30lhMy2>

5 "Egypt's Tourism Revenues Rise to \$12.6B in 2019," *Egypt Today*, 2/10/2019, accessed on 7/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2SBkuRj>

6 Clemens Breisinger et al, "Economic impact of COVID-19 on tourism and remittances: Insights from Egypt", IFPRI blog, 1/4/2020, accessed on 13/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/36VqLjk>

7 "Egypt Demolishes Thousands of Illegal Buildings in 3 Months," *Ahram Online*, 9/7/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3iE99L0>

## Poverty and protest: What do the numbers mean?

The demonstrations of September 2020 reflect a long history of worsening economic and social conditions dating back to the beginning of Sisi's presidency in 2014. The President has combined repression with ultra-neoliberal economics, floating the Egyptian pound and overseeing a sharp rise in prices and the cost of government services – with poverty expanding as a result.

The protests can be mapped closely onto the most impoverished areas in the country, particularly in the south. According to official statistics, in 2017 / 2018 32.5% of Egyptians were living under the poverty line,<sup>(8)</sup> meaning approximately one third of the country's 100 million citizens were earning less than 735 EGP (\$47) a month. In the south the rate is 52%, with some provinces even worse off: in Asyut it stands at 66% and Sohag 57%. Between 2016 and 2018, as a result of economic reform, the number of Egyptians living in poverty had risen by almost five percentage points. Of the country's 1,000 most impoverished villages, 226 are in Sohag, 206 in Asyut and 66 in Minya, all in the south of the country.<sup>(9)</sup>

The latest round of protests can thus be characterised as the rebellion of the impoverished. The middle class, by comparison, have been notably absent. This can primarily be attributed to fear of the regime, which has tightened its grip over the cities: the events of 2019, when the security forces rounded up huge numbers of demonstrators, is still very much a recent memory. There is also a broad feeling of disillusionment and apathy towards a revolution whose potential was never realised.

## Regime response

The protests seem to have taken the regime by surprise: after seven years of police repression and intimidation, popular mobilisation seemed to have been almost totally smothered. For the first few days it failed to take any action, encouraging others to join the demonstrations and allowing them to spread rapidly across a wide geographical area. It did not use its usual tools of extreme force to break up the protests. The security forces, in fact, seem to have been confused by demonstrators' new tactics: night-time mobilisation, simultaneous protest across multiple villages, face coverings, and the use of social media to record the protests and send them to foreign media. They may also have been concerned about how those who did not participate would react to intense suppression – that a major crackdown -might lead to protests getting out of control.

The regime's initial response was thus confined to a media campaign intended to undermine the protesters. At first it denied that protests were even taking place. Once they became too big to ignore, it instead claimed that they were taking place on a limited scale. Then it began to cry conspiracy and pointing fingers at its usual scapegoat, the Muslim Brotherhood. While it may be true, of course,

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8 "Mu'addal al-Fuqr fi Misr Yartafi' ila 32.5 fi'l-Mi'a min 'Adad as-Sukkan", *BBC Arabic*, 30/7/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020 at: <https://bbc.in/2SAXlCg>

9 Ibid.

that some members or supporters participated in demonstrations, the Brotherhood itself has lost much of its organising capacity thanks to government repression, and is unlikely to have played any significant role itself.

When protests continued, however, the regime turned to lethal violence to break some of them up. Two protesters were killed: Sami Bashir, from Buleidah in Giza, died on 25 September,<sup>(10)</sup> while Isa el Rawi was shot in his home on 30 September by security forces.<sup>(11)</sup> Hundreds of others, including numerous children, were arrested in the last week of September. Some have since been released.<sup>(12)</sup>

Foreign media coverage has been unusually limited in these protests.

## Turning point

This round of protests represents a turning point for Egypt's political scene. Firstly, it is the first time that simultaneous protests have taken place in more than one governorate, a point which becomes even more significant when we remember that southern Egypt rarely sees unrest of this kind and that these protests have targeted the head of the regime directly at a time of unprecedented political repression and total closure of the public sphere. Secondly, it is one of the few occasions on which poorer sections of society have come out to protest economic and social conditions en masse. Thirdly, the protests' wide scope has made suppression relatively difficult. And finally, the participation of young people raises questions about how successful the regime has been in crushing the culture of protest, especially given that many of them are too young to have taken part in the January Revolution. As small as they may have been, these protests represent a major step towards a reclamation of the public sphere in Egypt from the police state.

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10 "Anba' 'an Suqut Qatil Khilal Muzahara Munahida li'r-Ra'is as-Sisi", *Deutsche Welle*, 26/9/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2F8XnKZ>

11 "Lahzat Qatl 'Isa ar-Rawi wa-Hujum ash-Shurta li-Tafriq al-Janaza", *YouTube*, 1/10/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3ntixVh>

12 "Munazzama: l'tiqal Ba'd Mi'at fi Misr Wust Da'wat li'l-Ihtijaj", *Deutsche Welle*, 28/9/2020, accessed on 7/10/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2GJrdWK>