

# The Revolutionary Kids Are Alright: Egypt Ten Years after the Coup

by Stephen R. Grand

A decade after the military staged a coup to regain control, Egypt's revolutionary youth, who took to the streets in 2011 to topple long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak, are unmoved. They are perplexed and saddened by the dramatic turns their revolution has taken over the last dozen years, lurching from autocracy to nascent democracy and back again. But they still dare to dream of a better Egypt – one that emerges from its current political, economic and social crises more free and just and prosperous.

## *A generation in exile<sup>1</sup>*

Many of Egypt's revolutionary youth no longer live in Egypt. In 2013, the military ended definitively Egypt's brief democratic experiment by removing from power the country's first popularly elected president, Mohamed Morsi, who had previously served as part of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership and who governed as president at

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on private conversations with Egyptians in exile.

times incompetently and at times dictatorially. In the coup's aftermath, many of the revolutionary youth faced harassment by the state security services and even imprisonment. Often a furtive call from a friend connected to the new military regime tipped them off that it was no longer safe to remain. Leaving family, friends and career behind, they packed their bags and fled to Europe or North America. Many of the more Islamist-leaning of them ended up in Istanbul; the more secular in Berlin and New York.

The revolutionary youth are also no longer youth. A dozen years after their revolution, many are now well into middle age, with the grey hair and wrinkles to prove it. They have experienced more than most do in a lifetime: the thrill of overthrowing a dictator and briefly changing the course of history, the agony of seeing it all come crashing down as the revolutionary coalition splintered, and the tragedy of exile. They bear the physical scars of beatings by riot police and time spent in Egyptian jails.

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Even deeper are the emotional ones of seeing friends die in front of them, of marriages torn apart and of painful separations from friends and family. These were hard years that would have aged anyone.

Still, they remain undeterred. At a time in life when their American and European counterparts are focused on planning family vacations and saving for retirement, many of them continue to hope and dream of an Egypt that is democratic, where the rule of law prevails, where diversity is tolerated and where the economy is not owned and operated by military officers.

With each passing day in exile, though, the realisation deepens that they may not be the ones to usher in these changes and may never return to live in their promised land. Nonetheless, many remain committed to the cause, as they feel a responsibility for helping ensure the next generation inherits a better Egypt. Having failed in their own revolution, they owe this much to their children and grandchildren – as well as to their colleagues who remain behind in Egypt, who continue to experience persecution, imprisonment and torture.

Exile has provided them with fresh perspectives upon their homeland, the kind that come only with distance and the ability to compare one's lot with others. It has sharpened their vision of what they want for Egypt, and of the challenges that might lie ahead.

### *A brutal – and unsustainable – regime*

They are not sanguine about change happening anytime soon. President

el-Sisi has re-centralised power in his own hands and sought to crush any dissent by outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood, shuttering many civil society organisations and jailing activists and journalists who dare criticise his regime. At the same time, he has tightened cooperation between the army and the other state security forces and rewarded them with control over an even greater share of the economy (though how much of the country's GDP they control remains a state secret). The clear intent – as demonstrated most concretely by the construction of a new administrative capital in the desert outside of Cairo – is to prevent another Tahrir Square-like popular uprising.

Yet the revolutionary youth know in their hearts that such a regime is not sustainable over the longer term. An Egyptian population that has tossed out one dictator will not endure forever the repression, corruption and economic hardship of another. At some point, the crises buffeting the country will prompt a renewed push for political reform.

Already this past year the Egyptian economy stalled badly. When Russia invaded Ukraine, foreign investors pulled 22 billion US dollars in portfolio investments out of Egypt,<sup>2</sup> setting off a foreign exchange crisis. For months, foreign goods sat in port while the Egyptian government and businesses scrambled to find the dollars to pay for them. By late summer, Egypt looked like it might be on the brink of default.

<sup>2</sup> "A Crisis of Confidence in Egypt", in *The Economist*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/01/24/a-crisis-of-confidence-in-egypt>.

As they did in 2013 when el-Sisi took power, the Gulf States (the forces of counter-revolution in the region) swooped in to shore up the Egyptian economy, though this time they did it far more reluctantly and with conditions. In October, the government agreed as well to a 3 billion US dollars bailout deal with the IMF,<sup>3</sup> but also with stringent conditions attached, including that the Egyptian pound be allowed to float freely against the dollar and that more than 2 billion US dollars in state assets be privatised. Egypt is now the IMF's second largest debtor after Argentina.<sup>4</sup>

The floating of the pound precipitated a 50 per cent drop in its value,<sup>5</sup> which raised markedly the cost of imports, leading inflation to soar to 30 per cent year-on-year by this April. With an estimated 60 million of Egyptians living at or below the poverty line,<sup>6</sup> a government institute advised citizens to switch to eating chicken feet to meet their nutritional needs.<sup>7</sup> It is uncertain

whether the government will make good on its other promise – privatising state assets – as this has ramifications for el-Sisi's base, the military generals and crony capitalists who support him. With past loans to his government, the IMF succeeded in altering certain macroeconomic policies but not the larger structure of the Egyptian economy.

Egypt's economic woes highlight the limits of a statist economic policy. GDP growth chugged along at 3.9 per cent last year<sup>8</sup> but only because of massive public expenditures on infrastructure megaprojects – including the new capital and the expansion of the Suez Canal – and because of natural gas revenues, while the population rose by 2 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Private sector growth remained stagnant.<sup>10</sup> By June, the government predicts the country's debt will represent 93 per cent of its annual GDP.<sup>11</sup> How such a repressive regime, so laser-focused on political stability at any cost, can generate the robust private sector growth necessary to get out of that hole is unclear.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew England, "Egypt Vows to Cut Military's Outsized Role in Economy under IMF Bailout", in *Financial Times*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/0ab59ecb-da0b-42d9-a5da-35674c001e28>.

<sup>4</sup> Jiyeong Go and Alex Irwin-Hunt, "The IMF's Top 10 Biggest Debtors", in *fDi Intelligence*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/news/the-imfs-top-10-biggest-debtors-81405>.

<sup>5</sup> "Companies Skeptical about Egypt's Push to Ease Industry Ties", in *AP News*, 12 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/841ecf1a9fdda0554f91bfead210901d>.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy E. Kaldas, "Neither Public nor Private: Egypt without a Viable Engine for Growth", in *Tahrir Institute Analysis*, 12 January 2023, <https://timep.org/?p=37787>.

<sup>7</sup> Nadeen Ebrahim, "Why Egypt is Asking Its People to Eat Chicken Feet", in *CNN*, 19 January 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/18/business/egypt-economy-chicken-feet-mime-intl>.

<sup>8</sup> Egyptian annual GDP growth data from *Trading Economics*: <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/gdp-growth-annual>.

<sup>9</sup> Egyptian population growth data from the US Agency for International Development's *Country Dashboard*: <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/egypt>.

<sup>10</sup> S&P Global, "Business Confidence Weakens as Downturn in Activity Remains Steep", in *S&P Global Egypt PMI*, 5 March 2023, <https://www.pmi.spglobal.com/Public/Home/PressRelease/32027225a5ee43179e0aa9b40fcea868>.

<sup>11</sup> "How Deep are Egypt's Economic Troubles?", in *Reuters*, 3 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-deep-are-egypts-economic-troubles-2023-03-03>.

## *A moment to be seized*

The challenge for the revolutionary youth, and indeed all critics of the current government, is to be ready for the pendulum to swing back – for the time when the public becomes disenchanted with military rule, and the brutal authoritarianism, economic mismanagement and graft associated with it. Inevitably, there will be a political opening at some point: a moment when it becomes possible to debate reform, to contest an election that has the potential to be relatively free and fair, or to protest openly once again. The revolutionary youth recognise that the last time around – when Tahrir Square erupted in protests – they were not fully prepared to lead. At that pivotal moment, they failed to offer the Egyptian people a viable governing alternative to the autocracy that they have long known. Next time will need to be different. Otherwise, there is the real risk that renewed social unrest, in the absence of viable political alternatives to channel that discord, could bring state collapse and anarchy – in a country with more than 100 million people.

The revolutionary youth may not be on the frontlines of these future struggles, but they recognise that they can offer valuable help and advice. They can provide the next generation the one benefit of age: the wisdom of their experience.

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