

Background Information on Egypt
By Noor-Aiman Khan, PhD
Department of History
Colgate University

Egypt has about 80 million people and is the most populated Arab country. It is the second-most populated African country. The per capita income is about \$5,500, but the income gap is very large, with the vast majority of people living on about \$5 a day. It is a net exporter of petroleum, but not a major one. Many Egyptians work in the petro states or the West and send money back for their families. The three largest sources of hard currency in Egypt are tourism, the Suez Canal, and remittances from abroad. The literacy rate is between 60–70%, pretty good for Africa. About 85–87% of Egyptians are Sunni Muslim and 10–12% are Coptic Christian. Egypt receives 1.3 billion in military aid from the United States.

Despite being technically independent since 1922, Egypt has never experienced a real democracy. It was under British colonial control until the Free Officers Revolution in 1952. Since Nasser and the Free Officers were pretty popular, the time is often looked back on nostalgically, especially by the lower classes, but it was a military government.

Since Nasser's death in 1970, Egypt was ruled by Anwar Sadat until he was assassinated in 1981, and since then, by M. Hosni Mubarak. Upon coming to power, Mubarak instated an Emergency Law, which suspended many constitutional protections and basically gave the state complete jurisdiction for anything falling under the category "security."

Presently, there are no guaranteed rights to privacy, free speech, assembly, press, or even a trial. Although there are a number of members of the judiciary who have tried to maintain its independence from the state, they are regularly thwarted and often removed or worse.

The political party that controls the country is the National Democratic Party. Other parties are allowed but kept weak; the Muslim Brotherhood is technically banned but still the biggest party in opposition. When the elections are relatively free, they carry about 20% of the votes. There are periodic "elections" for a parliament that has no real power, and Mubarak, now 82 years old, is "re-elected" regularly with more than 90% of the vote. Recently, it has been clear that he expects his son Gamal to be "elected" to succeed him, although there has always been a chance that another military strongman will take over. (Gamal is not from the military.) Among the major contenders are Omar Suleiman, who was just named vice president; Ahmed Shafiq, who has just been made prime minister, and Sami Annan, the Army Chief of Staff, who recently visited the United States.

Why are Egyptians in the streets protesting?

First of all, they want a real democracy. No one is fooled by the "elections" that just play musical chairs with the people already in power. They want real choices. Yes, many want

the choice to vote for the Muslim Brotherhood. But that has not been the major theme in these protests, and in fact has been less important than anyone expected. The real issue is that the people want fair and free elections with all choices on the table. They want what most Americans want here.

Protesters also oppose the use of torture by the police, whose actions are protected by the Emergency Law. Abuse by police has become endemic to the point that no one expects *not* to be tortured if arrested. And the reasons for arrest can be as simple as not moving quickly enough out of the way of a police officer. People disappear and die in police custody on a regular basis, and if the “arrest” is for a supposed “political crime,” there is very little the family or even lawyers can do. It is estimated that there are close to 10,000 political prisoners in Egypt at any given time. See “We are all Kahled Said” on Facebook for more on the issue of torture in Egypt.

Thirdly, protesters oppose corruption. It is almost impossible to get anything done in Egypt without knowing someone or bribing someone. This is prevalent at every level of society. You need to bribe government officials to run a business, get a permit for anything, avoid a trumped up fine, get or keep a public sector job, or even get a driver's license in fewer than five visits. Education is supposedly free, but government schools are so bad that only the most desperate will send their children. For example, the average class size of a 7th grade Arabic-language class in a public school in Cairo (according to my sister-in-law, who is a teacher) is about 70 students. The only way to pass the national tests is to hire private tutors. Health care is also expensive and corrupt. You literally have to budget about 25% of hospital costs for an operation for “tips” so that nurses and doctors will help you. Private care is better, but no less corrupt. Neither nurses nor teachers are paid a living wage, so it can be said that without the supplemental income from tutoring, tips, or bribes, they might be better off begging in the streets. (Fact: a high school teacher's salary after 10 years of experience is about 400 LE/month in Cairo, plus about another 1500 LE twice a year as a bonus after the testing season. The salary doesn't go far, as a kilogram of beef is about 60LE today. Roundtrip fare using overcrowded public transport from a slum to work might run as low as 20 LE/month.)

Living conditions are deplorable. If one is lucky enough to afford to buy a flat, the first thing to do is check the plumbing. Usually, it is so bad it has to be torn out and reinstalled — and this is in the case of a *new* building. (Everyone knows the plumbing installed by the contractor will be defective; it would be cheaper to not have it in the first place, but someone had to do that work in order for someone else to get their cut from the financing agency in the government.) To install a new pipe the flat owner must pay at least three different people bribes to get the paperwork to do it “legally.” Oh, and make sure to have the forms in triplicate; someone will demand an original “to check” and then there will be a fee to pay to get it back. Buildings literally fall down in Egypt all the time — How can quality codes be enforced with this kind of corruption? The list goes on.

Connected to the corruption is the bureaucratic inefficiency. It takes hours just to pay an electric or phone bill. Getting a copy of a birth certificate will require a full day off of work, trekking to multiple offices, plus the bribes. And the bureaucracy can't be avoided,

because *everything* needs government pieces of paper. (Then there's the Eagle Stamp, which some call the "vulture stamp," held by only one trusted flunky per government office.)

A personal example: For my Egyptian driver's license I needed to go to the Interior Ministry to get a stamped copy of my marriage certificate to prove I was Egyptian (though I am married to the Egyptian whose name is on my Egyptian passport, which I had.) Next I went to the Foreign Affairs Ministry to get them to translate the marriage certificate, and then to another office to get it stamped. Then I had to bribe someone to say I had driven a stick shift for the test, because my own car was an automatic. Then I was told I couldn't put my degree on the license (occupation is listed on these things) because it was from the United States. Despite having a Fulbright to Cairo University and all the documentation from the Bi-National Commission, I was supposed to take my degree to the Ministry of Education to get it endorsed, and then do another set of acrobatics. I decided it was easier to be listed as "uneducated" on the license.

Another example: My sister-in-law was born on Feb. 4, but the certificate of passing high school has a mark on it so it looks like Feb. 14. After weeks of going between various government offices to get this fixed so that her college degree would be registered correctly, we finally gave up. We made a mark in front of the 4 on her birth certificate and enrollment paper. So now her birth date is the 14th. It's easier to forge than to correct a government mistake. Imagine this kind of rigmarole for every bit of paperwork. The rich pay poor people to stand in line for them!

Finally, the protesters are fed up with poverty. Prices have risen over 12% in the past few months, but food has risen the fastest. Meat has gone up 23%, sugar about 30% and tomatoes even more. In a country where most of the population spends about 50% of its income on food, this has been devastating. People can't put food on their family, as "W" would say. Yes, things are tough everywhere, but they are very bad in Egypt, and the government is spending billions on weapons and the security apparatus which protects them from the people more than it protects Egypt from any external threat. Plus, the fat cats in government and their "private sector" cronies are very visibly flaunting their ill-gotten gains. The gap between the rich and the overwhelming majority of poor is huge, but now the middle class is shrinking quickly — sliding down, not going up. There are thousands of luxury housing units going up all over Cairo while the majority of the people are packed like sardines in tiny apartments with deteriorating infrastructure. "Let them eat cake" is the government's attitude.

If all the above sounds exhausting, it is. Living like this has led to a sense of desperation and humiliation for the Egyptians. The people really believe that their kids have little chance of having decent lives in their own country. Common people feel they are denied basic dignity, they have to "yes massa" every time they deal with any representative of the government, or anyone with marginally more power in this corrupt system than they have. It is soul-destroying. I wept when I saw the crowds refuse to back down from the security services. So did almost every other Egyptian I know, including those — like me

— who were not born to Egypt but fell in love with it and its amazingly generous, kind, and — it turns out — brave people.

So who do the Egyptians want in charge?

Good question: why don't we let them vote on it? Realistically, it will take at least a few months to arrange for free elections. Until then, Egyptians will accept a transitional government they trust to turn over power to a new elected civilian government. They might even trust the military to do it, but I don't think so. The two most-trusted people by the masses are probably Mohamad al-Baradei, the former head of the IAEA, and Amr Moussa, the head of the Arab League. Amr Mousa is very popular; al-Baradei is more well-known abroad. Maybe another figure will appear. Opposition leaders such as Ayman Nour would probably not want the job, as they would want to run for Parliament.

Could elections be held fairly?

I don't know. Egypt does have some reliable figures in the judiciary, but I personally would prefer international observers. Would the Egyptian masses? Again, I don't know. Most Egyptians I know distrust international organizations and are very leery of threats to their country's sovereignty, perhaps for good reason.

What should the U.S. and other governments do?

Support democracy. The people are actually quite clear. It's time to stop supporting dictators who are *not* more reliable than a free people. And it's time we stopped thinking our foreign policy and economic concerns should be more important to other countries than their own. As for the economic aid, that's for U.S. interests — the freely elected leaders of the U.S. can decide what to do about that. But, we can't buy Egypt anymore.