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# Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice: Understanding the Egyptian Revolution

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Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice:

Understanding the Egyptian Revolution

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Distinguishing the primary causes of any revolution can be a daunting task, making the idea of analyzing such factors in a country with as rich, textured, and complex a history as Egypt's truly overwhelming. A full appreciation of the causes of—and, in some sense, the necessity for—the events that transpired in Egypt on and subsequent to January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, entails the development of a deep understanding of the interplay of the social, political, religious, economic, and overall cultural elements of Egyptian life that span over hundreds of years. While it would be almost impossible to identify a single set of factors or events that finally plunged this nation into revolt after countless decades of passive suffering, what we *can* do is analyze the condition of pre-revolutionary Egypt through the lens of the people's demands. Perhaps the best way to do this is to draw from one of the main slogans that could be heard echoing through the streets of Cairo at the very beginning of this fateful revolution: "*Aish, Horreya, Adala Egtema'eya!*" or "Bread, freedom, social justice!"

### **Bread**

Like many other political revolutions, one of the greatest factors that came to ignite the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was the impact of ever-worsening economic turmoil. Following the assassination of President Anwar El Sadat in 1981, successor Hosni Mubarak inherited a nation already burdened with a foreign debt of approximately \$21 billion (Fahmy, 2012, p. 360). On the domestic front, Egyptians suffered crippling poverty as a result of years of inconsistent and underdeveloped economic policy. In an effort to liberate the country from the socialistic regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sadat implemented his *Infitah* policy, opening up the once public-dominated nation to private investment. Upon his ascension to power, Mubarak followed suit, pressing the nation towards a more privatized economy. Unfortunately, this abrupt change in policy was not accompanied by the national change in attitude essential to the success of such

drastic reform; according to data collected for the Egypt Human Development Report 2010, when asked whose responsibility it was to provide them with employment opportunities, “More than 80% [of Egyptian youths] said that it was the responsibility of the government or policymakers” while only 9% said “myself” (United Nations Development Programme, 2010, p. 136). In this data lies a clear illustration of the shallow extent to which *real* reform occurred during the market liberalization of the ‘80s and ‘90s. Even decades after it began, the Egyptian people’s perception of the role of government remains unaltered. Thus, want of a concrete, coherent transitional strategy placed the Egyptian people at an immediate disadvantage in a restructured economy.

The resulting lack of fluidity split the population into two extreme groups: the majority of Egyptians, surviving at, below, or just above the poverty line, and members of the former regime, accompanied by ultra-affluent business tycoons and another minority of second-tier *nouveaux-riches* who monopolized economic opportunities, power, and privileges (Kandeel, 2011, pp. 39-40). Between 1990 and 2009, the unemployment rate in Egypt hovered at around 8 to 11 percent, due in large part to the appearance of disproportionately large cohorts of citizens between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four (LaGraffe, 2012, pp. 71-74). This youth bulge, making up such a large portion of those active in the labor market, exacerbated the impact of high unemployment in Egypt, pushing more and more Egyptians into the depths of poverty.

In addition to these obstacles, the Egyptian pound suffered fatal depreciation throughout the same period, losing over half of its value between 1990 and 2001 and an additional third of that value by 2003 (Kandeel, 2011, p. 41). The combination of these factors with the global economic crisis of 2008 and the skyrocketing price of wheat in Egypt created the perfect storm, pushing basic necessities like bread out of reach for millions of Egyptians. There are, of course,

several other factors that contributed to the collapse of the Egyptian economy, but these issues are only some of many that came to inspire the Egyptian revolution. With empty stomachs and hearts ripe with contempt, the Egyptian people sat seething in silence, knowing that even the pains of hunger would be preferable to the potential consequences of protest.

### **Freedom**

Any discussion of freedom—or lack thereof—in Egypt begins with a discussion of Law No. 162 of 1958, otherwise known as “emergency law.” As the name implies, emergency law is reserved only for times of crisis, and yet it remained in place for almost half a century, augmenting Hosni Mubarak’s ruthless authoritarian regime (Stork, 2012, pp. 465-468). Behind the façade of maintaining national security, this law allowed the Egyptian government to revoke countless basic constitutional rights, placing the Egyptians in a position to fear their government more than almost any other internal or external threat. Throughout Mubarak’s reign, the Egyptian people suffered severe and unprovoked police brutality, mass censorship, detention without charge, criminalization of organized protest, and torture at the hands of State Security Investigations officers and, eventually, even ordinary police. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this knowledge is that the Egyptian government committed all of these atrocities and more within the parameters of the law.

The 1971 constitution establishes the power to declare a “state of emergency” and vests that power in the presidency, subject to ratification by Egypt’s parliament, the People’s Assembly. A state of emergency can be declared “whenever public security or order are threatened,” in the form of “war [or] a state threatening the eruption of war,” “internal disturbances,” “natural disasters,” or “the spread of an epidemic” (Law 162, 1958). Vague

language covering a broad spectrum of scenarios became an enormous contributor to the ease with which the Egyptian government implemented and enforced this law for over 30 years.

Upon declaration of a state of emergency, the president may restrict the people's freedom of assembly, movement, residence, or passage; search persons and places without restriction of the Criminal Procedure Code and assign any person to perform this task; order the surveillance of any type of letters, supervise censorship, and seize any forms of expression before they are published; determine the opening and closing times of public shops and order the closure of any of these shops; confiscate any property, order the sequestration of companies, and postpone the due dates of loans for sequestered property; evict some areas or isolate them, and regulate or limit means of transportation (Law 162, 1958). Even more chilling than the blatant revocation of the most basic of human rights found in a free society—liberty, property, and, ultimately, self-preservation—is the dehumanizing extent to which the Egyptian government enforced these restrictions. One Aljazeera journalist recounts an incident of being assaulted by “uniformed and plainclothes assailants” when, positioned in an eighth floor hotel room, the news crew decided to film security forces beating a woman on the street below. The assailants broke into the hotel room and, while the crew managed to escape with few injuries, destroyed the equipment used to document the gruesome scene (Stork, 2012, p. 474). This is one of the milder stories that one might come across while sifting through the countless examples of the mercilessly enforced emergency law in Egypt.

Worse still is the story of Ramy Essam, an aspiring musician and former architecture student, who felt inspired to take the repetitive chants of the revolution which were, in his own words, “getting old,” and turn them into a song (McTighe, 2011). Little did he know that his song, entitled “Irhal” or “Leave,” would quickly become the anthem of the revolution. Essam

became one of many protestors detained for their actions at Tahrir Square; he was, in fact, called to a makeshift army camp by name. There, he was brutally beaten for four hours. He was “stripped of his clothes, his hands and feet bound, hit with wooden sticks, beaten with metal rods, his back and head stomped on, and his long hair slashed with shards of broken glass.” While Essam’s flesh may have been broken, his spirit remained intact as he returned to protest immediately after recovering from his injuries (McTighe, 2011). The most heart-wrenching story of all is likely that of Khaled Said, whose tragic death became a symbol to those involved in the demonstrations of the revolution:

“Something changed on the evening of June 6, 2010, when two plainclothes police in Alexandria viciously and in public beat 28-year-old Khaled Said to death, dragging him from an Internet café into the street and smashing his face repeatedly into marble steps. Khaled Said was not a political activist or otherwise well known: on the contrary, it seems that his very ordinariness—a young man of no particular distinction with hair on the long side, very much into music and computers—helped make the before-and-after photos of his face emblematic for the tens of thousands of Egyptians who took to the streets in January 2011” (Stork, 2012, p. 464).

With a constant influx of political media muddling our perception of the world, it is sometimes easy to eschew stories of violence in the Middle East. The story of Khaled Said, however, leaves us with a certain level of inevitable human empathy that cannot be easily forgotten. To know the story of Khaled Said’s death is to know the story of all of Egypt, a story in which the villain seems all the more infallible because he sits in the hero’s seat.

### **Social Justice**

The concept of “social justice” is an umbrella term covering everything from civil rights to economic equality through the redistribution of wealth. Still, the idea of social justice is able to stand independent of the ideals of generous freedoms and a thriving economy because it refers

not simply to an excellent state of being but an *equal* one. According to the idea of social justice, all people are born with equal human dignity and therefore should share in both trial and triumph, whether social, economic, or political. This principle may be the most important contributor to the long-brewing fury of the Egyptian revolution because while some people—most people, in fact—were suffering the miserly existence described above, toiling for a meager wage, which could not even provide the most basic necessities, and being silenced for demanding change, others sat atop pedestals of gold and watched the great tapestry of Egypt unravel, thread by feeble thread.

One of the greatest examples of a lack of social justice in Egypt is found in its tremendous mistreatment of women though it is important to emphasize that this discrimination, something deeply ingrained in Middle Eastern society, came not so much as a conscious choice but as an accumulation of consequential aspects of Egyptian life. For example, “Women are concentrated in the lower-paid job classifications and lower-paying firms and typically make nearly 30 percent less than men, though this is due more to differences in education and experience than outright discrimination” (Beinin, 2012, p. 332). Taking this into account, it is easy to see how inflation, unemployment, and low wages came to impact women with a particular magnitude in the decay of the Egyptian economy, especially after the decline of the public sectors, with women experiencing “much higher rates of unemployment than men because public sector wage and employment policies are relatively woman-friendly” (Beinin, 2012, p. 324).

These gender relation issues reached their peak in 2007 when workers at the Mansura-España textile firm began to protest in response to rumors that the company would soon be liquidated and “its land sold to a private school adjacent to the factory owned by a member of



Parliament of the ruling party” (Beinin, 2012, p. 333). The female workers protested with a level of ferocity that contested and sometimes even surpassed that of their male counterparts; several women began hunger strikes and five even threatened suicide. Despite a valiant battle on the part of the protestors, the MP who so coveted the land eventually bought it (Beinin, 2012, p. 333).

The United Bank was legally obligated to pay the wages and severance compensation of those on the payroll during the time of the sale but it failed to do so; in June of 2011, about 100 of these workers, mostly women, including Mariam Hawas, a 44-year-old mother of three, went to the bank's Mansura office seeking to collect the wages they were due. The bank's officials taunted the women and told them to “go block traffic in the streets” if they wanted their rights—and that's exactly what they did (Beinin, 2012, p. 333). In the midst of the protest, one traffic policeman urged a truck driver to run over the protestors, saying the blood of each was worth only about EGP 50 (approximately eight US dollars). The truck driver ran over Mariam Hawas and another woman, Samah 'Isa; Hawas died on the way to the hospital and 'Isa was severely injured. The driver responsible was charged with “causing wrongful death and injury, but was released without bail” and “the traffic policeman was not found” (Beinin, 2012, p. 334). While the subservience of women is a general precept of Egyptian culture, governmental reluctance to protect women's rights under the same laws with which it protects those of Egyptian men reflects an extremely convoluted conception of justice.

The inhumane treatment of one particular group extended well beyond women; street children, for instance, were frequently abducted and sexually abused by the police, sometimes even publicly humiliated for being homeless and “worthless” by association (Khaldoun, 2009, p. 30). It came to be that “the perception of corruption among Egyptians [went] beyond the daily reality of bribery and the awareness of fraudulent business dealings to a more generalized sense

that incentives and rewards were unfair” (Kinninmont, 2012, p. 5). Those who achieved success in this distorted economy were part of a closed elite thriving through close ties to the government, receiving consistent favorable treatment and privileges that were unattainable to the average citizen. In short, rewards had more to do with luck than genuine merit and incentives were inevitably laced with corruption.

Finally, the grotesque picture is painted complete. The social, economic, and political atrocities that occurred in Egypt prior to the revolution were not random misfortunes made worse by “bad timing,” but a systematic and merciless power grab on the part of the ruling regime. It becomes apparent that “the issue was not simply low wages, or collapsing healthcare, or the failing education system, but perceptions that these phenomena were related to government failures, chronic corruption and an abandonment of state responsibilities” (Kinninmont, 2012, p. 5). Thus, we see that the primary causes of the Egyptian revolution should not be called “primary causes” at all; it was not a series of unfortunate events that pushed the people to their limit, rather, it was an overarching lack of simple human dignity. The Egyptian government allowed its people to starve in an almost completely unregulated economy, provided benefits only to those who could benefit it, subjected those who opposed this system to brutal torture and months of detention without reasonable charge, and, ultimately, allowed and intended the Egyptian people to feel like subhuman beings, all in order to elevate its own authority. The ruling regime made one of its greatest mistakes in believing that it could control a people it chose not to serve, consequently nullifying the contract between government and people and igniting the revolution that would change the nation of Egypt forever.

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