

The demographics of Egyptian dissent may be shifting

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The country is preparing for parliamentary elections after a rare wave of anti-government demonstrations

Protests broke out in multiple locations across Egypt last month. Although small, the disturbances are significant, occurring in a climate where public opposition often results in a lengthy prison term, or even death. The unrest was bound up with an intensified government campaign to demolish informal housing. It comes as the authorities prepare for lower house elections later this month.



A police van parked in the rural Egyptian town of Edfu (Marlene Vicente / Shutterstock)

What next

Pro-government candidates are expected to sweep the board in the election. The street, rather than the ballot box, remains the only possible outlet for dissent. Even then, extreme repression will largely deter anti-government mobilisation. However, deteriorating socio-economic conditions will leave some communities feeling they have nothing to lose, fuelling sporadic protests in poorer areas. This contrasts with previous rounds of unrest, whose organisers typically hailed from wealthier, urban families.

Subsidiary Impacts

- The combined impacts of COVID-19 and state subsidy cuts will squeeze household finances further.
- The new parliament will continue to serve a mostly rubber-stamp function, with little room for debate, still less opposition sentiment.
- Victories for pro-government candidates in recent elections for the upper house offer patronage opportunities for loyalists.

Analysis

Relatively small demonstrations broke out in early September after the state razed dozens of unauthorised buildings in governorates across the country.

These single-issue protests bled into the anniversary of the September 20, 2019 demonstrations, which had been violently suppressed. That unrest had been triggered by allegations by former military contractor Mohammed Ali of corruption in the armed forces (see [EGYPT: Poverty and corruption will feed opposition - September 23, 2019](#)). Ali again took to social media this September to call for a repeat of last year's events, with patchy results around the country.

Rural revolution?

Most demonstrations erupted in deprived rural towns and villages of the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, and in working-class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Cairo.

The demographics of protest participants led some to term the unrest the 'galabiya revolution' (in reference to the traditional robe worn mostly by poorer social segments). This stands in contrast to the early organisers of the 2011 revolution, most of whom were from wealthier, more cosmopolitan urban families.

To some extent, this may be attributable to a ramped-up security presence in downtown Cairo ahead of the September 20 anniversary, with little prospect for protest in the capital's central squares. However, the change in protester demographics is also likely an outcome of the extreme degree of police brutality in cracking down on dissent, which has largely proven effective at deterring all but the most desperate from openly speaking out.

The latest demonstrations appear to have been much smaller in scale than last year's (with 500 people arrested in the first week, in comparison to 4,000 in 2019). Yet there is a risk that increasing economic hardship could leave growing numbers sensing that they have nothing to lose by participating in future anti-government mobilisation.

Poverty and housing

In 2019, poverty levels reached 33%, according to the country's official statistics agency -- up 5% (or around 5 million people) from 2015. The economic downturn due to COVID-19 and policy responses to it, as well as ongoing government subsidy cuts, have only exacerbated the situation (see EGYPT: Recession may prove deeper than it appears - September 24, 2020).

33%
Current official poverty rate

This comes at a time when the government has also been ramping up its controversial efforts to address the issue of informal housing.

Over decades, illegally built settlements have sprung up on the outskirts of towns (a result of a rapidly growing population and a dearth of affordable housing options), encroaching on agricultural lands. Since 2016, the state has begun razing these housing units, vowing to resettle displaced families -- although critics allege that the alternative accommodation is often unsuitable (see EGYPT: Slum development plan will be applied unevenly - May 8, 2019).

This demolition campaign intensified over the summer, leading to mounting tensions in affected neighbourhoods. The governors of Port Said and Assiut (both military generals) announced the bulldozing of over 100 buildings in early September alone. On September 9, the interior ministry reported the arrest of 234 individuals in a 24-hour period due to building violations.

The government has set up a scheme allowing some to avoid demolition by paying a fee to regularise the status of their homes, the deadline for which expires at the end of this month. However, the costs of the retroactive approval have been prohibitively expensive (in some cases, the permits could cost as much as USD16,000). Moreover, the fee must be paid by the owner, not the occupant, meaning many residents have no means of upgrading the status of their home without their landlord's support.

Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouly has said all informal structures not regularised by the deadline will be demolished, which could leave over 1 million people homeless. It is unlikely this threat will be carried out, but the government will continue applying pressure to encourage property owners to pay. Indeed, the sense that the government's priority is to boost its own finances only serves to fuel resentment.

Senate elections

As the military-dominated authorities crack down on dissent in the street and on social media, they continue to monopolise all official realms of political participation.

Senate elections held in August and September resulted in a major win for Mustaqbal Watan (Homeland's Future) -- a political party established with the support of the military intelligence services to support President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. It won 76% of the 200 contested seats in that vote (with the remaining 100 being appointed directly by the president).

Turnout was low, with around 14% of the 62 million registered voters participating, despite incentives to head to the polls in some governorates and threats, issued by the head of the National Election Authority, of EGP500 (USD32) fines for failing to cast a ballot.

Several opposition parties actively boycotted the elections due to the hostile climate in which they took place. They also denounced the reinstatement of the Senate, which was abolished in 2014 due to

alleged corruption and ineffectiveness. Indeed, the upper house lacks legislative powers and is seen widely as a tool for enhancing the president's patronage networks.

The chamber was reinstated with the 2019 constitutional amendments -- which also enshrined the military's political supremacy and extended Sisi's potential term in office -- largely at the behest of security organisations looking to find positions for loyalists (see EGYPT: Constitutional changes will tighten Sisi's grip - March 7, 2019).

Upcoming poll

Voting for the lower chamber of parliament (the House of Representatives) is scheduled to begin with the first round on October 24-25. Official results are anticipated on December 14, after runoff polls in November. Candidates will compete for 568 seats (another 28 seats are appointed by the president), and winners will remain in office until 2025.

The outcome will likely echo that of the Senate, with the pro-Sisi coalition expected to dominate.

Genuine opponents have been jailed on sedition charges

Genuine opposition candidates continue to languish in prison on charges of sedition after forming an anti-government alliance (the 'Coalition for Hope') in 2019 in preparation for the upcoming elections. Jailed coalition members have subsequently been added to the state's official list of terrorists.

Mustaqbal Watan holds around 9% of seats in the current House of Representatives (elected in 2015), but is expected to sweep the upcoming October elections as it did in the Senate, as the government sees it as a useful mobilising force.